

Sen. Vinehout "Saying Goodbye"

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Kathleen Vinehout looks back at her twelve years of service as the State Senator for the 31st District as she reflects on the 624 columns she personally wrote, the countless heartfelt constituent cases she worked on, and the breadth of legislation she drafted.

MADISON - "Good Bye," I said to my friend. "I remember the first time I met you," she said in reply. "It was at the 'New Legislator Training' ...I was going through my spiel. You kept asking questions about auditing and program evaluation. I was impressed way back then."

Twelve years – to that day – my Senate career is history. My, how time flies.

Cleaning out my desk, I found notes I took on my orientation day. I set my goals as part of the training. Here's what rookie Senator Vinehout promised herself: vote my conscience; match my votes to my district; be honest; respond to constituents; show respect to everyone in the Capitol; be the 'servant leader' – humble and listening; be the professor and folksy farmer.

I'd say, I did pretty darn good.



As a rookie, I wanted to solve every problem. I naively thought getting the policy correct meant a bill would become law. My first big project was to draft a healthcare bill that covered everyone and saved a billion dollars – my colleagues and I called it Healthy Wisconsin.

I quickly learned just coming up with a plan was a long way from changing the law. The plan failed. Later, I was able to pass less ambitious, but important health bills. For example, keeping your adult children on your health plan until they turn 27 – years before the Affordable Care Act (ACA) passed.

Today, Wisconsin still grapples with high health care costs. Recent court decisions to overturn the ACA make state health protections even more critical.

School funding, like health, was a perennial concern. In the new legislator orientation, my notes tell me, we learned “What’s wrong with the existing system.”

I recently attended my last hearing in the Capitol – The Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding Reform. Twelve years later, I’m still listening to experts, including school superintendents, about what’s best to help kids. I joined with other commissioners to propose nearly 20 solutions for fixing our school funding problems.

I was encouraged the Commission found so much agreement. I’m hopeful the recommended solutions will be adopted in the upcoming state budget.

I carry the stories of people and their problems with me, in my mind and heart. Sometimes I helped. Sometimes I couldn’t. People called me when they faced impossible conundrums. Like the truck driver who needed his CDL renewed. The federal law called Real ID, requires birth certificates for driver licenses. The man was born in Mexico. As an adopted infant, his American parents never finished the naturalization process. He needed a birth certificate that didn’t exist. His adopted parents passed away. The adoption agency closed. I could find no solution.

This kind of situation tears at my heart.

Along the way, I've learned that just having a Senator listen can be a powerful act. I spent a lot of time listening. I slowly learned that, by itself, listening can heal.

I've heard so many stories. Many were shared in my weekly column. You are reading the 624th column I've written. And, yes, I personally wrote every single one.

There's a lot to a lawmaker's job. One metric for measuring success is the bills one introduced. Over 12 years, I introduced 364 bills. Forty-three became law. Working in a Republican Legislature for the past 8 years, I've had to work with my Republican colleagues as 2nd author to get my bills passed.

Of course, merely counting bills doesn't address the breadth or quality of the proposals. Like Healthy Wisconsin, I've grappled with transformational issues. Topics like free college tuition, universal broadband, and, of course, universal healthcare.

I've always thought of my job as a team effort. Yes, my name is on the door. But that role cannot be accomplished by one person. Doug, my loving husband, is my rock and political guru. My son Nathan is my greatest joy.

I was blessed with amazing staff: Jacob Wipperfurth, Beau Stafford and my retiring, fabulous, Chief of Staff, Linda Kleinschmidt. I was also blessed with incredible constituents. Thank you to all of you. I'm a better Senator because of your help.

Keep Sowing Seeds for Peace on Earth and Good Will to All!

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