



HE'S 21.

New Hampshire's legislature boasts the oldest and youngest law

BY MORGAN CULLEN

Representatives Angeline Kopka and Jeff Fontas have a lot in common.

Both serve in the New Hampshire General Court, are Democrats and represent legislative districts in Hillsborough County. They also are from the same home town of Nashua, where they have lived all their lives.

There is, however, one significant difference: Kopka at 92 and Fontas at 21 are the oldest and youngest lawmakers in the country.

Kopka, a retired real estate appraiser, has served three terms and is running for a fourth term this year. Fontas, a student at Northeastern University, took advantage of a school program that allows him to work while earning his degree. After his term is over, he plans to go back to school full time.

State Legislatures asked the pair about their experiences, backgrounds, and approach to lawmaking at the state level.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Name: Jeff Fontas

Age: 21. Born Jan. 14, 1987

Hometown: Nashua, N.H.

Education: Northeastern University

Previous occupation: Student

Years as a legislator: One two-year term

State Legislative District: Hillsborough—District 24

Morgan Cullen conducts demographic research for NCSL.

State Legislatures: Is your age an asset?

Angeline Kopka: I am as amazed as everybody else when people tell me how old I am. But it is an asset. I bring a lifetime of experience to the legislature, and that helps me make thoughtful decisions

Jeff Fontas: My age helps me. I'm adept with resources like the Internet. I'm also a quick learner and can process a lot of information in short periods of time. I have a lot of energy. But I've had my challenges. This is my first real professional experience and I've had a huge learning curve.

SL: How do you keep in touch with your constituents?

Kopka: My constituents send letters and e-mails to me in droves. I respond to as many of them as I can, but it's sometimes difficult to keep up. Once, I got over 500 e-mails in a single day.

Fontas: I use e-mail and my cell phone. I'm creating an interactive website that details my positions on the issues and provides updates about what is going on at the legislature. During the campaign I had a website and blog. I also created a series of campaign Facebook Groups as a way to help raise money for the campaign.

SL: What is the most meaningful part of being a legislator?

Kopka: Having the opportunity to work with my constituents, supporters and fellow legislators is by far the most meaningful part of my job.

Fontas: Working on issues that are important to young people is meaningful to me. We have not been adequately represented in the political process, but now I can bring issues before the legislature that are important to us.

SHE'S 92.

makers in the country, but there's no generation gap in Concord.

SL: What issues do you care about most?

Kopka: I care about ensuring that every child in our state receives equal access to a quality education. I also serve on the House Commerce Committee and have been a strong advocate for consumer rights. I voted for a bill this session that will cap the interest rate on payday loans at 36 percent. Currently, there is no cap in our state on the amount of interest lenders can charge for these types of loans. (The bill has since been signed by the governor.)

Fontas: I have a real interest in criminal justice and introduced a bill to provide grants for a program that will help first-time drug and alcohol offenders. Many first-time offenders are young and this can have a profound impact on the rest of their lives. This program will require them to take drug and alcohol education courses and random drug tests. If offenders complete the program, they will be eligible to have their charges dropped.

SL: How did your family feel about your decision to run?

Kopka: I never got too much disagreement about my decision to run. I have always been active in our community so I don't think it was a big deal for my family. My husband simply said "if this is what you want to do, then you should do it."

Fontas: When I told my parents I was running for the statehouse they were skeptical and didn't take me seriously. No one in my family had ever run for public office so they weren't sure what to make of my decision. But after they saw me organizing my campaign and knocking on doors, they both became support-

ive and excited. I introduced a bill to decriminalize marijuana possession that my father vehemently opposed. Over the past few months we discussed it and my father began to understand my point of view. The bill passed the House but the governor threatened to veto it, and it was ultimately defeated in the Senate.

SL: What is the most pressing issue facing your state?

Kopka: It is essential that we solve our education challenges. The quality of our public education system varies a great deal throughout the state and this is unacceptable.

Fontas: The biggest problem is our education funding crisis. Unfortunately, state revenue estimates are down, and significant budget cuts will be inevitable. The legislature must find new streams of revenue but how we go about that will be a huge topic of discussion.

SL: What is the most important legislation you have introduced this session?

Kopka: I introduced a bill on licensing home inspectors. Almost every other professional in the real estate and con-

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Name: Angeline Kopka

Age: 92. Born April 18, 1916

Hometown: Nashua, N.H.

Education: Associate's degree

Previous occupation: Retired real estate appraiser

Years as a legislator: Three two-year terms

State Legislative District: Hillsborough—District 26





TAKING A BREAK

So what concerns the oldest and youngest lawmakers in the country when they're not working for the people of New Hampshire? Here's a sample:

THE MOST RECENT BOOK THEY'VE READ:

Kopka: A handbook by the National Realtors Association that illustrates how technology and marketing are transforming the business.

Fontas: *The Race Card* by Richard Thompson Ford, an examination of race relations in the 21st century.

WHAT THEY WORRY ABOUT:

Kopka: Her family, including her husband of 72 years who was injured in a fall and now walks with a cane and no longer drives.

Fontas: Getting into and transferring from Northeastern University to a school in New York City—and paying the tuition.

WHAT THEY'RE UP TO IN THEIR FREE TIME:

Kopka: She's still a community activist and, with a group from Nashua, meets regularly with the mayor. She also makes sure to spend time with family.

Fontas: He works part-time at Patagonia to pay the bills, jogs regularly and never leaves home without his iPod, loaded with everything from hip-hop to folk and blues to alternative rock.

struction industry needs a license. Given the current real estate market and the foreclosure crisis, it's essential that we have licensed home inspectors.

Fontas: I introduced a Sudan divestment bill that will require the state pension fund to divest from companies operating in Sudan. I hope New Hampshire will do its part to help place economic pressure on the Sudanese government to stop the genocide.

SL: What is it like working with each other, the oldest and youngest legislators in the country?

Kopka: I am honored to serve with Representative Fontas and very impressed that someone so young is so engaged in our state government. During my time in office, I have had the opportunity to serve with several legislators who were in their 20s. Ultimately, these individuals will be the future leaders of our country, and we need to give them every opportunity to take charge.

Fontas: It has been great working with Representative Kopka. Having the opportunity to work with the most senior legislator in the country represents the type of diversity that we are privileged to have in the New Hampshire legislature. 

 **CHECK OUT** demographic details—age, gender, occupations and more—of state lawmakers at www.ncsl.org/magazine.

LARGE AND DIVERSE

The New Hampshire General Court has 424 members (400 House, 24 Senate), making it the third largest legislative body in the in the English-speaking world behind the U.S. Congress and British Parliament. More than 100 years ago, legislators added their compensation level to the state constitution and they continue to be paid exactly \$200 per term, making it an entirely citizen-based legislature.

While the salary does limit many New Hampshire citizens from serving during their income-earning years, the legislature continues to attract many diverse and dedicated individuals. The average age for a legislator serving in New Hampshire is 61 years old but there are currently 14 legislators under age 30—the largest number of legislators in this age group in the country. The New Hampshire House is 35 percent female and the Senate is 41 percent female, making both chambers much higher than the national average of 22.6 percent.

Source: Virginia Drew, director of New Hampshire's Statehouse Visitor Center..

SALARY MATTERS

National trends indicate a higher concentration of legislators serving during their income earning years in states that maintain a full-time legislature with a higher salary. Legislatures that operate on a part-time basis and have lower salaries tend to have a higher number of younger and retired legislators with reduced levels of financial responsibility.

Some national statistics on state lawmakers:

- ◆ The average age is 56
- ◆ 61 percent are between 30 and 60
- ◆ 38 percent are 60 or older
- ◆ 10 percent are 70 or older
- ◆ Only 1 percent are under age 30

Most states have minimum age requirements that candidates must meet to run for the legislature. The Arizona, Colorado and Utah house chambers require candidates be at least 25, making them the highest in the country. The highest age requirements in the senate are found in Kentucky, Missouri and New Hampshire, which require senators to be at least 30. North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio and Vermont are the only state legislatures that do not impose any age requirements on candidates.