I’m Kelley Griffin and this is Across the Aisle, the new podcast of the National Conference of State Legislatures. We’re here to tell those stories of how state lawmakers work together, even when they don’t see eye to eye. It’s a skill! And it goes on more than you might think, so we want to highlight that work.

In this episode, we’re going to hear how the women of the Missouri Senate made a point of searching for something they could do together, across the aisle. They discovered that working on something easier to agree about—in this case, literacy—builds bonds that serve you when the issue is a little more controversial.

It started because the 11 women in the Missouri Senate decided to tell THEIR stories, in a book for kids.

Sen. Jeannie Riddle remembers when the idea started germinating.

*Riddle*

*When I first came to the Senate I was the only Republican woman. There has been other Republican women before me, but I was the only one at that time. //Gina Walsh and Kiki Curtis are dear, dear friends of mine. And they both were Democrats and so they reached out to me because I was the only female on the republican side. We became fast friends, and Kiki and I sat next to each other while someone was pontificating we got to looking around and I said ‘how many women have served before us?’*

The answer, they learned, was 36 women, including them, had been elected in Missouri’s history. A total of 36 women—and 1,118 men. And the first woman wasn’t elected until 1972.

That got Riddle thinking. She told her legislative aid Mary Cottom someone should write a book about the women. It didn’t go anywhere at that moment, but Riddle later found a perfect opportunity when all the women in the Senate—6 Republicans and 5 Democrats—met outside of work to get to know each other better.

*Riddle*

*“Just to get together and have an evening with uh, basically no shop talk.”*
They didn’t exactly adhere to the ‘no shop talk” rule—they recognized that 11 women in the Senate at one time was historic, and they were all eager to explore what they could do together.

Riddle recalls how she got introduced to her Republican colleagues as a new senator. The head of the caucus said everyone in the room had to tell something about themselves that no one knew.

*Riddle*

*So Jeanie you can’t talk about being a former teacher and you can’t talk about loving guns and got to a gun fighting school. We already know that about you (laugh) So I said, huh, well, I know how to throw knives and hatches so don’t mess with me (laugh.)*

So that evening with the Senate women, Riddle asked each one to share something about themselves others didn’t know. And this picture emerged of how varied their paths were to the Missouri Senate.

One of the senators who lost her parents to violent deaths, didn’t finish high school but got her GED and eventually went to college. One became a teen mom and later, as a single parent, went to college and started a business. One was the youngest woman to ever be elected to the Senate, at age 30. And one senator worked in banking with no plans for political office until friends urged her to run.

They figured their stories could help young girls realize being a state Senator is possible even though there haven’t been many women in the role, so far. The idea of producing a book took hold; they even came up with the name that night: You Can Too. And Sen. Jill Schupp, a Democrat, had an idea that everyone agreed to.

*Schupp*

*And we wanted a mirror in the book so that whoever was reading it could see herself or himself in that mirror and could see the ‘you can too’ saying ‘yes, you can do what it is you choose to do.‘*

The mirror became such an important symbol for the book that when they found out it was going to add $9,000 to the printing costs, they vowed to pay for it themselves if they had to.
While the book would be a tangible result of this collaboration, the group also wanted to work on legislation together, to demonstrate the power of bipartisan cooperation among this historic number of women in the Senate, Schupp says. Literacy became a clear choice.

Schupp

“The idea of literacy came up and we all you know, some of us are former teachers, we all understood the importance of making sure kids could read and read on grade level, and that maybe we could do something with regard to that in a bipartisan way or the betterment of Missouri to sort of leave a legacy of something positive that came out of having this larger number of women senators than ever before.

They left the meeting determined to proceed on all fronts. A group of senators began formulating a comprehensive approach to literacy. And Senators Riddle and Schupp took the lead on the book and pitched the idea to the Missouri Humanities council, which agreed to support the book—including the pricey but important mirror at the end.

While this was under way, the women found themselves coming together in the statehouse like never before.

In February, the women, who had started calling themselves “The Eleven,” got involved to shut down a filibuster on a redistricting plan that the bipartisan group of women agreed was too extreme. During the course of the contentious debates, Gov. Mike Parson’s spokeswoman Kelli Jones tweeted: Once again, it’s the Missouri Senate’s women who restore common sense.

Later, the group came together around another controversial topic. The Senate took up reauthorization of a tax that helps cover Medicaid costs. Several senators wanted to block money to Planned Parenthood as part of that bill, but that would have put the state out of compliance and cost it millions of federal dollars. And it would also have eliminated a key source of contraceptives for many women in the state.

Sen. Schupp went to Sen. Riddle because she knew whatever their disagreements, they agreed women should have access to contraception.

Here’s Senator Riddle.
Riddle

I said well Jill, do you want to cause a little trouble? //And I said you get the Democrat ladies together and I’ll get the Republicans and let’s meet in my office.

After the women gathered and determined they all opposed the amendment, Riddle invited the sponsor to her office.

Riddle

Little did he know 11 women were in there (laugh).

Riddle says they presented a united front and managed to break the filibuster. The amendment was dropped.

Schupp says it was a huge win.

Schupp

The reason we were able to come together was we were already working together on this other project and I feel if we had not been we would not have, well/I feel confident that we would not have gotten together and made that decision “

Throughout the session, three senators took the lead on writing a comprehensive package to address literacy. Republicans Cindy O’Laughlin and Carla Esslinger worked with Democrat Lauren Arthur on measures including teacher training on evidence-based approaches, support for students struggling with dyslexia or other challenges and funding to collect data so the state knows what is working. They also created a task force to monitor how well the programs are working and offer suggestions for improvement.

Senator Arthur says that during the work on the literacy package, the diversity of perspectives among the three women—one Democrat and two Republicans--made it better.

Arthur
And we all have really different philosophies on education, really different sort of approaches to education but I think we all want to find common ground, and if we file like there are things on which we can agree, then probably the rest of Missouri agrees on those things too.” /// 12:35 I think we all understand that we can’t let perfect be the enemy of good. And that this topic is so much bigger than any one of us, and that/// we need to find what we could agree on and start there.

The multifaceted bill passed a strong majority in both chambers.

By last August, with the session over, many senators began taking copies of the “You Can Too” book to school districts and public meetings.

Senator Schupp says this effort was meant both to share the books in schools and inform the process going forward by finding out what concerns and ideas Missourians have about literacy.

She’s heard from teachers and administrators who will use the book in classroom lessons, particularly before the traditional 4th grade trips to the state Capitol.

Riddle says it was heartwarming to be able to offer the stories to children—both girls and boys.

Riddle

We just talked and answered questions and let’em know that they can do anything they wanna do, but they have to be willing to work hard. Excellence matters, you gotta train hard, you gotta study hard///the only thing that stops you is you.

Schupp and Riddle are term-limited out of the statehouse with this session but they both believe the bipartisan work the 11 started will continue. They say the public will be grateful.

Riddle

What makes Missourians and Americans aggravated at politicians ///because it’s your way or the highway///There are things that are lines in the sand for Democrats and Republicans alike, but where they’re not those lines ///whether it’s energy, education, things like that, we can agree on a lot of things if we just work together.

Schupp:
and I know that people are hungry for that and when we can make that the story and that the news instead of focusing on the issues that divide us, my gosh it gives people a sense we are working really for them.”

Schupp says there’s also something different among the women, even when they disagree.

Schupp

This has happened to me several times. When somebody, you know, is not agreeing with my perspective on some of these more challenging partisans issues. You know, they’ll come and you know, give you a give me a hug and say I’m sorry here’s why you know it can’t be with you on this or so it’s it’s we know each other better. We know each other's differently than we than we did before and so there’s a little more grace there.

Sen. Arthur, who WILL be back next session, says she and the other female senators will continue the collaborations.

Arthur

I think we’ve built something very special///There have been a lot of personal petty fights among senators and I feel like we are kind of trying to set an example of things, the way our body should aspire to work, but we’re also effective in getting good things done for Missouri at a that is very challenging, from a lot of Missourians, and they need///their leaders to step up in meaningful ways.

And this effort, that started as a way to recognize the record number of women in the Missouri Senate, now has a new high mark. The 12th female senator was elected in November.

That’s our story today from Across the Aisle. We’re just getting started with this podcast and we want to share your stories of bipartisanship, so please email us as acrosstheaisle@ncsl.org

Thank you for listening. I’m Kelley Griffin.