
The Final Word

Nicole Cannizzaro

Majority Leader, Nevada Senate

After serving three years in the Nevada Senate, Nicole Cannizzaro was elected to the chamber's top leadership position in March 2019. Cannizzaro is a deputy district attorney who earned her law degree from the University of Nevada Las Vegas. She is the first female Senate majority leader in Nevada history.

There are more women serving in the Nevada Legislature than ever before. Is the atmosphere different?

There's more diversity, and women are sitting at the table. There's a real sense of collaboration. That always makes for a better legislative process.

Is this a trend?

We didn't set out to make Nevada the first female-majority legislature. We went out and said we want to find the best candidates. They happened to be a lot of really amazing women—lawyers, doctors, environmentalists, social workers, teachers, moms, law enforcement officers, the list goes on—who have very real skills that make them very effective legislators. The trend you're seeing in state legislatures is that voters are looking for people who understand the issues they're facing and are looking for real-world solutions.

What makes an effective leader?

That's an interesting question because as a leader of a caucus, you are leading other leaders. My job isn't just to be a point of authority. My position is to help empower the leaders that are within my caucus to be the best representatives they can be for their constituencies.

How did your upbringing shape you?

I grew up in Las Vegas and my parents didn't have a high school education. My mom was a waitress and my dad was a bartender. From a very young age I wanted to be a lawyer. My mom said, 'You can do it, but you've got to work hard.' My mom used to work downtown in a little cafe, and I'd sit in the restaurant and do homework. She would serve these lawyers who worked in the courthouse down the street. They were



very fancy. They had suits. They wrote on yellow legal pads. I just thought what they were doing seemed so important.

What drew you to public service?

The legislature had funded a scholarship for Nevada high school students who wanted to stay in-state for college. I earned that scholarship and got to go to college in northern Nevada. The legislature also helped establish the School of Law at UNLV, and so I went to law school there. And now I work downtown in the courthouse across the street from the same little cafe that my mom worked at. I wanted someone to fight for kids like me. I wanted somebody to fight for working families like mine. An example like that, where the legislature created an opportunity for a kid who wouldn't otherwise have it, is exactly why I put my name down and have spent my time knocking on doors, talking to constituents and going to Carson City to try to do the same kinds of things that helped me succeed.

What would surprise people most to learn about you?

I've recently become the person who runs marathons and half marathons, which I never really thought I would be able to do. I ran my first marathon and completed it in a pretty good time last February. I'm still running and doing races.

What final words would you like to share?

We have been given a unique opportunity to change the world around us in a very real way, and that is both an enormous responsibility, but also an exciting opportunity. I'm very grateful for all the people who have put their hat in the ring and do the job of legislators every single day, and all the people who support us, because we wouldn't be able to do our job without really wonderful staff. I hope that everyone who is given this unique opportunity is using it to help change the world and to keep fighting for what they think is right.

Jane Carroll Andrade, a contributing editor, conducted this interview, which has been edited for clarity and length.