

Sara Gideon

Speaker, Maine House

Sara Gideon is serving her first term as speaker and third term in Maine's House of Representatives. A native of Rhode Island, Gideon earned her bachelor's degree in international affairs from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., then worked in New York City as an advertising account executive at USA Today. She and her husband, Ben, moved to Ben's native Maine in 2004. Gideon served as vice chair of the Freeport Town Council before running for her legislative seat.

What are the top traits of a good leader? I would point to two personality traits which are probably most instrumental in becoming a successful leader—empathy and patience. As a leader, you have to be willing to listen to every single person and know the reason why they have come to do their job. And you have to do it in a way that is true and genuine, so you can help everyone continue to come together.

What is your top legislative priority? It is aimed at lifting families out of poverty first, and secondly, lifting all families into whatever their personal prosperity can be. I have been systematically working on that one piece at a time.

You've had your disagreements with the governor.

What advice do you have for colleagues who experience similar conflicts? The most important thing for navigating conflict with anyone—whether they hold a higher office or they're your peer—is communication. That communication has to continue even when you're disagreeing. One of the most important things I have learned and put into practice as a leader is that you have to have the ability to empathize with where somebody else is coming from, even when you disagree or vehemently disagree. If you're able to do that, you can ultimately land—even if it's through a painful process—on a solution.

What do you hope your legacy will be? What I strive for is for the legislature to be a place where it feels like something anybody can do. There tends to be a feeling in legislatures that if you are not retired or a very young person before you have a family, it's really difficult or impossible to do. One of my goals has been to make this a place where people feel like they can come and work and also have a life outside of work, be the parent they want to be, and do the really, really

important work which should be done by people who are like everyone else.

What led you to run for office? When my children were born, I stayed home with them. During those years, I couldn't figure out a way to go back to work and make it work for my family. My compromise to myself was to run for a town council seat. As soon as I became involved in local politics, it was like I had come right back to what I had always believed growing up: that identifying the problems or challenges or just simply the things we can do better, and bringing people around the table to agree on how to do them, was the most fascinating and fulfilling work I could imagine. And I found I was decently good at it. That was what launched me into this world of the legislature.

What do you do when you're not running the House of Representatives?

I just like to fold back into my family and my community. I am the person who empties the dishwasher, takes out the garbage and moves the kids from place to place. We do a lot of skiing, canoeing, kayaking and swimming, and I horseback ride with my daughter. I also spend a lot of time on the sidelines just watching the kids play. And that is the realistic life of a 40-something mother of three and speaker of the House. It's the best I can do.

Who is your role model? Honestly, the person who has inspired me most is my own mother. Growing up, she was one of the only mothers who had a job, and she loved it. She taught my sisters and me that doing that while being a mom was one of the best models you could create for your child. Both of my parents modeled for me everything I am or ever hope to be. At the end of the day, they are the reason why I am who I am.

What final words would you like to share? No matter where we are in this country, we're all facing very similar challenges in this modern world because of the way we live—the interconnectivity and social media—and because of the real challenges of economics and the political environment. We all need to remember and model what it means to not give up on each other, to remember that all of us are focused on the same goals and objectives, and that if we keep our eyes on that prize and our hearts in the right place, there are no

boundaries to what we can do together. That is state by state, Republican, Democrat or independent, young staff to senior non-term-limited legislative members.

Jane Carroll Andrade, a contributing editor to the magazine, conducted this interview, which has been edited for length.

