

The Unexpected Legislator

In the midst of their grief, and with little time to prepare, these widows stepped into the political spotlight to fill their late husbands' legislative seats.

BY JANE CARROLL ANDRADE

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five steps to grieving—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. But many widows whose husbands die while serving in their state legislatures have added a step to the process: serving out his term.

For many years, a husband's death was a woman's path into public office. Although no statistics are kept at the state level, it was a frequent method by which women got to Congress. And that trend likely mirrors what happened in state legislatures, according to Cindy Simon Rosenthal, who studies women in politics as associate professor of political science at the University of Oklahoma, and author of *When Woman Lead*.

"From 1917 until World War II, 46 percent of the women in Congress succeeded their deceased husbands," she says. "The pattern continued and even by 1965 and the advent of the women's movement, almost 45 percent of all female House members had been congressional widows."

In the early days, she adds, widows who succeeded their husbands were seen as "place holders," keeping the deceased's seat warm until the party could wrangle up a "real" candidate.

These days, it's hard to find a woman willing to play that role. Conversations with several state legislators who succeeded their late husbands illustrate a group of women who, while initially hesitant, turned out to be tough, politically savvy public servants committed to their constituents and causes.

NO TIME TO GRIEVE

Tough? Try losing your husband, and five days later, being sworn into office. That's

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what happened to Senator Vickie D. McDonald of Nebraska.

"What should have been a joyous occasion was very tinged with sorrow," says Mikki McCann, senior legislative aide for both McDonald and her late husband. "It was difficult for everybody, and yet she held everybody else together because she was just composed and strong and calm."

Vickie married Richard N. McDonald in January of 2000, a second marriage for both. While they were dating, Richard said he'd always wanted to run for political office.

"I said, 'That would be great. I'll run your campaign. This'll be fun!'" recalls McDonald, who was an investment representative for a bank. She figured she could use her

sales skills to run his campaign.

They announced his candidacy for the Nebraska Legislature around Labor Day of 1999. A year later, about the time he won the election, Richard was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Immediately after being sworn in, he had surgery to remove his spleen. The cancer had spread.

Richard was able to serve only about six weeks until he became too ill to travel to the Capitol. During that time, McDonald and McCann worked hand in hand to fulfill his

Nebraska Senator Vickie McDonald was appointed by the governor and sworn into office five days after her husband Senator Richard McDonald died.



PHOTO: CONNIE PRITCHARD

legislative obligations to the best of their abilities, foreshadowing what was to come.

“His dying wish was for the governor to appoint me to fill his seat,” says McDonald.

She was concerned that she didn’t have a law degree, or even a college degree.

“He said, ‘You don’t have to have a college degree. You just have to listen to people and work with them and take their concerns to Lincoln.’”

Former Representative Kathe Decker of Kansas also received her husband’s blessing to fill his seat. Steve Lloyd was serving his eighth year in the legislature when he was diagnosed with stomach cancer in 1987. Decker, a volunteer youth minister who also ran a real estate appraisal business, was reluctant at first.

“Steve encouraged me to fill his seat. I really did not want to, but he felt strongly,” she recalls. “Steve wanted to make sure that whoever held the seat would truly have the interests of the people of the district at heart, and he knew that I did. We joked that my

Alabama Senator Vivian Davis Figures agonized over running for her husband’s seat after his death. Now, after being reelected three times, public service is a way of life.

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most qualifying factor was that I knew where the bathrooms were at the Capitol!”

Representative Vonnie Pietsch’s husband, Bill, was of a similar mind after suffering a stroke in 2002, in the middle of serving his first term in the biennial North Dakota Legislature. When he was unable to return to session in 2003, he looked to his wife of nearly 50 years.

“When people asked Bill, ‘Where should we start to look for a replacement, he just looked at me and said, ‘Why don’t you start with her?’” says Pietsch.

Pietsch, an administrative assistant at North Dakota State University who had been active in the Republican party, was appointed in 2003. Bill passed away in 2004, during Pietsch’s first election campaign for the seat.

“He watched me from above so he knows that I won,” she says.

Former Georgia Representative Earnes-

tine Howard didn’t get the chance to discuss her future with her husband, Henry. He died suddenly of a heart attack in October of 2005 after serving 15 years in the state legislature.

Her stepson, who wanted to run for the seat but did not live in the district, encouraged Howard to run. For such a life-changing decision, the ladies’ shoe store owner didn’t have much time to think about it. Two days after her husband’s death, the governor set the special election. A week later, she traveled to Atlanta to qualify.

“I thought about it. I prayed about it,” she says of her decision. “When I gave serious consideration to the idea of running, I had no doubt that he would have loved to have me in that position.”

In Alabama, it was Senator Vivian Davis Figures’ 7-year-old son and a sign from above that convinced her to run. Her husband, Michael Figures, the first African-American to serve as president pro tem in the state Senate, died suddenly of a massive stroke in September 1996.

Although many of Michael’s colleagues, friends and supporters encouraged Figures to run, she was undecided. She wasn’t sure she was qualified, even though she had been active in Democratic politics and served on the Mobile City Council. Plus, she now faced being a single parent to three sons, ages 7, 11 and 14.

“The turning point that made me decide to run was when our baby son said to me, ‘But Mommy, you’re the only one who can take Daddy’s place.’”

To further complicate matters, unlike other widows, whose potential opponents tend to bow out when the widow decides to run, Figures faced a fairly nasty primary and run-off campaign.

At one particularly difficult point, she visited her husband’s grave.

“I said, ‘I hope you approve,’ and I asked the Lord to show me a sign.”

As she left the cemetery, she spotted a large family plot with the name Stokes. Stokes was



PHOTO: MICHAEL MURPHY

Following His Footsteps



PHOTO: ERIC CROSSON

There are other women legislators filling seats previously held by their husbands. One is Delaware Senator Dori Connor, who not only took over her husband's seat in the legislature, but has continued his involvement with NCSL as well. Senator Robert Connor was NCSL's president from 1993-1994. After his death in 1997, Dori Connor won the special election to represent Delaware's 12th Senatorial District. She has served on NCSL's Executive Committee, has chaired the Legislative Effectiveness and State Government Committee, and is currently on the Executive Board of the Women's Legislative Network of NCSL. For more information about the programs and activities of the Network, visit www.ncsl.org/wln.

the name of the pastor who baptized her and performed her and Michael's wedding ceremony. The first headstone displayed a birth date of Jan. 24—the same as her birthday. The date of death was Oct. 13—Michael's birthday.

The discovery brought Figures to tears. She took it as a sign that she was doing the right thing, that the baton was being passed to her.

HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

According to Simon Rosenthal, widows often make the best replacements for their husbands. Many couples have long political partnerships in which the widow knows the "family business" as well as her late husband did. They've spent time at the capitol, and they enjoy a built-in set of relationships that make them skillful and competitive.

"The learning curve is nowhere near what it would be for a new member," she says.

Indeed, once elected or appointed, none of the women rested on her laurels. They worked especially hard to learn the process quickly and to overcome any perceptions that they may not have deserved the seat.

Figures recalls a reporter telling her that her husband had a really big pair of shoes. Did she think she could fill them?

"I brought my own pair of shoes," she replied.

McDonald also worked hard to find her own place in the legislature.

"At first people were very careful with her ... out of respect for what she'd been through," says McCann.

But that changed the first time McDonald opposed a senior member on a bill she was carrying. The bill did not pass until the following session, but standing up to the leadership was a turning point.

"That was when she stopped being the

widow—the appointee—and became the senator," says McCann. "I think people realized she was serious, knowledgeable, able to think on her feet, able to debate, and she knew what she was talking about. You could feel the tenor of the body change in how they regarded her at that point."

While all of the women say their views on public policy issues were very much aligned with their husbands', they also brought their own interests and strengths to the table.

"I did fill his position, but not his seat," says Pietsch.

While her husband served on agriculture, industry and finance committees, she focused on human services and political subdivisions, "where I had more interest."

Decker is proud of the school safety hotline she set up after the Columbine school shootings. Figures has worked on everything from changing the dress code on the Senate floor so women could wear pants to passing the first statewide clean indoor air act.

McDonald created a cancer repository from which a doctor can re-prescribe unused medications for the uninsured and others who can't afford them. She had been shocked when her husband's hospice nurse told her that by state law, she had to dispose of all his expensive medicines.

"I said, 'I'm going to change that law,'" she says. "And I did."

Ironically, Howard and her husband had discussed introducing legislation to honor state officials with a state funeral after attending a Congressman's funeral. But Henry never got around to it. So when she was elected, Howard introduced the legislation. It was approved overwhelmingly.

None of these accomplishments surprises Simon Rosenthal.

"Generally, the day of the widow who would just keep a seat warm and be pliant is gone," she says. "These women are real politicians in their own right."

FINDING THEIR CALLING

Although the circumstances surrounding their entry into statewide office were painful and unexpected, each of the legislators interviewed chose to run for election or re-election.

Decker served four two-year terms, and ran for lieutenant governor on a ticket with Dr. Ken Canfield, but lost in the primary last August. She has remarried, and works in her evangelist husband's ministry, as well

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—*Senator Vivian Davis Figures*

as with Dr. Canfield, founder of the National Center for Fathering, on family programs.

“I hope to still make a difference,” she says.

McDonald was elected to two more terms and will serve until term-limited out in 2008. She has remarried, and says at this time she doesn’t think she’ll pursue public office again.

Pietsch is “on the fence” about whether to run after being elected for the term that ends in 2007. She is being encouraged to run, but at age 70, she is contemplating spending more time with her children and grandchildren.

Howard ended up running for reelection against her stepson, who had moved into the legislative district. She lost in the primary.

While disappointed, she is philosophical.

“You don’t have to be a politician to be an advocate for helping our young people,” she says.

Figures ran for reelection—and won—three times. She is now seriously considering a run for the U.S. Senate in 2008.

Clearly, the unexpected legislators have found public service meaningful and enriching, despite the obstacles.

For Figures, who had young children when her husband died, the challenges were enormous. The most difficult part, she says, was packing up the children to stay with family or friends while the legislature was in session.

Her youngest son is now a senior in high school, getting good grades and starting for

the basketball team. Her middle son, 21, is a senior on the dean’s list at the University of Alabama. Her oldest, 14 when his father died, is serving prison time for drug activity.

“He was at the worst age a male child could be to lose his father,” she says. “I’ve done everything I possibly know to do, but he made the choices that he did.

“My relationship with God gave me what I needed to get through,” she continues. “That’s not to say it’s been easy. It’s been a struggle. But it’s worth it.”

As for the stages of grieving, the widow legislators seem to have moved well beyond acceptance. In fact, they are grateful to their husbands.

“I got so much courage and inspiration from him,” says Figures. “He didn’t know it, but he was a great tutor and inspiration for me all those years.”

“The best thing about it was my husband gave me a career,” says McDonald.

Howard agrees.

“It was just an awesome task for me,” she says. “It was truly the highlight of my life.” ♣