

History maker

First female African-American legislator brings community concerns to the Capitol

BY MARY KAY WATSON

Election Day 2000 was fraught with tension for many — politicians and voters alike. But for one Minnesota woman and her constituents in District 61B, it was an historic and celebratory day. Rep. Neva Walker (DFL-Mpls) was elected to the Legislature: the first African-American woman to serve there.



Rep. Neva Walker

“It’s not about me,” Walker said. “It was a community win. Everyone has taken ownership of it.”

Walker sees herself first and foremost as a community organizer. She has worked on issues of affordable housing, youth organizing, and neighborhood development.

She has especially enjoyed opportunities to work with people with developmental disabilities. “That’s something I cherish,” said Walker, whose 7-year-old family member was born with Down’s syndrome.

“I believe in hands-on learning,” she said. “I don’t necessarily believe what other folks tell me.”

Walker never intended to run for the Legislature. But an experience demonstrating with homeless people at the Capitol galvanized her. “The reception here wasn’t that friendly” during the rally, she said.

That encounter motivated her to examine the state government more closely. When Walker learned that there had never been a black woman legislator in Minnesota, she was “so disappointed” that she tried to find someone to run for office. No one came forward, so she decided to do it herself.

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“Community” could be Walker’s middle name. Her mother, Clarissa Walker, has been program manager for Sabathani Community Center in south Minneapolis for more than 30 years.

“I’m a community baby,” laughed Walker, 29. She grew up in the Sabathani neighborhood and was one of her mother’s earliest and longest-serving volunteers. The center includes transitional housing and back-to-school assistance, a clothing shelf, holiday assistance, tax service, a garden, and a food shelf that serves between 1,000 and 1,500 people a month.

“My mother is the person from whom I’ve gotten most of who I am,” said Walker. “The two men in my life — my father and my grandfather — focused on family first, and my mother did the community stuff.”

Walker’s 13-year-old son Shae, an eighth-grader at Minneapolis Green Central, takes her

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new job at the Legislature in stride. His main concern is that she help pass laws to get rid of smoking and drinking.

In addition to volunteer work, Walker has worked for the Jordan Neighborhood Association, Family and Social Services, and The United Way. She received her education in sociology at the University of Minnesota.

Her introduction to the Legislature has been both exhilarating and exhausting. She said it didn’t take long to discover the most important characteristic a new Legislator needs: a sense of humor.

She has enjoyed getting to know her freshmen peers — both DFL and Republican. “We’re all different. Realistically, we all have personal agendas and district agendas. As someone who comes from a social service background, I have more of a tendency to give dollars to social services. I know the work they do.

“I don’t promote living off the government, but there’s a role government has in assisting families to be as self-sufficient as they can.”

In addition to affordable housing, issues of importance to Walker include educational

disparities and racial profiling. She also hopes to study diversity issues in education — not only in Minneapolis, but throughout the state.

“Being a black woman, I definitely have an interest in communities of color,” Walker said, “but I also see the correlation between communities of color and towns in Greater Minnesota. They wonder, ‘Are our schools going to stay open?’ and we wonder, ‘Will we get teachers of color?’”

She said her involvement in community issues has been her best preparation for the Legislature. “Folks think you need a master’s degree, or to be a lawyer or teacher or some other profession to be a legislator. You don’t,” Walker said. “All you need is compassion for the community, a determination to learn, and a commitment to work.”

She wants to involve young people of all ages in the political process in an informal, non-threatening way. She encourages students to visit her at the Legislature on Fridays, or she will go to their classrooms.

She said a young man recently told her “stay healthy and fight because we’re so happy you’re there.”

People have high expectations of Walker because of her unique position. “I remind people that I’m in a quadruple minority: my party’s in the minority, I’m black; I’m a woman; and I’m under 30. Let’s be realistic.”

DISTRICT 61B

1998 population (estimate): 32,120

Largest city: Minneapolis

County: Hennepin

Location: south central Minneapolis

Top Concern: “I want to involve community in every aspect of the Legislature: encouraging them to come and visit me, to take historic tours, sit in on committees, watch the action on the floor, come in and testify, and e-mail or phone their legislators.”

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