

Rejuvenation for Neva

First black woman to serve in the House hopes for renewal time

BY PATTY OSTBERG

Rep. Neva Walker (DFL-Mpls) made history in 2001 by becoming the first black woman to serve in the Minnesota House.

When her legislative journey began, she knew it wasn't just about representing constituents from District 61B, it was about representing all minorities. "I knew that as soon as I got elected," she said.

There have been many times in debates when she has been expected to speak up for minorities, she said. Sometimes just being the lone minority in a committee meeting or on the House floor made people think before they spoke. "Things one may want to say when I'm the room, they may want to think really hard if they want to say it," she said.

Her first bill was a resolution commemorating the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his life "devoted to the elimination of segregation and prejudice against his people."

Her fight for issues isn't over once she leaves the Legislature, but she said it's time for a break, "to remind myself why I really came here in the first place." Perhaps graduate school, substitute teaching or even starting her own business are in her future. A lot of hours go into representing a district, and she's never been able to figure out a way to have a second job to supplement her income as a legislator. "It's Neva time," she said of her decision.

She is dismayed at how the House too-often operates. "This place is really partisan and I'm not really a partisan person by nature," she said. "I'm just open and trying to get through session."

Once her term is complete, she doesn't intend to be a hired lobbyist, but she is still going to work on re-creating the position of an ombudsman for corrections, out-of-home placement and mental health issues. She's authored bills in the past on those issues and says there is more work to be done.

After six years of being in the minority

caucus, Walker was named chairwoman of the House Mental Health Division when the DFL took control in 2007. Last year she helped secure more than \$34 million in mental health grants for children and adult services. With a deficit looming, and the divide expected to be even larger next year, she says people need to get creative, and community support is necessary for those with mental illness.

Her words of advice for the person to take her seat: "Get to know everybody, and don't polarize yourself."

Walker speaks from experience. Whether it's rural, suburban or another political party, she says everyone can find common ground. "Even if you fundamentally disagree with that person on 99 percent of the issues, there has to be an issue that you guys can agree on."

The widening polarization of parties has been one of the biggest changes she's seen since beginning her legislative career. "We've become partisan and it doesn't do us any good," she said.

She believes that in years past there were members, both Republican and Democrat, more willing to work across party lines, but that spirit in so many ways is gone. "It's a difficult climate to get to know everyone," she said.

Walker says she's represented her district fully. Whether it's social justice, racial profiling, poverty or mental health issues, she's been able to advocate on their behalf.

"I'm the luckiest girl, because I have the best district that there is. It has been more than an honor to serve. It's been an opportunity of a lifetime." 🌿



PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Neva Walker enjoys the company of her best friends' nephew, Kenney Gatlin Jr., in her State Office Building office.

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Neva Walker
DFL
District 61B — Minneapolis
Terms: 4 (elected 2000)
Advice: "Get to know everybody, and don't polarize yourself."