

Wisconsin Rep. Mary Felzkowski

Initially reluctant to run, she's ascended to leadership in a new session and new environment, as Wisconsin returns to divided government

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

The Wisconsin Assembly's new assistant majority leader has a secret: She never intended to be a legislator.

A lifelong resident of northern Wisconsin's Lincoln County, Mary Felzkowski (Mary Czaja, as she was known back in 2012) was happy as the owner of an insurance company when a client, who happened to be ex-Rep. Don Friske, called her to ask if she was going to be in her office at 4:30 p.m.

"I thought he was coming in for insurance. And then he walked in with Speaker [Robin] Vos, the majority leader at the time [Scott Souter], Jenny Kostas, who works for Robin, and they made the pitch that I should run for office," Felzkowski says. "My initial reaction was, 'No, I don't want to do that.'"

But after calls from other legislators and talking with friends and family, she ran for the Assembly seat and was elected with 57 percent of the vote.

"I had never served in public office," she recalls. "It's not like I served at the county level or anything like that, so it was a whole new experience."

"I never worked at something so hard in my life. I was knocking on doors — it was day in and day out — and then running the insurance agency, but I very much enjoy it, so I'm glad I did it."

Felzkowski initially concentrated on legislation related to hunting and outdoor sports such as snowmobiling, along with various education issues.

Re-elected for a third time in November 2018, Felzkowski was tapped to be assistant majority leader, a position she hopes to use to reconnect her party to voters who went in a different direction this past fall.

As she prepared for her new responsibilities and challenges, Felzkowski discussed her views on leadership and being a legislator with CSG Midwest. Here are excerpts from her interview.

Q: What would you say are your biggest accomplishments in the Legislature so far?

A: My first session was unique for me. There weren't a lot of people who were into the sporting heritage in the Assembly at that time, and for the past 15 years [preceding 2012,] there had been work on legislation to allow people to hunt with crossbows. We were able to get that done in my first session.

I also worked on what's called "CAP/STEP" [the state's Club Assistance Program/Snowmobile Trail Enhancement Program] with snowmobile associations. *[Editor's note: Under CAP/STEP, snowmobilers must buy a trail pass in addition to a vehicle license; proceeds from both are then used to help maintain snowmobile trails around the state].*

In my second and third terms, I was on the Joint Committee on Finance, and we did a lot of the things around education, but especially fabrication laboratories, or "fab labs" [today's version of school technology labs]. There are more fab labs in the state of Wisconsin for tech education than there are in

Bio-sketch of Rep. Mary Felzkowski

- ✓ elected to Wisconsin Assembly in 2012
- ✓ chosen assistant majority leader in 2018
- ✓ Insurance agency owner (CIS Insurance Group, in Tomahawk, Wis.)
- ✓ 1986 graduate of University of Wisconsin-River Falls, with a bachelor's degree in finance and economics
- ✓ she and husband, Fries, have five children and three grandchildren



"With split government, we need to be realistic ... and find out where we have common ground. I think it will be health care."

the rest of the United States combined. So that was really, probably, I'd say my biggest accomplishment.

Q: What are your top legislative priorities for the 2019 session?

A: I think that one of the things you're going to see is health care — access to health care, expanded health care, mental health care, everything. We're very fortunate in the state of Wisconsin in that our hospital system is No. 1 and our quality of health care is always No. 1 to No. 3 nationwide. But that doesn't mean that everybody has equal opportunity or access to that health care, especially our rural areas and maybe some of our lower-income urban areas. That's going to be a priority for people.

With split government [Republicans control the Legislature, Democrats the governor's office], we need to be realistic. There's going to be probably very few reforms that we would like to see happen that are going to get done, so we're going to have to work with Gov. [Tony] Evers and find out where we have common ground. I think it'll be health care, mental health care.

I also hope we can get some criminal justice reform done. I know that's a priority at the federal level, and I know that both sides would like to see it get done at the state level, too.

Q: What elements of criminal justice reform would you like to see in Wisconsin?

A: I think that we would like to look at some of our nonviolent crimes that are felonies and move them off the felony roll. And then, how do we help — once you've paid your dues to society, so to speak? How do we help you get the education you need? Or help you get back to work, have the family life and become a productive member of society?

One of the largest hurdles we have in northern

Wisconsin, as in all areas of Wisconsin, is the drug crisis — the opioid crisis in some parts of the state, but up in my area it's meth.

Rep. John Nygren has done a phenomenal job with the HOPE [Heroin, Opioid Prevention and Education] agenda.

We have people that are using drugs and we're helping them to get their lives back. But now I'm looking at this issue, and I said this to John, with this question in mind: "What is the why?" Why are they using those drugs? And I think that until we really get a handle on that and work through it, I don't know that we ever really solve the issue.

Q: How does the state get at the "why" question, legislatively?

A: I wish I had a really good answer to that. I don't know, but I know that there are a whole lot of people who work in drug counseling and different areas that can help us get to those answers. But I think that's going to be our next challenge. We need to figure out why people are doing what they're doing.

Q: Was stepping into a leadership role something you anticipated? What did you think when you were approached about it?

A: In doing [campaigning] for other representatives and helping them out, I thought to myself, and I don't mean this as a negative, but if you look at our leadership team, it's ... middle-class white males. So how do we tell a different story? I'm a college-educated, 55-year-old white female. Why am I a conservative? ... Safety, education, good-paying jobs, low taxes, opportunities — those are all the things that we want. That's what our voter base said they wanted. But we've lost the narrative on that. I look at my role as an opportunity to start having those conversations again.