

# Wisconsin Sen. Alberta Darling

From community volunteer to co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee, her focus remains on helping children

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

The seeds of Alberta Darling's rise from community volunteer to the upper echelon of Wisconsin's legislature were sown in Illinois.

Darling says her first insight into the importance of public service came in childhood, in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, where her grand-uncle was a parish pastor and her grandmother ran a soup kitchen that served (among others) recent immigrants.

"Because of that part of my life, being of service — whether that was having your church take care of families in need or whether it was a neighbor in need because of being new to this country — service was a big part of our lives," she says.

Her interest in politics began there, too, courtesy of that same grandmother, who was one of very few Republicans in town. "There were probably five Republicans in Cicero at that time," Darling jokes.

"I remember sitting down with her as she practiced her speeches that she would give to the other four, and I just thought, 'Oh, that's so cool that she can talk like that.' She would pull down this picture of Ike and talk about leadership and democracy.

"So from her I got the desire for more organized political community service, but from my parents it was a grass-roots community service."

Fast-forward to 1990: A teacher and marketing director, Darling was also heavily involved in community volunteer work. "I really loved that part of my life. In fact, I loved it better than my paying job," she says.

And through her work with children and foster care, "I thought, 'You know, if I ever get the chance to run for public office, I'm gonna do it because these kids are not represented as much as they need to be.'"

Then her state representative, and friend, Betty Jo Nelsen, was appointed by the first Bush administration to be administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (she later served as deputy secretary for agriculture).

"I knew nothing about politics, but I knew a lot about the community and a lot about community issues; I had a great network of associates and friends," Darling says. "And I just went, 'I'm gonna go for it because how often does this opportunity come up?' And I won in a very competitive three-way primary."

Darling moved to the Senate in 1992. She co-chairs the Joint Finance Committee, in part because she wanted to advocate for children and realized early in her career that "who controls the money controls what happens in the legislature."

"So I always had as a goal being on the finance committee and being a co-chair. I thought that it was really the kind of challenge I wanted."

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Darling reflected on her legislative career and priorities for the next two years. Here are excerpts.

**Q: What drew you to pursue a career in public service?**

**A:** I came in [to public service] from my passion for community service. I was a teacher [and] businesswoman during my professional life. I always had the priority to be very involved in the community

## Bio-sketch of Wisconsin Sen. Alberta Darling

- ✓ Member of state Senate since 1992; co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee
- ✓ Previously a member of the Assembly (elected in 1990 special election)
- ✓ Former teacher, marketing director
- ✓ Married to Dr. William Darling from 1967 until his death in 2015. They have 2 children and 3 grandchildren.



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so I served on many community boards, and I was a pretty high-profile community volunteer. One of my priorities was children and foster care. I really get passionate about children and foster care, and trying to make their lives better.

**Q: What was your biggest adjustment to life in the legislature?**

**A:** Because I was very involved in the community at a leadership level and the grass-roots level, it wasn't that big of a shock. The shock was at how slowly things moved, if anything. But the relationship-building, the building focus on solutions, the building teamwork — the Junior League was particularly good for building skills for leadership in terms of community organizing, communication, agenda building, how to get things done, how to get things done in a team. It was really great teamwork that enabled me to get to the legislature without a huge culture shock.

**Q: Why did you choose to pursue a leadership position?**

**A:** I just think I always felt that my purpose in life was, is, to make a difference. So whether that's a religious belief or whether that's a cultural belief, it's definitely a big part of my life and a big part of who I am. So being in leadership was always a goal for me because I knew I had fairly good leadership skills from my work with men and women in the community; I dealt with fairly high-level people who were major businesspeople, as well as grass-roots people. So it wasn't that I was intimidated by leadership; I welcomed it.

**Q: What legislation are you most proud of getting passed into law?**

**A:** One of the first bills I got passed was the sexual predator bill [1993 Wisconsin Act 479]. I was very concerned about an individual who

was going to be released from prison who had raped and murdered a 10-year-old girl during a Halloween episode, and that just haunted me. So I worked with the Corrections Department and we successfully drafted a sexual predator bill that Kansas [adopted] and the [U.S.] Supreme Court [found it constitutional]. I'd say that was probably my biggest accomplishment. [Editor's Note: Chapter 980 of Wisconsin's statutes allows the state to classify someone as "sexually violent" and commit them indefinitely to a civil treatment facility after they've served their criminal sentence.]

**Q: What legislation tops your agenda for the new biennium?**

**A:** Education continues to be my passion. I had a bill with Rep. (Dale) Kooyenga that created a turnaround partnership with the Milwaukee Public Schools that targeted failing schools and focused on a partnership with a wraparound program addressing health, jobs, safety, families. We also concentrated on a certain ZIP code to pilot it so we could demonstrate an evidence-based approach to not only improving educational outcomes, but improving health and jobs and safety for those families because without healthy, safe working families, our education outcomes are not going to be achieved.

Unfortunately, we never saw results, so I'm trying to get it implemented; so that's going to be a priority.

Another priority is corrections. We just had a recidivism legislative study. We're looking at helping individuals cope with mental health and education, job placement and training, and being prepared for the real world of work and of living in the real world [including working with CSG's Justice Center on potential next steps.] This is going to be a big focus of mine, and it actually ties into my work on foster care and education and crime, so that's a very appropriate next step. ★