Through 10 years and two seismic statehouse power shifts, the Wisconsin Senate's assistant minority leader pursues bipartisan problem solving

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

When Janet Bewley first ran for a Wisconsin Assembly seat in 2010, her party controlled the governor’s office and both legislative chambers.

“Then, almost in one fell swoop, from the moment that I ran until the next day when I found the election results, it had completely, completely shifted,” Bewley says of the election which gave Republicans that same triple-lock on state government.

“Everything was upside down. It was a very interesting place to be.”

And volatile as well.

Her first few days and months in office were marked by the historic legislative fight over Act 10, the measure that changed collective bargaining rules for most public sector employees, ignited massive protests, and even caused 14 Senate Democrats to decamp to Illinois to delay a vote. (The bill ultimately passed.)

“I had nothing to compare it to because I had not been in state government before that,” Bewley recalls.

“I was on the floor for three days in that, and it was all brand new and rather bizarre. “But I loved it.”

Ten years later, she still does, and Bewley is now a legislative leader adjusting to another power shift in Wisconsin state government: With the election of a Democratic governor, Tony Evers, power is now shared among the two political parties.

“Suddenly, she says, “there’s a reason for conversation.”

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Bewley talked about her hope for bipartisanship, her role as assistant minority leader, and some of her legislative accomplishments to date. Here are excerpts.

Q: How much did you have to change your outlook that first year in the Legislature, after finding yourself in the minority party?

A: It was made known to me by a reporter who asked me, “How does it feel to be irrelevant?” Having someone frame my circumstances that way made me completely do a 180-degree turn, I said, “I have never been more relevant in my life. I now have the duty to represent my district and serve as a minority representative.”

And I found that to be such a challenge, and again, I was relevant. I had the same number of constituents as any other representative in the building, we just had as many needs, just as many challenges and issues. So my role was no different in terms of my significance to my constituents than any other representative.

Q: You’re now entering a second year of divided government in Wisconsin. What’s your outlook for the year ahead?

A: We’re not really dancing very smoothly yet, but we’re looking to dance with each other. A lot of people want to view this as if it’s a fight — someone’s going to win and someone’s going to lose. I prefer to think of it as a dance. You’ve got to understand your partner and be willing to have your toes stepped on once in a while. But this is our job. Our job is to figure out ways to get things done, and just keep working at it. We’re going to disappoint each other; some of the hardest things, we might not be able to do right away. But if we just keep working at it, I have a lot of hope, I really do.

Q: What is the balance you try to strike between working across the aisle and remaining true to the goals of the caucus and your own values?

A: One of the things that I am most proud of is the fact that I am willing to work with Republicans, and being known as someone you can go to if you think you want a Democrat to be with you (on a bill). Because I’ll listen. I won’t automatically say “never.” I’ll go with, “That’s a decent bill; yeah, come on, let’s talk to me about it.” If it’s good for the people in my district, and if it’s not completely contrary to how the caucus feels, I’ll go along, I’ll do it. I’ve been on many bipartisan bills that have passed.

They have never been anything that has taken my caucus by surprise because I’m always very straightforward. It takes a lot of work in communicating and letting people know that, “Hey, stay with me, I’m not going to betray anything.”

And I do say no. I think there are many times that I will go along and, at some point, it’ll just get to be more than I can really agree to. So I’ll say, “All right, here’s my limit. If you don’t make this change or I can’t get what I need, I’m not going to be a co-sponsor or a co-author.”

Q: Your involvement in public service predates your time in the Legislature. What has drawn you to this work?

A: It came out of the satisfaction I got when I was working with communities and with nonprofits, and realizing how, when people come together and work on things as a group — be it a nonprofit or school or a church or a unit of government — you really, really can get things done.

I love to pull problems apart and try to figure out solutions that are hidden in the mix. I solve problems that way, by literally pulling them apart as I’m talking to my colleagues.

And when you realize that by doing that with others, that you can really do something good for your community? Ah, that’s the best.

For me, that is the most satisfying role that I can play.

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SELECTED BY: WISCONSIN SEN. BEWLEY

Select assistant senate minority leader in 2017

Elected to the Senate in 2014, previously served in the Assembly (2010-2014)

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Served on the Ashland City Council in Wisconsin

Lives in Mason, Wis., with her husband, Dave; they have five children and five grandchildren

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