Minnesota Rep. Laurie Halverson

From a family of legislators, she has created her own policy legacy on issues ranging from helping homeless youth to curbing e-cigarette use

by Mitch Arvidson (marvidson@csg.org)

Laurie Halverson had been around politics and public service much of her life. Her grandfather and uncle were both Minnesota mayors and legislators; she was deeply involved in various volunteer activities in the Minnesota town of Eagan. But the impetus for Halverson to run for public office herself came from an unlikely source — her book club.

At one of its gatherings, the club’s conversation somehow veered toward politics, and the need for more women to seek and hold office. Halverson’s friends began pitching her on the idea. “I thought it was fascinating, and I felt a little indicted because I’ve given that speech before, ‘that we really need to get more women to run!’” she recalls about the talk at the book club.

Halverson answered the call from her book club friends and ran for a House seat in 2012.

She won, and the work inside the state Capitol has turned out to be a good fit for someone who had learned much about public service and bipartisanship. “You grow up sharing ideas and trying to come to good solutions, as opposed to being an ideologue,” Halverson says about the lessons that she took from her family. (She is a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party; her grandfather and uncle were Republican officeholders.)

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Halverson discussed her political career so far and what she hopes to accomplish in Minnesota’s changing legislative landscape.

Q: What have been some of your top legislative priorities this year?
A: Passing additional e-cigarette legislation.
I had worked on e-cigarette regulations in Minnesota in 2014, but [they] did not get passed because a lot of people were not concerned about e-cigarettes. Now they’re really concerned because Minnesota is losing ground regarding youth smoking rates, and e-cigarettes are a big part of that. We got a bipartisan bill (HF 349) passed which added to our Clean Indoor Air Act regulations. It was fun to have it be bipartisan because the history of that issue has not been bipartisan.

The other big priority has been the Paid Family Leave Act. That is the big one. It has been introduced in several legislatures over the years, but this year, for the first time, it was passed [by the House] as part of a jobs omnibus bill. So that was kind of an amazing accomplishment to see that actually get passed off the House floor. [Editor’s Note: As of early May, differences in the House and Senate versions of the jobs omnibus bill, HF 2208, still needed to be worked out.]

Q: To date, what legislative accomplishment or accomplishments are you most proud of?
A: Offering and passing the Homeless Youth Act (in 2013). That was in my first term. Minnesota had an act in place, but it had never been funded, so we got the first significant investment in preventing and solving youth homelessness. We have been able to add to that funding every year since.

It was bipartisan and a statewide effort among legislators. The fact that we were able to make that a priority across the state — and regardless of party — was meaningful to me. It has had such incredible, real results. I get to meet kids who have been housed in facilities that were built because of legislation that I helped pass. That is powerful stuff. Kids have been able to go on to college because they were able to get services that were funded by the legislation. That tells you a lot about how much power you have as a new member, and how you can use your voice.

Q: What do you think is Minnesota’s biggest challenge over the next five to 10 years?
A: It’s hard to choose one. It feels like we’re at such a significant time in our history. It feels like it’s almost a resetting time regarding who we are going to be going forward. For example, we have incredible issues facing our natural resources. Half of the lakes in the “Land of 10,000 Lakes” are not swimmable or potable.

We have, like every other state, incredible health care issues that we must deal with. … Getting people covered is one important thing that we’ve been good about in Minnesota, but what we have kind of fallen down on is getting to the underlying cost drivers and making sure that health care will be sustainable into the future.

Then, of course, we’re facing an era of incredible change regarding transportation needs and interests. The future is here. We are talking about things like what happens when self-driving cars and trucks are part of our transportation system. We’re having these conversations already and trying to prepare.

We’re also making sure that Minnesotans are prosperous into the future. I think a lot of people are feeling afraid of the future of the economy. If they’re comfortable now, they’re wondering if they’ll be comfortable in the future — because of things like the high prices of college and health care, because of shortages of housing and, for employers, shortages of workers.

It feels like we’re really at a crossroads on a number of issues.

Q: You can always defend your position on an issue if you come to it with authenticity.
A: You have several new members in your Democratic caucus this year. What advice do you give to them?
Be authentic and listen to your district. … You can always defend your position on an issue if you come to it with authenticity. We tend to have a caucus that is statewide, we have members who are in deeply rural districts, members who are in very urban districts, and we’ve got suburban members as well. There’s a lot of variety in the state of Minnesota, so representing your district takes a certain level of authenticity.

Q: Minnesota is the only state in the country right now that truly has a divided legislature — one party controlling each chamber. How do you try to work through those partisan differences?
A: We’ve got a great legacy in Minnesota of legislators committing to solving problems. That doesn’t mean that you have to give up your values or give up important things that you care about, but Minnesotans are creative and innovative. We’re home to 3M, we’re home to Thompson Reuters, other innovative companies. And we have a great history of educating our work force and growing innovators here in our state. So we must take what really works in Minnesota and bring those values into the Legislature to say that we can find ways to work together.

That, to me, is what people are asking us to do: Be real Minnesotans and put the needs of the state first. I have a community that reflects that. There are a lot of things that my community values that really transcend partisanship: education, clean water, open spaces, and things that my community has invested in regardless of political party for decades. We call it the “Eagan Way.”