South Dakota Sen. Kris Langer

Elected majority leader in her second term, her dual goals are to keep her supermajority caucus united and the Senate running smoothly

by Jon Davis (jDavis@csg.org)

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f the timing had been better, Kris Langer might have joined the South Dakota Legislature much earlier than 2013, when then-Gov. Dennis Daugaard tapped her to complete the term of a departing legislator.

Not surprisingly, it wasn’t the first time the local civic and business leader — known for her work on the City Council and as a Realtor — had been asked. “My kids were pretty young,” she says about turning down previous opportunities. “Then, my youngest was going to be a senior in high school, so the timing just kind of lined up.”

Fast forward six years, and Langer has won three elections — one to the House seat, and then two successful Senate races — and emerged as one of the state’s top legislative leaders. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, she reflected on her time in the South Dakota Legislature, her approach to leadership, and her overarching policy goals for the state.

Q: What do you recall about the transition from local to state government?

A: It definitely was very different than what I anticipated. You go in thinking that you at least know something, being on a city council, but things were very different. It was much more formal, and in some ways, things move quickly because we only have up to a 40-day session. But in other ways, like anything in government, it can move kind of slow and be kind of painful. So I think you just get better at it and realize that you can make a difference, and that’s why you continue to serve. Or, at least that’s why I do.

Q: Six years into your legislative career, what do you like best about the work?

A: I really enjoy working on good policy and making a difference, feeling like you actually do create something that really makes a difference for people, for your constituents’ lives, their well-being. That’s why you do it, that’s why you go into public service: to really feel like you do make a difference, feeling like you actually do create something that really makes a difference for people.

Q: You became Senate majority leader in late 2018. What appealed to you about holding that leadership position?

A: I think trying to steer things in the right direction and get the sort of policy that you want, that you want to make sure you’re driving everything in the right direction. And there’s also kind of an organizational philosophy of making sure that everybody is on the same page or at least trying to go for the same common goals. We had a new governor [Kristi Noem] coming in, so it was her first term as governor and my first term as majority leader. I worked hard to get her elected and we work well together, so that was one of the driving forces of me wanting that leadership spot, hoping that we could do some great things together. I look forward to that continuing.

Q: How would you describe your leadership style or philosophy?

A: It’s not my job to stand up and tell my caucus what they need to do. It’s more following what I see happening and where I think the Senate as a whole needs to go. I’m kind of laid back, I guess, as far as that goes, but I want to make sure everybody feels equipped to handle what they’re up against. That’s one of the reasons as the leader — that our members have the right information to make the best decisions that they can. And especially for the new senators coming in, I want to help them know where they need to be, what are important things for them to attend — just kind of those types of organizational things. And I’m also big on the decorum. I like to start things on time and make sure that the Senate looks like the respected body that it is.

Q: Your caucus has such a large majority of members, 30 of the 35 total seats. What is your approach to dealing with the minority party?

A: I would say, for the most part, we have a really good working relationship with our counterparts. We work across the aisle well. There’s obviously the big, hot-button issues we disagree with and kind of just know that that’s going to be a sticking point, but I try to communicate with them as much as I can about what we’re going to take on for your constituents’ lives, their well-being.

Q: What would you say have been your biggest legislative accomplishments?

A: Probably just keeping South Dakota such a business-friendly state; balancing our budget; keeping our conservative values right at the forefront. We passed a bill this session to place “In God We Trust” in our schools. You know it’s on our currency, and now it’s out there in all of our schools. Having our young people see that is really what we wanted. Probably just keeping South Dakota such a low-tax state; we don’t have a lot of extra revenue laying around. It’s always a challenge: where those dollars are going to be appropriated. Everybody’s always fighting for the last penny on the bottom line, so that’s kind of where we’re always driven: How do we best use those dollars and make sure that we’re not growing government and raising taxes for unnecessary things.

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Q: What are the biggest challenges for your state in the next five years?

A: A challenge for us is always funding. We’re a low-tax state; we don’t have a lot of extra revenue laying around. It’s always a challenge: where those dollars are going to be appropriated. Everybody’s always fighting for the last penny on the bottom line, so that’s kind of where we’re always driven: How do we best use those dollars and make sure that we’re not growing government and raising taxes for unnecessary things.

Bio-sketch of Sen. Kris Langer

✓ elected Senate majority leader in late 2018
✓ previously served as Senate majority whip (2017-'18) and House majority whip (2015-'17)
✓ appointed to fill South Dakota House vacancy in 2015; won election to House in 2014 and to Senate in 2016 and 2018
✓ served four terms on the Dell Rapids City Council, including as president
✓ works as a Realtor
✓ lives in Dell Rapids with her husband, Tracy, and their sons, Cole and Grant