
Legislative leader reflects on historic policy steps in her state, including criminal justice reform, legalized cannabis and a $45 billion capital plan


- in 2008, became first African-American woman elected to represent central region of state in Illinois General Assembly
- currently serves as deputy majority leader in Illinois House
- previously served on local school board
- lives in Peoria with her husband, Derrick, and daughter, Jianna

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Q: You were one of the main legislative leaders this year behind HB 1438, which legalized recreational cannabis. What parts of the new law are most crucial to you?

A: We were the first state to really legalize cannabis in an equity-centered way - equity around criminal justice, equity around who gets into the business, and equity around how you repair the harm from the past 80 years of the “war on drugs.”

So there were three areas most important to me: expungement for people who had been convicted of cannabis offenses; ensuring that communities who have been affected by the war on drugs get economic reinvestment, specifically from the buying and selling of cannabis; and ensuring we create an environment that ensures there is diversity in not only the workforce, but in the ownership of our state’s cultivation centers, dispensaries, etc.

I’m proud that we were able to go further than any state in the country has gone in those areas.

Q: This year, you also were one of the lead negotiators on a new $45 billion capital construction plan. How significant will that new investment be for the state?

A: That plan gives us the ability to really have transformative thinking around where we want to take the next generation of our state — whether you’re talking about high-speed rail, transformation within our higher-education system, the highway system, schools, bridges, roads, etc.

We raised a number of different revenue generators [including a gambling expansion and an increase in the gas tax] in order to be able to do it.

So to be at the forefront and at the negotiating table for both cannabis and capital was a dream year. It will be tough to beat this year.

In your Democratic caucus, you are the highest-ranking legislator from outside of the Chicago area. Is it important to you to bring a Downstate perspective to leadership?

Q: Absolutely. Anytime that we as legislators and leaders have the opportunity to bring our unique voices and experiences to any space, I think that makes the collective effort far more balanced and far more inclusive of whatever the agenda or the issues may be. I’m certainly not shy, so whenever there are issues that are pertaining to the spaces that I stand in, I make it my business to lean in — whether it be a Downstate issue, an African-American issue or a women’s issue.

Q: You’ve talked about the importance of being authentic and true to yourself as a legislator. You also seem to appreciate the chance to work across the aisle, on bills such as the Neighborhood Safety Act. How do you go about building bipartisanship?

A: A lot of it comes from how my mother and my father raised me, and also the community where I come from. I am a black woman who was born and raised in central Illinois. I went to predominantly white schools for most of my life. I learned very early on you have to come to an understanding and find a sense of shared values.

If you try, you can do that with almost anybody. I represent a district that does not always look like me. I still represent my community as exactly who I am. I think I am able to do that because I always look for our shared sense of values — Democrat/Republican, male/female, union/management, etc. I try to find the thing we connect and agree on and build from there.

Also, Peoria is the only community in the state where I stand in that has a member of the General Assembly who sits in each of the four [party] caucuses. That has been the dynamic the entire time I’ve been a legislator. That was my indoctrination into the legislature, and it allows me to approach situations not from an ideological perspective, but from a perspective of what’s right and what’s wrong. A lot of it is just common sense, too, which can honestly be a superpower.

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