



Wisconsin Rep. Peter Barca

Minority leader is serving second stint in Legislature after term in Congress and traveling globe to promote job training

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

Rep. Peter Barca has traveled around the globe to help emerging democracies, and has spent time both as a member of the U.S. Congress and a federal administration.

But in the end, it is in his native Wisconsin — and its state Legislature — that Barca has felt the strongest call to service.

Born and raised in Kenosha County, Barca became active in local politics and jumped at the chance to run for the Legislature when an Assembly seat opened up in 1984. His goals included spurring economic development in his state, and especially providing opportunities for people with disabilities or other workplace challenges.

Barca had become passionate about these issues early in his career, while acting as director of a camp for children with special needs.

“To see kids for the first time walk and talk ... it was amazing to see the progress they made,” he says.

Barca also served as employment coordinator at the camp, and his experiences led him to push for a number of state laws to help improve programs and job training for the disabled.

Focus on jobs leads back to Madison

In 1993, Barca was elected to the U.S. Congress, where he served as a representative until 1995. He then served in the Clinton administration as Midwest regional administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Later in his career, Barca became co-owner of an international firm that conducted long-term development projects around the globe. For nearly a decade, he worked on initiatives to improve employment training and education in places such as Vietnam, Tajikistan, Guam, South Africa, Botswana and Ukraine.

But Barca was eager to return to his home state, which he calls “one of the special parts of America.”

In 2008, Barca answered a call to service from colleagues and supporters who encouraged him to bring his experience and expertise right back to where his legislative career started — the state Capitol. Now serving as minority leader, Barca is juggling new leadership responsibilities with furthering the core goals he’s always held: boosting the economy and creating jobs.

“Whether it’s trying to create jobs, training people, education, looking out for seniors and those with disabilities, all those issues really are affected to the greatest degree in state government, and those are the issues I care deeply about,” he says.

Last month, CSG Midwest interviewed Barca about his legislative career and insights on leadership. Here are some excerpts from the interview.

Q: Why has job training been a top policy focus for you?

Bio-sketch: Rep. Barca

- ✓ served in Wisconsin Assembly from 1985-1993, and returned in 2009
- ✓ won special election to the U.S. Congress, where he served until 1995
- ✓ born and raised in southeastern Wisconsin and represents the Kenosha/Racine area
- ✓ appointed to serve in the Clinton administration as Midwest regional director of the U.S. Small Business Administration
- ✓ became co-owner of Aurora Associates International, a project management company
- ✓ holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Wisconsin

A: I care a great deal about education — and employment and training are the issues I focus on. That affects so many elements of our society. Young people need to have quality education and job training, and people need the opportunity to work and use their God-given talents. If you don’t have quality education and training, you are not going to start companies and you are not going to grow your economy, and that is when you run into all kinds of social problems and social issues.

Q: What kind of initiatives have you helped pass in the area of worker training?

A: First, we created “one-stop shop” training centers where we integrate job training efforts with helping employers to find qualified employees. We passed that when I was in the Legislature in my first tour of duty. I chaired the Employment and Training Committee and shepherded that into law. My home area, Kenosha, had the first “one-stop shop” training center, and it has done really well and affected a lot of people’s lives.

The second thing I will mention [is the] transferability of credits from vocational colleges to universities. That is something I continue to be very active in. ...

I have been on the board of the University of Wisconsin-Parkside for well over a decade, and they have done an incredible amount in their transferability of credits — even from Illinois, such as the College of Lake County — and we have agreements with Gateway Technical College in our home area of Kenosha/Racine. That has been extremely important. Many people have had opportunities to achieve their God-given potential because of that. I was proud to have a role in kick-

ing that off and now trying to usher it forward.

Q: Why has transferability of credits been such a focus for you, and how did you achieve this policy change without passing a state law?

A: Many people can’t afford a university right away, or some go to technical college first and then they find they want to further their education. [But] to go for four years, especially as you get older and as you become a parent, becomes a real challenge. ...

We introduced legislation, and once we had a majority [of legislators as co-sponsors], there was a memorandum of understanding signed between the university system and the technical colleges. Over the last 10 years, the difficulty has been in the details in terms of what classes they’re going to accept under what circumstances. ... But the institutional leaders have come to recognize how important this is, and it has become even more important than when we first started this 15 years ago.

Q: Can you talk about your experience serving in Congress and in the federal government?

I enjoyed my tenure working in Congress and in the Clinton administration. Congress is much more slow-moving, and you end up having to specialize in your committee work to effect much change. I certainly found it fascinating. I got to interact with some of the top experts in the world on various policies, so that part was very stimulating. ...

I was on the Science, Space and Technology Committee and also the Transportation Committee. Of course, infrastructure is vital to economic development — and I was on the economic development subcommittee, so we worked on things like enterprise zones at the time.

Q: You have said that promoting civility is one of the reasons you returned to the Wisconsin Legislature. What are some of your strategies?

A: First of all, you try to set a good example in the way in which you conduct yourself with your counterparts. In caucus, we have detailed discussions about how to approach people on the other side of the aisle and find ways to work together on things we can — and find ways to vigorously object to things we think are not helpful to the people of the state or the Wisconsin economy.

You try to engage in a lot of dialogue and model the behavior you don’t see. ...

We are trying to help to maintain Wisconsin’s historic reputation of clean, open and transparent government. That is a core value that I have and one of the reasons why I agreed to come back [to the Legislature], because there had been so many problems in that regard. That is something that is so vital to our interests, because it affects everything else we do. ★