



Sen. Gretchen Whitmer

Senate minority leader once had sights on broadcasting career, but instead embarked on groundbreaking path in Michigan politics

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

As a college student, given the choice of becoming a state legislative leader or television broadcaster, Gretchen Whitmer wouldn't have hesitated on the career choice.

"I wanted to be the first woman on ESPN," she says.

But that all changed when the East Lansing native got her first up-close look at the legislative process — as a college intern working inside the state Capitol during a unique period in Michigan government when co-speakers shared power in an evenly split House.

"I loved it," she recalls about the work she did for the Democratic co-speaker at the time, Curtis Hertel.

"It got me interested in the process, but more importantly, it made me realize the value in having a voice while public policy was being made."

Two decades later, Whitmer is one of the leading voices in Michigan politics.

At a time when Republicans control the governor's office and the Legislature, she is serving as minority leader in the Senate.

Whitmer, who took on the leadership position last year after being chosen by her Democratic colleagues, is the first woman in state history to lead a party caucus in the Senate. The East Lansing resident also holds the distinction of being "the dean of the Legislature," at "the ripe old age of 40," she jokes.

Now entering her 12th year as a legislator in the term-limits state (six as a member of the House, six as a senator), Whitmer reflected on her career, the economic and political challenges that Michigan faces, and the year ahead during an interview with CSG Midwest in late 2011.

Here are excerpts from the interview.

Q: Though you had an early interest in sports broadcasting rather than politics, you come from a family steeped in Michigan government and politics. Your mother worked as an assistant attorney general under Attorney General Frank Kelley, and your father worked as head of the Department of Commerce for former Gov. William Milliken. How did your parents shape your political career?

A: One was a Democrat, one was a mother. But there was a commonality in how they approached being a public servant — putting the public interest ahead of your own or any special interests.

Q: What went into your decision to run for elective office?

A: Because of term limits in Michigan, the woman who represented me couldn't run again. So I began looking at the field to see who I could help. And I thought, "I could do as good a job as any of these candidates, if not better." My mom, my dad, everyone said to do it. So at age 29, I decided to run. It was the year of Bush vs.

Bio-sketch of Gretchen Whitmer

- ✓ has served as Michigan Senate minority leader since 2011
- ✓ first woman in state history to lead a party caucus in the Senate
- ✓ first elected to Legislature in 2000 and spent first six years in House, serving for a time as the ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Committee
- ✓ a two-time graduate of Michigan State University: undergraduate degree in communications and a law degree
- ✓ an attorney in private practice specializing in regulatory and administrative litigation
- ✓ led successful ballot initiative campaign to open up embryonic cell research in the state
- ✓ a leading proponent of anti-bullying legislation that was signed into law in 2011

Gore, the hanging chad. I was able to win a tough primary and a tough general election, and I've been here ever since.

Q: What are your thoughts on being the first woman in Michigan history to lead a party caucus in the Senate?

A: First, it was surprising to me that there hadn't been a woman in that position before. It's such a great opportunity, and what role my gender plays into it I don't know. But I take the job very seriously and am grateful for the opportunity. With term limits, we've seen the ranks of women in the Legislature go down dramatically. Our Legislature has gotten whiter, older and more male since they took effect in Michigan. We were at a historic high of 12 when I came over to the Senate, and now we're down to four.

Q: What is your perspective overall on the impact of legislative term limits in Michigan?

A: It's been a terrible experiment, and I like to quote former Republican Gov. Milliken in a speech he made about it: "In no other walk of life would you insist on less experience." The result has been that legislators tend to have a more narrowly focused view, because they only have a finite amount of time in office. We're not talking about what Michigan is going to look like in four years or more. The conversation is more about what it's going to look like next term. That works to our disadvantage as a state.

Q: You've served in the minority party throughout your legislative career, but now you're in a situation where the Republicans control all the

levers of power in government. What do you see as your responsibility as a Democratic leader?

A: Michigan is not a Republican state or a Democratic state. We're a state that desperately needs leadership. So despite the last election, we believe we're a 50-50 state. That means at least half of our residents are counting on us to be their voice and advocates. We've had to get leaner and meaner because of the budget constraints of being in the minority party, and because of the cuts to the Legislature in general. What we've tried to do is create a more focused message using new media with the help of a young, energetic staff.

Q: You became a bit of a new-media star late last year after a speech you gave during debate on an anti-bullying bill, a policy priority for you that ultimately became state law. How did that come about?

A: There were efforts to amend the bill to give exemptions for moral or religious reasons, and I just found the whole process outrageous. So I gave an off-the-cuff, impassioned speech on the floor of the Legislature, and within 96 hours, the video had been viewed 400,000 times. It was an issue that resonated with people; the whole momentum changed based on the response to that YouTube video. We were then able to work on a modified measure that was signed into law. My staff joked with me that I should never write speeches, just go up there and say what's on your mind because it's better than anything you try to put together.

Q: The bill that was signed into law (HB 4163) requires schools to develop and enforce anti-bullying policies. How significant of a legislative accomplishment was that for you?

A: I've served in the minority for 11 years, so I don't have a lot of public acts that I can point to. But this one was special. It was named after a constituent of mine who took his life. When we got it signed into law, his dad called and thanked me. That was the most rewarding day I had the whole year — the feeling that we were able to do something meaningful.

Q: Looking to the year ahead, what is going to be the message of your Senate Democratic caucus?

A: We are going to be laser-focused on pushing a middle class agenda. For us, that starts with education. Almost \$1 billion was taken out of our K-12 system last year to pay for business tax cuts. ... Our higher education system — one of our state's most important assets — took a huge cut, 15 percent, in our last budget. That's going in the opposite direction of where I think we should be headed. We are going to push for investment in an educated workforce — restore education funding and get rid of a lot of tax breaks on the books. ★