

Minnesota Sen. Sandy Pappas

Longtime legislator has taken on new leadership role while continuing to focus on social justice issues — in Minnesota and around the world

by Katelyn Tye (*ktye@csg.org*)

Sandy Pappas was just 13 years old when President John F. Kennedy urged Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

It was a speech that helped shape a generation of young people, and that inspired Pappas herself to become interested in the world around her — from civil rights and women’s rights, to the anti-war movement and grass-roots environmentalism.

Fast-forward more than 20 years later, and Pappas was busy as a community activist, a community arts organizer and the mother of two toddlers in Minnesota’s capital city. But with some convincing from her husband (who was active in the Democratic Party), Pappas decided there was something more she could do for her state and her home district: serve as a member of the Minnesota Legislature.

Pregnant with her third child at the time, Pappas ran for a state House seat under the slogan, “She will deliver.” She lost that first race in 1982, but came back two years later and won. Pappas has been a part of the Minnesota Legislature ever since then, first in the House and, since 1991, in the Senate.

She assumed a new leadership role in the state’s upper chamber in 2013, when fellow members of the Democratic caucus elected her Senate president. That biennium proved to be an especially memorable period for Pappas because she and fellow Democrats had full control of Minnesota state government.

“For most of my years, we’ve had a Senate controlled by one party, a House controlled by the other party and Republican governors,” Pappas says about her 30-year run in the Legislature. “It was gratifying to be able to get things [passed] that you’d worked on for two decades, like all-day kindergarten, more money for early childhood and important protections for women in the workforce.

“I enjoy finally having victories.”

For Pappas, one of those legislative wins was passage of the Women’s Economic Security Act, a bill that she successfully carried to passage in the Senate.

The 2014 law requires state business contractors to pay equal wages, expand access to affordable child care, provide new workforce protections for pregnant women and new mothers, and encourage women to seek careers in which their gender is underrepresented.

As the result of last year’s elections, Republicans took control of the Minnesota House. But Democrats held on to their majority in the Senate, and Pappas

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Bio-sketch of Sen. Sandy Pappas

- ✓ first elected to Minnesota Legislature in 1984; became Senate president in 2013
- ✓ vice president of the Women Legislators’ Lobby and founder of Forward Global Women, a nonprofit that provides leadership training for women in the Middle East/North Africa region
- ✓ holds a master’s degree in public administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University
- ✓ she and her husband, Neal Gosman, have three daughters and 21 grandchildren, all of whom live in Israel



continues to serve as its president — presiding over the chamber, assigning bills to committees, and maintaining decorum among members.

From trying to provide every preschool child with access to high-quality child care, to strengthening state protections for the victims of human trafficking, to helping low-wage workers better plan for retirement, Pappas still has a long list of policy goals.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, she reflected on her legislative career to date and how she has embraced her leadership position, and she described her role as an activist outside the Minnesota Capitol.

Q: What have you most enjoyed about serving in the Legislature?

A: On a personal level, what I really enjoy is becoming friends with people who are very different from you. You have friends from different parts of the state, different generations and even different political parties. We still do make friends across party lines, even though people don’t think we do. I think that is very enriching. Most people just hang out with their crowd — people who think like them, who are just like them — and I think it’s very broadening to have friends who are different.

Q: You mentioned one of your proudest accomplishments as a legislator was passing the Women’s Economic Security Act in 2014. What made you embrace that particular issue?

A: [It] was really proposed by women in the community who had created a coalition to tell us that we hadn’t been paying enough attention to the needs of women in the workplace. We have consistently not had equal pay for equal work, and have consistently seen discrimination against women when they are pregnant or nursing. Women in low-wage jobs are not getting paid sick days and getting family leave like women in other countries — and of higher incomes [in this country] — do.

This is really a broader issue because the way women are treated in the workplace impacts their husbands or significant others, and their children. It was a fabulous coalition that came together [to advocate for the bill], and I think that to be really successful, you need that.

Q: What challenges did you face along the way to passing the Women’s Economic Security Act?

A: We had a very long floor debate that was very intense and very exciting. I had conflicts within my own caucus, which is always hard. There was a motion to send it back to conference committee that failed by just one vote, so it was a very dramatic, stressful event.

A lot of times you work on issues you might not win — it’s hard to put your whole heart into something because you might lose it. You have to have a really long-range perspective.

Q: How did you envision the role of Senate president when you pursued the position?

A: It has not historically been a very significant position in Minnesota, not like in other states. I had been thinking for a long time that we really, really need a strong administrator in the Senate. A lot of [legislators] complained for years about our pay and benefits, lack of professional development opportunities, and the need for a health and wellness program. As Senate president, I can make that happen while relieving the burden on the majority leader. He can focus on being the political leader and leave the administration of the Senate to me.

Q: What is life like for you outside the Legislature?

A: My husband and I have three daughters and 21 grandchildren, all of whom live in an ultra-orthodox community in Israel. I visit Israel twice a year and have a lot of friends there.

With an Israeli friend and a Jordanian friend, I founded an organization called Forward Global Women that trains women leaders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to be stronger peacemakers. We are in seven countries—Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and the U.S. — and our participants are social activists, academics in the field of negotiation and women’s studies, and current and former elected officials. Part of my motivation behind Forward Global Women is that I really want to see peace in the Middle East. ★