

Iowa Sen. Janet Petersen

Des Moines-area native uses personal stories of her constituents, and her own experiences, as inspiration to improve public policy

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

During her 15 years in the Iowa Legislature, Janet Petersen has had plenty to do outside of it — raising her three children, for example, and founding a state campaign to save babies and then helping build it into a global movement.

But being a state legislator, and being able to pass legislation that improves individual lives, remains as special as ever for the Iowa native.

“I like to help people turn their voices and stories into good public policy,” she says. “You get to see a great side of people; you see the advocacy and the passion. It’s such a fun process to be part of.”

Petersen’s own story, in fact, shows how personal experience, and sometimes tragedy, can be a catalyst to help others.

She and her husband, Brian Pattinson, lost their second child due to a true knot in their baby girl’s umbilical cord. The doctor said it was a rare occurrence, but Petersen soon learned that, at the time, 1 out of 160 pregnancies were ending in stillbirth. That was not rare enough for Petersen, so she made it her mission to make Iowa the “safest place in the nation to have a baby.”

As a legislator, she was in a unique position to do something about it.

First, Petersen helped lead the way in making Iowa the first state to expand its birth-defects registry to include surveillance work on stillbirths.

Then, in 2009, she and four other women from central Iowa (all of whom had lost a child due to pregnancy complications or stillbirth) created Healthy Birth Day, a nonprofit organization that launched a public awareness campaign known as Count the Kicks.

“Iowa’s stillbirth rate has gone down every year since it started, and we’re down 26 percent overall,” Petersen says. “We were 35th worst in the country for the number of stillbirths, and now we’re third best.”

“What we really want to do now is get more states on board.”

The group also has a global reach, thanks to a mobile app that helps moms “count the kicks” and be better aware of decreased fetal movement.

“We’ve heard from moms and the babies that have been saved, and their stories are real tear-jerkers,” Petersen says.

Interactions with parents and other constituents not only touch Petersen personally, they help shape her legislative work — whether it has been a leadership role on legislation to ban smoking in many public places, or a bill this year to help Iowa’s refugee population. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Petersen reflected on her 14 years in the Legislature. Here are excerpts from the interview.

Q: How did you first get interested in public policy and serving in the Legislature?

A: When I was young, my dad got cancer and died of melanoma very quickly, so my mom needed to re-enter workforce. Our church minister told her about a job lobbying for social justice issues for a coalition of churches, and she took it. So very early on in my life, our dinner-table discussions often revolved

Bio-sketch of Sen. Janet Petersen

- ✓ member of the Legislature since 2001; currently serves as Senate Commerce Committee chair
- ✓ incoming Midwestern Legislative Conference chair; graduate of the MLC’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (class of 2002)
- ✓ founder of the nonprofit Health Birth Day and its Count the Kicks public health campaign
- ✓ has three children with husband, Brian Pattinson



around the issues that my mom was working on at the statehouse. That started my love of public policy.

Q: You joined the Legislature at age 29, just as you were starting a family of your own. And you soon became a leading advocate of passing a Smokefree Air Act in Iowa. What do you recall about that legislative effort?

A: I introduced it for eight straight years, and it finally passed in 2008. What I think of now is how that law has changed our society and our medical bills, and I hope it means there are more people in Iowa who are able to be grandparents and enjoy longer, healthier lives because they didn’t smoke or gave it up.

Q: More recently, you sponsored legislation (funding for which ultimately was included in this year’s budget) to help Iowa’s population of refugees. What is the goal of this new law?

A: In the high school that is a quarter mile from my house, one out of five students there now is a refugee. A lot of our refugees come from Burma, and for many of them, they have been in refugee camps for so long, they don’t understand some of the things that we might take for granted. They need our help, and the state is going to provide dollars for local programs that team up refugees with AmeriCorps volunteers in order to help teach refugee communities how to work within our culture.

Our state has a strong reputation of welcoming refugees, all the way back to post-Vietnam and our governor, Robert Ray, responding to a letter [from President Gerald Ford] to take in what at the time were called “boat people.”

He was the only governor who responded to the letter. He called upon Iowans and our churches to embrace and welcome [the refugees]. I was a young kid when it happened, and our little tiny church welcomed a family, including a child my age. It was such a fascinating thing to see what happens when you are a welcoming state: You help people get assimilated into our country, and you can see the great things they go on to do. They’ve become an important part of the fabric of Iowa.

Q: The recent refugee bill is one example of how Iowa has been able to get things under divided government, with the state Senate controlled by Democrats, and the House and governor’s office by Republicans. How has that worked in your home state?

A: I think we’ve done a good job in Iowa of showing that we don’t have to choose gridlock under divided government. Of course, there are going to be issues that you’d love to see advance that just aren’t going to happen. ... Every year when you get through an election, it’s kind of an art of figuring out what is going to be possible under this group of people. Then you try and find out how far you can get, from the perspective of both sides of the aisle. ★

Sen. Petersen’s hometown will host legislators at next year’s MLC meeting

The Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting last came to Des Moines in 2004, and state Sen. Sen. Janet Petersen has a message for her fellow legislators from the region: Expect to be pleasantly surprised about all of the changes to Iowa’s capital city.

“I’m excited to show off Des Moines, because it has really become a thriving magnet for the millennial generation, says Petersen, the incoming chair of the MLC who lives in and represents a northwest part of the city. Des Moines, too, is now home to the World Food Prize, and its riverfront has been renovated and become part of a system of connected biking and walking trails in the downtown area.

As for the meeting itself, Petersen hopes to continue the four-day event’s tradition of being a place where legislators can learn from one another and policy experts in a nonpartisan environment.

“It seems like our country is at a point where we are ready to get back to civic engagement, and finding good public policy ideas together,” Petersen says.



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