Wisconsin Sen. Jennifer Shilling

Introduced to politics early in life, Senate minority leader has worked to build relationships inside and outside her caucus

By Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

Jennifer Shilling was probably destined for a Wisconsin legislative seat at some point in her life.

Her father was an advance man for U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy and President Jimmy Carter, as well as an aide to former Wisconsin Gov. Martin Schreiber. One of her grandfathers was a circuit court judge, the other a small-town mayor.

And by age 20, while still a student at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Shilling already had entered Wisconsin politics herself, winning a seat on the county board by outing a 78-year-old incumbent. (Shilling's father helped her write fundraising letters and post yard signs for that first run.)

She first came to Madison working for a friend who had won an Assembly seat, and after a few years working for U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, Shilling started getting approached about coming back to Wisconsin's state capital — this time as a state legislator herself.

She won an Assembly seat in 2000 and has been a member of the state Legislature ever since. In November 2014, just three years after moving to the Senate, she became the Democrats' minority leader.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sen. Shilling reflected on her time in office, her leadership style and how to break the partisan ice.

Q: How have you tried to build personal relations in the Legislature since being elected in 2000, especially among colleagues from the opposition party?

A: When I was elected in 2000, I was the only new Democrat that year in my class, which is very unusual. So I quickly realized that I needed to introduce myself to my Republican colleagues, my Republican [committee] chairs. And I'm much more of a relationship-building person than a policy wonk. I tried to get to know people outside of the Capitol after hours, going out for dinner.

I think that really helped when I moved over to the Senate after the recall elections of 2011. It was a very toxic environment because I was one of two Democrats who had unseated Republican senators. People took things really personally, both Democratic and Republican members of the Legislature, after all the things that happened.

And I am a Methodist; we have food at every gathering. So I would say, “Hi,” and talk to his staff. … I also keep what I call a “Fitz List” in my desk drawer. So when I do meet with him I have a list of issues to talk with him about — quality-of-life issues for our senators; certain requests that are coming down the pike on legislation or bills; or just day-to-day management of the Senate overall.

I’m firm and make sure that I serve and am advocating for my caucus and our agenda, but also realize that there are issues that he’s going to need our help on.

It’s just in my nature to try to be a problem-solver and try to be pretty candid with the people I work with, so it wasn’t difficult for me to pick up the phone and call him or stop by his office. I wasn’t threatened to go into the majority leader’s office. He’s leader of the majority, I’m the leader of the minority, so I’m going to advocate for my caucus but also see if there are things that we can agree upon.

Q: You became minority leader in the Senate soon after joining the state’s upper chamber, and you were elected by a unanimous vote of your caucus colleagues. How have you tried to adjust to this new role?

A: I kind of had to learn on my own. But I approached Senator Mark Miller, who had served as the Democratic leader for one stint, and got some guidance from him and advice on how to motivate the caucus, on relationship-building, and on strategies within our caucus and for dealing with the majority party. I’ve also reached out to those senators whom I admire and respect because of the strength that they bring on issues they work on.

I talk about it as a team, and outside of session, I like to text my colleagues or just give them a quick call and see what’s going on.

Q: What personal experiences do you bring to your role as a legislator and legislative leader?

A: I tell people I’m a mom with a mini-van, so I worry about orthodontic appointments and overdue library books and birthday party RSVPs and also what a $250 million budget cut to the university system means. I worry about our roads and our infrastructure and the importance of broadband. It’s the only kind of lifestyle that my husband and kids have known, so I hope people see me as identifying with a lot of the issues that all working families are juggling.

“Chex Mix diplomacy has served me in just trying to ratchet down the tension that sometimes still exists in a really hyper-partisan environment.”

Bio-sketch of Sen. Jennifer Shilling

✓ Unanimously chosen as Senate minority leader in November 2014 (still holds this leadership position)
✓ First elected to Wisconsin Senate in 2011 in special election
✓ Served in Wisconsin Assembly from 2001 to 2011 and as minority sergeant at arms in 2005
✓ Once worked as a legislative and congressional aide
✓ A 2001 graduate of CS 9 Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD)
✓ Lives in La Crosse, Wis., with husband, Chris, and two sons, Nate and Zach