

# Wisconsin Sen. Jennifer Shilling

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

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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 ousting 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 everything and so I started on what I called my "Chex Mix diplomacy." In 2012, I served on the Finance Committee and started bringing homemade Chex Mix every week to our meetings, and we'd have it in the back of the room where the coffee was. And you know, feeding my colleagues a cereal snack where we would talk about things over that bowl of Chex Mix, it made it harder for them to go out on the other side of the wall and really personalize things and be nasty and negative.

They started making requests for Chex Mix recipes, and when I left the Finance Committee,

## 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 CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD)
- ✓ Lives in La Crosse, Wis., with husband, Chris, and two sons, Nate and Zach



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some of them said, "We're really going to miss you Jen; you're one of the good guys. We liked working with you and we're going to miss your Chex Mix, so please make some Chex Mix for us!" I joked: "No. Make your own damn Chex Mix, I'm in leadership now. I'm not even on the committee anymore."

So I have tried to bring some humor, self-deprecating humor, to really lighten some potentially tense situations. "Chex Mix diplomacy" has served me in just trying to ratchet down the tension that sometimes still exists in a really hyper-partisan environment.

**Q: As Senate minority leader now, how do you view your role in trying to improve relations among members of the two parties?**

**A:** It's my relationship with the Majority Leader [Scott Fitzgerald]. I try to pop into his office once a week when we're in session, just to 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. ★