

South Dakota Sen. Billie Sutton

Since life-changing rodeo accident, he has made the most of all opportunities, including improving state policy as minority leader

by Laura Kliever (lkiever@csg.org)

As a young man, Billie Sutton had ambition, talent and a plan for success. None of his aspirations included running for elected office in his home state of South Dakota.

He grew up on his family's ranch near the Nebraska border, riding horses and roping calves from a young age. His father had been a saddle bronc rider, and the young Sutton wanted to be one too.

Awarded a full-ride rodeo scholarship at the University of Wyoming, he not only qualified for the national college rodeo finals all four years, but ended his college career as the university's all-time leader in individual rodeo points.

"Rodeo meant everything to me," Sutton recalls.

But then his life abruptly changed forever — at a competition in October 2007, when he was just a few months away from graduating with a degree in business finance and beginning a career on the rodeo circuit.

Settling himself on a horse that he knew and had won with in a previous competition, and waiting for the chute to open like he had done in countless competitions before, Sutton was thrown backward. It was an ordinary enough occurrence (minor injuries from getting thrown by a horse aren't uncommon).

But on that day, the horse threw him into the back of the bucking chute, at a spot where a board had been kicked out by another bronco earlier in the day. Sutton's lower spine was wedged into the hole, crushing two vertebrae and causing spinal cord damage due to the impact and angle. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

"After my accident, I kind of adopted the philosophy of trying to take advantage of every opportunity that I was given," Sutton says, "because you never know when you are going to lose something that means a lot to you."

After graduating in May, and then spending an additional year in Wyoming going through rehabilitation and serving as an assistant rodeo coach at his alma mater, Sutton came home — to a place and way of life he still loved.

"The original plan was for me to probably come home and run our family ranch," he says. "But after that accident, that kind of limited things as far as the physical labor."

Sutton took a job buying and selling hay (he now works as an investment consultant), and was soon asked by his district's state senator (who was running for state auditor) if he would consider running for the open Senate seat.

"It was something I really hadn't thought that much in depth about until I was asked," Sutton says.

His grandfather, though, had been a state senator in the mid-1970s, and Sutton saw this chance at elected office as one of those life opportunities not to pass up.

He won that 2010 election, and has been a member of the state Senate ever since. Sutton is serving as the Democratic minority leader, gearing up for the legislative elections this fall

Bio-sketch of Sen. Billie Sutton

- ✓ Minority leader since 2015; previously served as assistant minority leader (first elected in 2010)
- ✓ investment consultant at First Fidelity Bank
- ✓ member of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development Class of 2013
- ✓ lives in South Dakota town of Burke with wife, Kelsea, and newborn son William "Liam" John



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(though he is unopposed), and planning to make the most of his third and final term in the state's upper chamber.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Sutton reflected on his legislative career to date.

Q: Since you joined the Legislature, you've made education and state school funding a top priority. Have you seen some successes in that area since you were first elected?

A: This year was kind of an epic year in South Dakota. I was a member of what was called the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Education, and we [the Legislature] just invested right around \$70 million into K-12 education and put together a whole new funding formula. This formula is based on a target teacher-student ratio, and it targets [better] teacher pay — because, as everyone is aware, we're last in the nation on teacher pay in South Dakota.

This is something that I have been pushing since I came into the Legislature: to get more funding for education and to get our teacher pay out of last place. And I think this plan will do that. There is still more to do, but this is a pretty epic step in the right direction. Our general fund budget is just \$1.3 or \$1.4 billion in South Dakota, so \$70 million is a significant increase.

Q: So would you consider this new education funding plan your biggest success so far in the Legislature?

A: We've had some pretty incredible successes in the last few years. We reformed our adult correction system and our juvenile correction system, so that we keep nonviolent criminals out of jail. And we've put more focus on rehabilitation and programs so that we don't have to build more jails.

It has been a change in philosophy that has been completely bipartisan: to reform our system so that we are getting people the help they need

rather than just throw them in jail and hope for the best.

Then, we've had a huge investment of dollars into our infrastructure system. [In 2015] we invested around \$80 million in our infrastructure through an increase in our gas tax and some other taxes. And then, on the horizon, something we can look at as a victory before not too long is Medicaid expansion.

We really have had some pretty incredible accomplishments. ... I think that goes back to hard work by a lot of our legislative cohorts never giving up on an idea that they really cared about.

Q: How has your personal background contributed to your work in the Legislature?

A: After my injury, I think more clearly than ever I saw the value of education. I look back and think, Where would I be had I not gone to college, had I not had a good high school experience with education? Where would I be? Because the injury was traumatic and I'm not able to do a lot of things that I maybe used to do in the past, although there are a lot of ways to figure out how to do things differently — but where would I be?

I don't know I can answer that very well, except to say that I would not at all be in the position I am in — an investment consultant at the bank where I work, and being able to serve in the Legislature. Not that you have to have a college degree, but it sure helps to give you credibility and a knowledge base when you have a good education. I think sometimes we take it for granted how important education is; it's the future of our country.

A great public education is the solution to so many things; whether you want people off welfare rolls or you want people to be successful in business, you need an educated public. The benefits are overwhelming. That added to my passion for the Legislature and passion for politics, and led me to want to take a leadership role and to forge ahead a path for South Dakota. ★