

Making a Difference: An Interview with Rep. Anne M. Northup

By Patricia L. Harman

After five terms in the Kentucky General Assembly, Anne Northup decided to expand her horizons. When the opportunity presented itself, she ran for the U.S. House of Representatives for the Third District in Kentucky and won. Now in her second term, Rep. Northup (R-KY) has brought her interest in education to Congress and is working to make a difference.

If practical knowledge and dealing with the everyday issues of life are prerequisites for being a successful politician, than Anne Northup has that and more. As the mother of six children, she stayed home for 12 years while her children were growing up, taking time to serve on the school boards and parent/teacher associations for the schools her children attended.

"I've always been interested in the political process," says Northup. "There were 11 kids in our family and that was an interest that my dad and I shared." She volunteered on a number of campaigns as far back as the 1960s. "I was always someone who was very involved with the communities that were a part of my life."

When her youngest child began nursery school, Northup decided that she wanted to start working on having a career some day. Her interests lay in public policy, especially economics. She contacted several people she knew in politics and they suggested that she start working for someone in the Kentucky general assembly. In 1986, she went to work for the senate minority whip, developing an immediate affinity for this type of work and the challenges that accompanied it.

The following year, the state representative in her district ran for attorney general and won. Even though it was a Democratic district, Northup was encouraged to run for his former seat, which she succeeded in winning.

Many individuals are intimidated by the thought of running for public office or even becoming involved in the political process, mistakenly believing that they can't make a difference. When Northup made the decision to run in 1987, her friends were surprised by her choice and wondered who had "appointed" or "chosen" her to run. "We live in a democracy," she reminded them. "Anyone can run."

Why should people get involved in the political process? "Because everyone has varying experiences and their experiences are valid to them and to people with like experiences," says Northup, "and you need all of the valid experiences at the table. It's too bad, and not to our credit as a country, that so many people who run for office come out of a sort of ideal law background."

For example, an individual with a child who is a straight-A student will have a completely different perspective on the resources a school should offer than a parent who has a learning disabled child. Both of those perspectives are valid and both are critical to developing good public policy. "In some ways, the best training for being in Congress is to have lived life," she adds. "You draw on those experiences every day. We need people who have valid experiences in a lot of different walks of life to be in Congress."

While growing up, Northup had reading and attentional difficulties. "I knew I was one of the smartest kids in the class, but my grades didn't reflect it," she says. "I felt guilty and thought if I just paid more attention and tried harder, I knew I would be in the top of the class. My parents said the same thing because they sensed I was smart. Once I got help and tutoring, I went back to the top of the class."

She understands that every child can benefit from a more systemic approach to education. "They need the building blocks because you can rely on those all of your life," she concludes.

Northup still struggles with time concepts and how much can be accomplished in a given period, but says she is much more organized thanks to her husband. She attributes her endless energy and creativity to helping make their home a place where their children felt comfortable and accepted. "I could relate to my kids and their difficulties and encourage them to continue to achieve. I always considered some of those qualities my best assets, and I've been able to pass that on to my kids," she adds.

"I tell my kids, 'You just have to take a little more time to get organized. You just have to realize that this isn't your strong suit. You're probably going to lose things, so try to do a mental checklist. This is just the way you are, but it's perfectly okay.'"

Northup firmly believes that children need someone to say to them that it's okay to be different Ñ not to put others out or to not do their school assignments Ñ but the fact that it is harder for them to do those things is all right. "You will bring different talents to your home and community," she says.

She founded and co-chairs the House Reading Caucus, whose emphasis is to help get information to members of Congress on what the latest research is on reading, such as the importance of phonics or that 40 percent of school-aged children need early intervention and a systemic approach to reading. "Too many members of Congress are relying on the people who testify in front of education committees instead of on the research which can provide a much better road map to where money should be spent,"

she says.

The bottom line is that everyone can make a difference, but first, you have to get involved.

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When it comes to reaching politicians and others responsible for setting public policy, Northup offers these suggestions:

- * Have the research at your fingertips so it doesn't just sound like just one parent's opinion.

- * Organize and collaborate with others. Be part of an association to help establish your legitimacy.

- * Take the time to educate the staff person in a member's office on what you're trying to say. Politicians are not experts on every issue and rely on their staffs to provide key information for specific issues. If you get the ear of a Congress member, it will probably only be for a few minutes before they go on to deal with other issues. Working with staff members in the local district and in Washington, D.C. can give you more time to provide critical information.

- * If you really want to talk to your representatives, do it while they're out of session, such as during a recess. The time in D.C. is very fragmented and there are a lot of issues demanding their attention.