



Young women urged to take part in Legislature

By Kevin Woster, Journal staff

Debra Anderson was a 27-year-old waitress at a Sioux Falls restaurant when a phone call from home inspired her to begin a state legislative journey that would eventually make her the first woman speaker of the South Dakota House of Representatives.

If there was a grand plan in her political aspirations, she doesn't remember it.

"My dad just called me up one day and said, 'I've been thinking, maybe you should run for the Legislature,'" she said. "I thought, 'Well, why not?'"

Why not, indeed?

Change had swept the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the women's movement was a powerful force behind it. Although the social revolution was late and somewhat subdued when it arrived in South Dakota, it had a clear impact on the makeup of the Legislature, as well as on some of the issues it considered.

In 1974, incumbent Democratic Gov. Dick Kneip won re-election and helped bring more Democrats and women into the Legislature. In January of 1975, five women were sworn in to the 35-member Senate, and seven were sworn in to the 70-member House.

If 12 out of 105 still seemed paltry, it was more than twice the number of women legislators in state history. South Dakota didn't have a single woman lawmaker in the Capitol from statehood in 1889 until 1923.

That's when a 32-year-old school teacher from Huron named Gladys Pyle broke - or at least chipped - the glass ceiling by being sworn in as a Republican member of the House of Representatives.

Pyle would go on to serve as South Dakota secretary of state and win a short term in the U.S. Senate through a special election after Sen. Peter Norbeck died.

But her election to the state House hardly began a landslide of female legislators. There were four in 1925, one in 1927 and none again in 1929 and 1931, back in the days when South Dakota's Legislature met every other year. There were never more than three women legislators between 1925 and the early 1970s.

Debra Anderson joined nine other women in 105-seat Legislature when she took her oath of office in the House in January of 1977.

In the next 12 years, she would see that number double.

"By the time I left office, there were 21 women out there," Anderson said.

That's three more than the 18 women lawmakers in the state Legislature today, a fact that troubles Rapid City lawyer Linda Lea Viken, 62, a Democrat who represented Sioux Falls in the South Dakota House from 1973 through 1976 and a district in Rapid City from 1989 through 1992.

During Viken's last two-year term, there were 26 women serving in the Legislature, 15 in the House and 11 in the Senate.

She was hoping the numbers would stay at that level or increase, but instead it fell - to 15 by 1995, and back up slightly to 18 now. Viken believes that fewer women legislators make the state Capitol a poorer place.

"I think its wonderful to have all those voices heard when we're making decisions," she said.

But even when the number of women legislators reached its zenith, there was trouble gathering in the atmosphere of the Legislature and the increasingly strident tone of the debates, Viken said.

"I think the numbers were up for a period of time because women saw a challenge, they knew they could make a difference in people's lives and they wanted to serve," she said. "But when it became more personal and there were more divisive issues, social issues that divided people and it became a litmus test, I think that had an impact."

Anderson thinks that more women in the Legislature brought emphasis to a greater variety of issues. Those included education, health and welfare and domestic violence, she said. But Anderson, 58, said she never experienced a mean-spirited atmosphere. Nor did she go out of her way to promote herself as a women's candidate.

"I tried never to be identified as a woman's-issue person," she said. "I think you do a better job when you don't focus on something like that."

Anderson resigned her seat in the House in 1989 to take a job as deputy assistant for intergovernmental affairs in the White House of President George H.W. Bush.

She returned to the White House as a volunteer scheduler for President George W. Bush, where she still works part time.

She also stays in contact with Mary Bibby, an old friend and former Republican colleague in the state Legislature, whose name then was Mary McClure, who moved to Washington, D.C. in 1989 to assist Andersen in her White House duties.

Before that, Bibby had served 15 years in the state Senate, 11 as the president pro tem of that body. That was the Senate equivalent of the House speaker's role. And Bibby, 68, and Anderson drew attention for their respective ranks.

"If we would go to an out-of-state legislative conference we were kind of unusual," she said.

A former school teacher, Bibby brought that passion to the job. But she, too, avoided being labeled as a women's-issue legislator.

"I'm not so sure there's a difference as far as policy issues are concerned," she said. "Women might push the agenda more toward child care and so-called women's issues, although I always maintained that taxes were a woman's issue, too."

Viken said that virtually all issues are women's issues, but a better gender mix would provide more diverse perspective and perceptions that are useful in shaping legislation.

But women must be ready to face the too-often-personal criticisms that seem more common today than they used to be, she said.

"I would hope that young women, leaders, would step forward and get back in the legislative process," Viken said.

"You can make a difference. And it's so important. We need to have those voices heard."

Contact Kevin Woster at 394-8413 or kevin.woster@rapidcityjournal.com.