



PROFILE: WISCONSIN SENATE MINORITY LEADER MELISSA AGARD

How the ‘quiet leaders’ in her life and community continue to inspire her, and why legislative success to her means much more than ‘wins’ inside the Capitol

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

At first, Melissa Agard thought she might be too busy to seek elective office.

She was, after all, the mother of three young boys at the time, a small-business owner, and already very active in her hometown of Madison, Wis.

Friends and neighbors were encouraging her to run for an open seat on the county board, but Agard wasn't so sure — until a fateful conversation she had with two of her boys.

They had come to Mom asking for some relief from a community-service requirement at school.

“They knew I already dragged them around and had them do so many different things for the community,” Agard says, “and they wanted me to call the teacher and excuse them.”

Agard sat them on the couch. “This is your community asking you to step up,” she told them.

They weren't the only ones who got the message.

“As those words dripped out of my mouth — and my two little boys' faces wondered what they'd gotten themselves into, getting this lecture from their mom — I realized I was actually delivering a lecture to myself.”

She listened, running for a spot on the county board and serving two terms there. Soon, though, Agard's attention turned to state politics, especially after the passage of Act 10 in 2011, a contentious measure on public unions and collective bargaining that sparked protests and brought national attention to Wisconsin.

“I looked around and thought, I have a couple of choices: I could complain and completely withdraw from politics, or I could try and roll up my sleeves and work to make the world a little better,” she says.

In 2012, she won a newly drawn Assembly seat on Madison's North Side. She moved to the Senate in 2020, and a path to leadership soon opened up. Chosen caucus vice chair at the start of her first term, Agard was elected minority leader by her legislative peers in 2022.

In an interview with CSG Midwest, Agard reflected on her first year as a top caucus leader and shared her perspective on leadership, inside and outside the Wisconsin Legislature. Here are excerpts.

Q How do you define leadership in the legislature?

A It goes back to my time in the Assembly — what does success look like, not only for me but for my constituents?

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BIO-SKETCH: WISCONSIN SEN. MELISSA AGARD

- ✓ has been a member of the Wisconsin Legislature since 2013
- ✓ elected Senate minority leader in 2022
- ✓ is a graduate of two CSG leadership programs: the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (Class of 2014) and the Henry Toll Fellowship (Class of 2015)
- ✓ is a lifelong resident of Madison, where she lives with her four sons
- ✓ is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison

“Leadership is a lot of listening. Leadership is stepping outside of what may be comfortable, and knowing that you're not always going to be faced with cheers.”

may be comfortable, and knowing that you're not always going to be faced with cheers. There may be people there that have tough questions.

It's about making safe spaces for people with differing opinions to be able to be share [their views].

It's about providing a bit of a vision for my caucus, but also checking in with them: What would they like to see themselves being able to do? How can I and my office continue to support them?

And because we are in the minority party, it's about really defining what success means for all of us. Then, make sure people are able to achieve that success so it doesn't feel like a complete negative grind all the time.

Q Who have been your role models when it comes to leadership?

A The best leaders, the people I really look at as successful leaders, aren't necessarily other elected officials.

They're people who are quiet leaders in changing the world around them. It's people like my grandmother, who was a stay-at-home mom with seven children figuring out how to keep her family moving and continuing to give back to her community. Or young people exhibiting leadership, standing up against adversities and things that don't feel right to them and being brave enough to use their voice and optimism.

There are quiet leaders everywhere we look. It's a matter of finding them and seeing the magic that they have.

Q What did you learn from your experience as a newer

legislator, especially as a member of the minority party, that you try to impart to colleagues?

A I think elected officials need to sit down and meet with their constituents and their staff, and also think to themselves: What is a win? What does that look like?

In the Assembly, I spent a lot of time learning the rules of the house and living my values — knocking on doors in my district and drafting legislation in response to what my constituents wanted to see happen. I wasn't stepping up in a leadership role. I felt there were other people hungry to do that and were doing a good job. So I spent my time defining success by forging an engagement with my district and my community, while also supporting my colleagues.

Q How and why did you step so quickly into Senate leadership?

A Going back to a lesson that my dad taught me: If you see something you think can be done differently, you have a couple of options, and one of them is rolling up your sleeves and putting yourself out there.

I was a freshman member of the state Senate when I ran for caucus vice chair and was thrilled to be unanimously elected to that position by my colleagues.

I think people saw me as someone who had a proven track record in the Assembly and in my community. And I certainly had worked hard over the years to build trusting and collaborative relationships with my colleagues in the Senate when I was in the Assembly.

Q As minority leader, how do you manage the differences with the majority?

A I have a lot of respect for Senator [Devin] LeMahieu [the majority leader]. We sit down and have conversations and touch base with each other; our staffs have good relations with one another.

Do I agree with what he's putting on the calendar, what bills he's moving or not moving forward? Not so much, but I do think it's important to him that there's a sense of decorum and respect for the body in which we serve, as well as a respect for me and my staff and for the role that I serve in the Capitol.

Q What do you view as your biggest legislative accomplishments to date?

A It's always an achievement when you get a bill signed, when you get to go to the governor's office and stand there for the pictures. But my biggest legislative wins are linked to the time and energy I spend knocking on doors, engaging in listening sessions, and lifting up the true heroes — the everyday people of our community.

I'm also very proud of the bipartisan work that I've been able to do. It took six years, different attorneys general and different iterations of legislative champions, but we closed the loopholes in Wisconsin that were creating backlogs in [the processing of] sexual assault kits. We also are now providing tracking systems for survivors to track their kits.

Those are real wins, and life-savers for many people.