

PROFILE: MINNESOTA SENATE MAJORITY LEADER KARI DZIEDZIC



She looks back on momentous first session in top caucus post, and shares her perspective on keys to legislative success: listening and constituent relations

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Her father, Walt, was a teacher, a police officer, and a longtime, influential member of the Minneapolis City Council.

But it wasn't her father's titles that stuck so much with Kari Dzedzic. It is what he did with them, including his tireless work in the community — often with Kari and other family members by his side.

Get out and listen to people. Bring flowers to a lonely senior citizen. Deliver food to a family in need.

"As we were handing out the flowers or the food, you see how many people are worse off than you, but also how grateful they are, sometimes just for that moment of conversation," she says.

Dzedzic was not only learning the value of community spirit and public service, but understanding what she has come to view as central to the effectiveness of all elected officials, at any level of government: Listen to, learn from and help your constituents.

"I can think I know what's going on in the community, but until I actually get out there and talk to people and see how different things are impacting them, I might not realize it," she says.

NEW TITLE, SAME PHILOSOPHY

Dzedzic joined the state Senate in 2012, and many of her most treasured accomplishments cover a wide range of issues. What they share in common, she says, is that the idea for legislative action came from constituent services.

The Minneapolis native used a similar approach in her first year as leader of the Senate DFL Caucus.

She was elected to the position by colleagues in late 2022, and at the time, the number being thrown around in Minnesota's political circles was one, the size of the slim partisan advantage (34-33) that the DFL had entering a session where Democrats also controlled the House and governor's office (the first such trifecta in a decade).

The caucus had no votes to spare, and a lengthy list of policy goals.

Dzedzic points to another number for helping keep the caucus together: 500,000, the number of doors knocked on by legislative candidates during the 2022 campaign.

"We listened to what voters were telling us and wanted to see happen," she says, "and then when we were having discussions on bills, we listened to each other.

"We found out there was much more common ground, even though we were from very diverse regions of the state, representing very diverse populations."

Here are excerpts from a recent CSG



BIO-SKETCH: MINNESOTA SEN. KARI DZIEDZIC

- ✓ chosen by her Minnesota Senate colleagues as majority leader in late 2022; first elected to the Senate in 2012
- ✓ served as executive assistant to U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone of Minnesota
- ✓ worked as communications director for the Hennepin County attorney and later served as a policy aide for the Hennepin County Board
- ✓ born and raised in northeast Minneapolis, part of the district she now represents
- ✓ earned a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Minnesota

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Midwest interview with Majority Leader Dzedzic on the 2023 session and her views on leadership.

Q Looking back at the 2023 session, what stands out to you in terms of how the Legislature went about its work?

A I've been here for 12 years, and other people who have been here longer than me have also said this was the most collaborative session they've seen — whether that was from member to member in the Senate, or between the House and the Senate. A lot of that was members taking their own initiative. Some of it was leadership driven, saying: "OK, you want to pass this, you have concerns. Have a conversation." And they would go off on their own and try to work it out.

It was one member telling another member, "This is why this is important in my district." Or, "Here's my concern with your bill." It wasn't just, "I don't like your bill." It was "Here's the language that is giving me heartburn" or "Here's the language I need in this bill."

Q You've been part of politics and public service for quite a while now: as an aide to former U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone, in county government, and now in the state Senate. What have you observed about effective leadership?

A I've seen leadership styles change over the years, and I think the style today tends to be more open and inclusive. This past session, knowing we had 34 votes and we needed all 34 of them, it had to be all

about that. Very open and inclusive, and truly listening to each other. That was the way to find common ground. We knew that we had an opportunity to do a lot, but we couldn't do it if we didn't stick together.

Paul Wellstone would say, "We all do better when we all do better." And I think it helped that we all kept this idea that we wanted to help the most people improve their lives across Minnesota. That kept us grounded and together.

Q What about the role of bipartisanship in a state like yours, where a lot of attention had to be paid to keeping the slim partisan majority together? Was there room for legislative work across the aisle?

A I think there always should be room for it. We found common ground to pass bonding bills this year, and even on bills where there were party-line votes on things like paid family leave or [legalized] recreational marijuana, there was a lot of input from Republicans who would say, "I can't vote for the overall bill, but I want to see it work." So they gave us suggestions that ended up in the final bill.

I've told the Democratic members who are our [committee] chairs to reach out to the Republican members. Don't assume they don't have good amendments. If they're willing to work with you, work with them.

Q In March, you had surgery to remove a cancerous tumor, and part of that surgery was a hysterectomy, a splenectomy

and an appendectomy. Then you started chemotherapy. How were you able to get through all of that while in the middle of session?

A It came down to everybody stepping up and doing their part, knowing we had to depend on each other and work that much harder. I relied on my colleagues in the Senate, and it also was a reminder of just how important staff is [in the Legislature]. Hire great staff and work with them.

Q What are some of the policy changes enacted this past year that you think will have the greatest impact?

A Some of what we did will have an immediate impact, others will take longer. Paid family leave, for example, is going to take a while to implement, but I think it will make a difference in people's lives for generations to come. Because when parents can stay home with that newborn baby, or when somebody gets sick and has to stay home, they don't lose their job. They don't lose their house.

Then there are things like the North Star Promise, with the potential for free college tuition for a lot of students who struggle to figure out how to get money for college. We also passed child care initiatives in seven different bills. A lot of those will take longer to implement. Some of them are grants to cities and areas to help build up the physical infrastructure; other bills are reducing the cost of child care. We also put a lot of money into affordable housing.

They're all related, going back to those discussions we had with constituents and ourselves about how to help families and help local economies throughout the state.