



PROFILE: MINNESOTA HOUSE MINORITY LEADER LISA DEMUTH

From involved parent to top state leader, her life has changed quite a bit in the 17 years since she began asking this question about elective office: ‘Why not me?’

by Rebecca Leis (rleis@csg.org)

Lisa Demuth got the call six years ago from longtime Minnesota legislator Jeff Howe.

“Have you ever thought about running for a seat in the Minnesota House?” he asked.

Her immediate answer: “Nope, never crossed my mind.”

But then Demuth asked a question of herself, one that had brought her to public service in the first place.

“Why not me?”

The year was 2007, and an article in her local newspaper noted that the school board had more open seats than candidates. Demuth clipped the article and set at it her husband’s place at dinner, thinking he could fill one of those openings. He instead turned the question back at her: “Why don’t you run?”

“I didn’t have a reason why I couldn’t; I just had never thought of it,” she says. “So I checked into it and started to think about it.”

“I didn’t want to do it to be an elected official. But I cared about my community. Two of my kids had graduated. Two were still in the district, and it mattered to me how our kids are educated.”

That led Demuth to launch a successful write-in campaign for school board.

Eleven years later, many of the same reasons led to her to say “yes” to Howe and the chance to seek a seat in the Minnesota Legislature: her faith, conversations with family, a sense of community responsibility, and that always-lingering question of “Why not me?”

First elected in 2018, Demuth ascended to the top position in the Republican House Caucus in late 2022.

In an interview with CSG Midwest, the Minnesota House minority leader shared her perspective on leadership and policymaking. Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Q In just four years, you went from new legislator to top legislative leader, and it happened during a tumultuous period in your state’s history. How do you look back at that time, and why did you choose to pursue leadership?

A I had one year under my belt before COVID. During that time, I kept my head down and worked hard on my committees to learn from my constituents and colleagues. The



BIO-SKETCH: MINNESOTA REP. LISA DEMUTH

- ✓ elected House minority leader in November 2022; previously served as assistant minority leader
- ✓ first elected to the Minnesota House in 2018
- ✓ is a small-business owner who served 11 years on her local school board
- ✓ lives in the central Minnesota town of Cold Spring; she and her husband, Nick, have four adult children and six grandchildren
- ✓ is a 2021 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD)

“Work hard for the people I’m serving, learn what you can, and stay true to yourself.”

— Words from a letter that Rep. Demuth wrote to herself as an incoming freshman legislator, and that she says still hold true today

turmoil of COVID was one thing, but the unrest following George Floyd’s death was personal for me.

A lot of my colleagues didn’t even know I was biracial. I had never brought it up because I don’t do identity politics. They didn’t know my connection to that area. Although I was born in my rural legislative district, from the time I was in seventh grade to 11th grade, we lived on 31st and Elliot, which is just blocks away from the site of George Floyd’s death.

I was able to say, “I see this a little bit from the middle.” Because I hadn’t led with identity politics, they [my caucus members] had already gotten to know me and were more willing to listen to my perspective. That opened the door for a discussion that was beautiful.

I was deeply frustrated by the state’s failed response to the unrest as I watched the city burn. I no longer had connections in the neighborhood, but that feeling of frustration, even though I was an elected official, motivated me to run for caucus leadership.

Q Having the rather unique perspective of living in both urban and rural communities, how has that shaped your leadership style?

A I think one of the things about the urban-rural divide is that we’re often not willing to listen. Yes, you can go out and tour [other parts of the state], but did you listen to what people are saying and try to take that in and understand it as you form your own ideas?

I believe in a leadership style that is very collaborative. I want to hear from everybody, even if that means things take a little bit longer. I know I don’t have all the answers, whether that’s in my business, in my home, or in the legislature.

We have 64 members in our caucus. I want to hear from all of them.

Q What have you learned about how to be successful as a legislator?

A I just came across a letter that I had to write myself during freshman orientation — in December 2018, right before we took office. There were 40 freshmen, and they had us all write a letter to ourselves, kind of in that old-school way. And then they gave the letter back to us the last week or the last month of session.

In re-reading it, I felt really shocked. The letter had stayed so true. It said to work hard for the people I’m serving, learn what you can, and stay true to yourself.

Q You are leading a Republican caucus at a time of full Democratic control of the Minnesota Legislature and governor’s office. How do you measure success for your caucus?

A I was interviewed by the *Star Tribune*, in November of 2022, right before I became leader, and I had said at the time that success would be

signified by staying unified as a caucus and gaining a majority [in the fall 2024 elections].

Even during really challenging times, we stayed true and stayed tight as a caucus. Obviously, we were playing a lot of defense these past two years.

But our members learned all they could about each topic. They dug in and did the research. That allowed us to form our decisions and our responses accordingly — whether that was amendments on the floor, introducing our own bills that we wanted to carry, or making our case to the public.

Q What do you see as some of the challenges for the Legislature to address, both over the near and longer term?

A We have a budget deficit looming in two to three years. That will inform the next five to seven years. Minnesota is one of the highest-taxed states, and with the pressures put on businesses over the last two years — with new sick and safe time and paid family leave [laws] — we’ll have to find ways to reel in spending.

Make Minnesota a place that people can afford to live their lives. That doesn’t mean cutting programming; it just means being smarter about how we spend our funds and having accountability.

Let’s have accountability and transparency in government agencies, because then we’re going to find maybe we’re shortchanging here or we could do better to serve people with spending money there.