PROFILE: WISCONSIN ASSEMBLY MINORITY LEADER GRETA NEUBAUER

'It's about what we do together': State's youngest caucus leader since World War II shares ideas on maximizing the power of the minority and the skills of its members

by Jon Davis *(jdavis@csg.org)*

To suggest that Greta Neubauer was born for the Legislature isn't (too much) hyperbole.

Her father, Jeffrey, sat in the Wisconsin Assembly from 1985 to 1989 and is a former state party chair.

Her mother, Lisa, is a Wisconsin appellate judge (chief Appellate Court judge from 2015 to 2021) and made an unsuccessful run for the state Supreme Court in 2019, losing by just 0.5 percent to current Justice Brian Hagedorn.

"My parents did meet in the state Capitol in Wisconsin, where I now go to work, so there, of course, is a deep family connection to Wisconsin politics," Neubauer says.

"I grew up talking about politics around the dinner table and knocking on doors as a very young person for local candidates with my parents, my dad in particular."

Campaigning stuck with her.

As a high school student, Neubauer joined Barack Obama's 2008 presidential effort.

"I went to Iowa, almost lost my fingers and toes in the caucuses being outside, waving signs around," she recalls.

As a college student, motivated by what she saw as a lack of action to address climate change, she became active in a student movement pushing schools to address the issue.

Neubauer had left home for college and, for several years, Wisconsin politics. That changed after the 2016 elections.

"I realized just how critical Wisconsin is in national political contests and in the direction of our democracy at large," she says.

Neubauer began work as a legislative aide for then-Rep. Cory Mason, who soon left the Assembly to become mayor of Racine (also her hometown). She ran for that open Assembly seat and won a special election in January 2018, joining the Legislature at age 27.

In December 2021, when then-Minority Leader Gordon Hintz announced he was stepping down, Neubauer pursued the position.

She was unopposed and, at age 30, became the youngest leader of a Wisconsin caucus since 1943. In an interview with CSG Midwest, Neubauer shared her perspective on legislating and leadership. Here are excerpts.

Q You had exposure to the Legislature before becoming a member of it, but was there anything about the position that surprised you?

A I understood a lot about the mechanics of it, but I was and continue to be moved by my interactions with people in my district and around the state.

It became very clear to me quickly that a huge part of my role was showing people that it mattered for them to engage in the political process. Even when it felt like their calls or their letters were going into a black hole, it matters. ... So a lot of my work is helping people and advocating effectively on the issues that they care about.

Q How do you view your role now as a caucus leader?

A We have a caucus of 44 people who are elected and accountable to their own districts. Their districts are different, as are the needs of their constituents. I am not their boss, but I am their leader. Their bosses are their constituents, and so I really see this role as an opportunity to get to know and understand my colleagues and to align around their goals and to build a plan.

Q How do you try to make the most of all 44 members?

A People bring different professional and personal backgrounds and different skills, and so I try to understand what each person has to offer to the group.

Who's a great communicator? Who's really interested in the details of policy work? Who can go out and work with stakeholders and bring them in for advocacy? Who does a fantastic job of connecting with their constituents and can share how to best do that with their colleagues?

People bring incredible skills. My background is as an organizer. I think that helps me. I see my job as organizing the caucus toward our shared goals.

Q How would you describe your approach to leading a party in the minority?

A I very much understood [after becoming leader] that the strength of our caucus was in our unity and our ability to act as a collective, and that continues to be true. ...

We are able to, of course, have individual legislators work across the aisle on policies that are important to them, but we make sure that they're aligned with the interests of the caucus as well. And I think if the majority party knows that they're going to need to contend with us as a group, that gives us power.

Q Your caucus has grown in numbers and has quite a few new members. Has that required an adjustment?

A We have 23 new members this year. That's the majority of our caucus and includes many new seats — we picked up 10, the most in several decades — so that changes the culture of the group and the dynamics.

Those folks ran for office with new [legislative] maps in place. And in the desire to govern, they want to be in the majority and they want to get things done for their constituents.

In past sessions, we have been more on defense, and now we're on offense. We are using our numbers and the closer margins in the Assembly as an incentive to try to get things done.

Q Who were or are your leadership models?

A I studied social movements in college, and that really helped me understand that governance is not just about one person getting elected and being in power. It's about a collective.

I draw a lot of inspiration from seeing the people in Wisconsin who have stayed in the fight over many years, who have no title or pay, but have done the work of trying to bring people together to advocate for bettering their communities. And that's really how I try to think about my role. We are all in these roles for just a certain amount of time. It's not about us. It's about what we do together.

Q Is there a policy area that is top of mind for you right now as a priority?

A Education is really important for my district. Our public schools have struggled. When my dad was growing up, people moved to Racine for the public schools. And we, as a community, have struggled in many ways — loss of jobs and rising inequality in our community in the last several decades have had a huge impact.

I've worked to build support in the Capitol for investments in public education ... and I also just helped run a school district referendum campaign in Racine because we were facing an existential cut. We were successful in April, and it really was amazing to see the community rally around our goal, even in a time of economic uncertainty with many people having a difficult time making ends meet.

So I was really proud to be able to leverage my leadership position in this community to help win these critical investments for our kids.

BIO-SKETCH: WISCONSIN REP. GRETA NEUBAUER

- ✓ first elected to the Wisconsin Assembly in a January 2018 special election; elected to full terms since November 2018
- ✓ elected minority leader in 2021 at age 30
- ✓ is a graduate of Middlebury College and a Harvard Kennedy School Fellow
- ✓ lives in Racine, where her family has resided for five generations

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