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Washington's Senator Patty Murray is busy during the Senate break touring the state, assessing concerns.

# Whirlwind Tour

*by Treva Lind • Photography by Shelly Hanks*

A tree-lined main street buzzes with mid-August activity as the town of Dayton wakes for business. The Seneca plant for canning asparagus and sacking seed peas looms large at the edge of this Eastern Washington community,

*“We’ve such a diverse state, from dense forests to remote rural areas, high tech to agriculture.”*

— *Patty Murray*

and across the highway, a Columbia Grain Growers elevator offers another reminder of Dayton’s agricultural ties. Tourism is also important to the 2,500 residents here.

A block from downtown, about 20 community leaders gather in a meeting room adjacent to the library. They’re awaiting U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-Wash.), scheduled on this Thursday morning for a roundtable discussion on community concerns.

She’s running about 10 minutes late. With a decade in Congress under her belt, Murray looks unruffled as she walks in with, “Hi, everyone.” People in the room pause, then stand as Murray circulates around with handshakes. She greets a county commissioner, a bank CEO, two senior citizens, a superintendent of schools. Others are with economic development, health services, the Farm Bureau, and the Port of Columbia.

With a welcome from the mayor, the one-hour meeting begins. Dressed in a gray-green pantsuit, Murray settles into a chair with paperwork on her lap and pen in hand.

“This is our August break, but it’s an extremely busy time,” she explains. That’s an understatement. Murray’s schedule is jam-packed with stops around the state during Congress’s one-month recess. The visit to Dayton comes at the end of a week spent viewing a new overpass in Auburn, touring a light rail facility in Tacoma, discussing security at the Port of Tacoma, and commissioning a U.S. Coast Guard patrol boat in Port Angeles.

“What I do in what I call ‘recess’ is to get out to as many communities as I can to find out what people are most concerned about,” Murray says.

She’s heard a lot about prescription drug costs and Medicare reimbursement rates affecting health care. Murray has intro-

duced the Medi-Fair Act to raise the state’s Medicare reimbursement rate by almost \$1,500 per recipient up to the national average.

“It’s a number-one issue facing doctors and health care in rural communities. They can’t afford to keep open, or they’re turning away patients.”

She also hears about the state’s economy and transportation. Murray’s itinerary included tours of Columbia Valley vineyards and a stop in Walla Walla to discuss highway widening before hitting Dayton, Pomeroy, and Clarkston.

Her cross-state travels distantly echo another August trip she took 30 years ago from Bothell to Pullman, where she completed a degree in recreation at Washington State University in 1972. Later, as a young mother, she tackled the state legislature when funding cuts threatened a co-op preschool program her children attended. Her grassroots campaign to save the program triumphed, and her “mom-in-tennis-shoes” image stuck. Murray served two Shoreline School Board terms. In 1988, she was elected to the state senate.

Campaigning as one who lived the issues affecting families and pushing education, Murray was elected in 1992 to Congress. She became the youngest female senator to balance dawn-to-dusk politics with parenting two children. She won reelection in 1998.

Murray’s son and daughter are grown now. She and husband Rob are even grandparents. But even as she has played key roles on Senate transportation and agricultural appropriations panels, she still lists education and families as top passions.

“I came to the Senate as an advocate for children and families,” says Murray. “I have been able to impact education and health care issues, including working to reduce class sizes

**Murray visits with Pataha citizens following lunch served by the children, right, in the historic Pataha Flour Mill, just east of Pomeroy, Washington.**



## “...I found my own voice”

in the early grades and requiring our teachers to have training in technology. The issues that affect families personally are always close to my heart.”

Today in Dayton, Murray is ready to hear what's close to the hearts of residents.

She briefly describes Congress's work on homeland security, prescription drugs, health care, pensions, an energy bill, and a new trade agreement. Supportive of the President's need to negotiate trade—helpful for Washington's agricultural, biotech, software, and aircraft industries—Murray warns about guarding the state under a new energy bill. “We need to make sure it meets with our needs, with our dependence on hydropower.”

When Murray turns to community leaders, Jennie Dickinson of Dayton's Chamber of Commerce appeals for help in the possible closure of four regional parks on the Snake River. Faced with a massive budget shortfall, the legislature cut funds for state parks on leased land, including Lyons Ferry, Central Ferry, Crow Butte, and Chief Timothy on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers property. The corps lacks funds to operate the parks and may have to destroy the facilities to return the land to its natural state, Dickinson says.

Listening, Murray nods and takes notes. She touches the pen to her chin, asking about costs to keep the parks open. Murray offers to see if her staff can work with officials, with the first goal to stop any destruction.

Since making that offer, Murray's office has held four community meetings, gathering together state and local officials, concerned citizens, and the Army Corps of Engineers in an unsuccessful effort to find a way to keep the parks open. Murray also offered to try to secure federal funding, if other funding partners stepped forward to help.

Around the room, the discussion turns to the complications of patients' privacy regulations, apple tariffs, paperwork hassles for special education, teachers, and high prescription costs. Murray tells the group she's newly appointed to the Agricultural Appropriations Committee and urges them to suggest funding priorities.

The hour is up. Murray excuses herself, but it's another 10 minutes to the door as people greet her.

Outside, Murray climbs into the passenger side of a white Grand Cherokee. She turns to her Eastern Washington director, Judy Olson, in the driver's seat. “You want to follow up on talking to the corps?” Murray queries. This reporter and two Murray staffers settle into the vehicle's back seats for the 35-minute drive to Pomeroy.

In the car, we first discuss Murray's role in education. According to her staff, Murray secured \$1.2 billion to hire teachers in 1998. Under the plan, school districts annually receive formula-based distributions to hire teachers and reduce class sizes in the early grades. The funding reached \$1.6 billion for

**P**ATTY MURRAY didn't see a future in politics when she left Washington State University in the early 1970s. In fact, her hopes of getting a college degree at all were nearly dashed when her family fell on hard times.

The second of seven children, including an identical twin sister, Murray first spread her political wings at WSU when she led her Streit-Perham residence hall in protest to allow women to wear pants instead of dresses to the dining hall. She was soon elected Streit-Perham president.

“That was my first time away from home,” Murray recalls. “I've a twin, and we chose to get as far apart as possible, she to Western Washington and me to WSU. We chose that to allow us to grow on our own, and I found my own voice.”

Her father, Dave Johns, who managed a dime store, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when Murray was 15. In a few years the family lost his income, and by age 19 Murray was worrying about finishing at WSU.

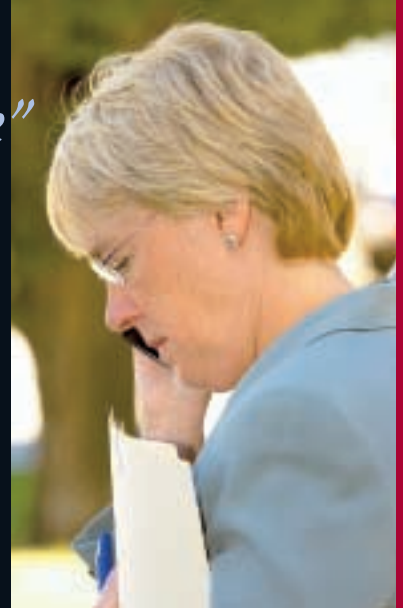
“I wondered, am I going to have to go home, get a job, and help raise my brothers and sisters?” But her family got help, including job training for her mother. Murray received Pell grants and student loans. All seven siblings are now college graduates—a firefighter, a lawyer, a computer programmer, a sportswriter, a homemaker, a junior high school teacher, and a United States senator.

Once the youngest woman among U.S. senators, Murray has more female colleagues now. As of the 2000 elections, the U.S. Senate had 13 women. “We meet once a month for dinner to discuss the issues important to us, as well as how one another are doing.”

Her family's support is also key. When her children were still home, they would watch C-Span and often knew the issues such as TV program ratings for children. “Actually they watched me on C-Span to see when I'd come home,” Murray laughs. “They had it figured out before I got home. You have a very real perspective.”

Murray flies back to Western Washington every weekend and spends time with family, including one grandchild. Sometimes, she enjoys fishing or hiking.

“I do try to take time every weekend to take walks with my husband and to gather our family together.”





2001. However, for 2002, the teacher hiring initiative was combined with teacher-quality programs, resulting in \$2.85 billion for both teacher training and hiring.

"But Senator Murray succeeded in ensuring that no school district currently receiving class-size [teacher-hiring] grants would have its funding cut, so they could maintain the progress that had been made in reducing class size," says her spokesman, Todd Webster.

Washington ranks 19th nationally in teacher pay, with an average salary of \$42,143, according to the American Federation of Teachers. When asked about any gains in education, Murray smiles.

"It's an on-going effort. It used to be education was a last priority. I've worked hard to reverse that. I will continue to push education as a top national priority."

One of only a few senators to use Pell Grants and loans toward college, Murray also lists priorities of protecting student financial aid and supporting higher education.

Other issues press in, though. Washington had the second highest unemployment rate nationally behind Oregon for much of 2002, and Murray runs through some reasons.

"The agricultural economy has really been devastated, the Pacific Rim countries are not buying as much, the energy costs and the whole California crisis and pricing [that] closed the aluminum plants, then the dot.com leveling." She pauses. "And then September 11. Boeing has lost a lot of employees, about 30,000." A recent United Airlines bankruptcy threatens to cancel more Boeing orders. Murray was the architect of legislation to allow Boeing to build and then lease 100 wide-body 767 jets to the U.S. Air Force.

The state must regroup, Murray says. "We have to say, 'Where are the new ways to create jobs? Where are the new potentials for businesses? What are the big attractions or barriers?' One barrier is the transportation system unless we do something."

A great economic prospect is Washington's wine industry—especially with WSU support, Murray adds. "We need good research: crops that are disease-resistant, how to grow better crops. It could be a part of another WSU program to educate and hire wine industry managers. Now a lot of our [industry] scientists come from California."

WSU has an Irrigated Agriculture Research and Extension Center in Prosser, and Murray met August 14 with representatives of six Columbia Valley vineyards as well as with retired WSU horticulturist Walter Clore, a pioneer in Washington's wine industry. The more than 160 wineries in the state also attract tourists, Murray says. "The wine industry offers value-added dollars through tourism. People stay at hotels, eat dinner, buy gifts."

Until she was unseated last fall as chair of the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee, Murray managed transportation spending bills in the Senate. That was good news for the state.

A 2002 spending bill signed into law earmarked \$190 million for state transportation, a jump from \$60 million a year before. Among projects, it covered new city buses, bridges, ferries, highway construction, scenic byway work, west-side light rail, and airports.

During her tenure on that panel in the Senate, Murray felt pressure from both fellow Democrats as well as Republicans such as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who criticized \$3 million in the 2002 spending plan for a maritime museum in Seattle and \$4.7 million for a Coast Guard patrol boat built in Washington.

Murray contends that transportation is linked to improving the state's economy and quality of life. "Transportation impacts our ability

to attract new businesses and jobs. The reason businesses say they're not moving to the state or leaving is the gridlock.

"More work needs to be done. I've been able to make an impact."

She admits being a veteran helps in the Senate, as does passing a learning curve. "I think I've gotten my master's degree in 80 different subjects. We're such a diverse state, from dense forests to remote rural areas, high tech to agriculture."

Time is running out for questions in the car. Just outside of Pomeroy, Olson stops by the roadside to give Murray time to end the interview and review for the next stop.

We drive to the U.S. Forest Service's Pomeroy Ranger Station to find Port of Garfield manager Lora Brazell. Murray won Senate support of \$500,000 toward an access road and bridge connecting to a nearby light industrial area, and Brazell briefly shows off the site. Then, everyone

heads to a scheduled luncheon at the Pataha Flour Mill restaurant.

The dining room of the 1878 rustic building holds about 30 people—a good turnout for harvest time. The owner's children and their friends escort the senator inside. Murray shakes the hand of a young girl near the entrance. "Hi, I'm Patty," she says.

At a podium, Brazell thanks Murray. "With this road and bridge we will get a chance to try to help the decline in our agricultural economy by diversifying through light industry," Brazell says.

Murray stands to speak, vowing to keep the project as a priority. As Pomeroy residents talk, they echo many of Dayton's concerns: transportation, schools, and health-care costs. Murray urges continued dialogue and gives a nod to the region's tourism, praising the restaurant. "This is a tourist destination. You have a gem here, and you have the most professional wait staff," referring to the children.

With that, she mingles briefly; but as the group starts dispersing, Murray and her staff quietly set out for their next Washington destination. ■



Pataha Flour Mill restaurant

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