



{ A SEAT at the TABLE }

Washington's Senator Patty Murray '72 clings to a humble beginning, but wields influence and power and dishes out results for her state's struggling citizens.

:: by Hannelore Sudermann ::



DAVID ILLIFF





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One morning this spring, Patty Murray's suite in the marble and limestone Russell Senate Office Building is bustling. A group from a garden club in Tacoma chats sociably with a team from the Washington Grain Alliance while a few other people in suits and military uniforms fill the couch and chairs.

Murray '72 and her staff will make time for all of them, though this morning the senator has had to rearrange her schedule to include a visit to the White House. President Obama is a day away from releasing his budget, and has asked to meet with Senate leadership.

But first Murray must head to a press conference over at the Capitol with colleagues Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Nevada) and Chuck Schumer (New York). Powerhouses like Reid and Schumer like to have Murray in their mix, say Washington insiders. Being from the West Coast and having a plain-folks way, she adds something to the tableau. That she's a woman adds diversity as well.

Murray is the first woman senator from Washington, the first woman to serve on the Senate Committee on Veteran's Affairs, a senior member of the appropriations committee, and the fourth-ranking member of the Senate leadership. Still, she continues to nurture the image, from her early days running for Washington State's Senate seat, of the ordinary "mom in tennis shoes" who wants to serve the folk of Washington State.

Reid speaks first, discussing Obama's "stunning speech" the night before. Schumer steps forward with similar comments. Then it's Murray's turn. The men spoke in concepts. She says it plain: All through the president's speech she was thinking of the concerns back in Washington State where the citizens are "really struggling." She lists layoffs at Washington Mutual, Microsoft, Boeing, Starbucks. Even her brother, a sports reporter at the *Seattle P-I*, is about to lose his job, she says.

"Now the hard work begins," says Murray. "This country needs us all to work together."



PATRICIA LYNN JOHNS and her twin sister Peggy were born in Bothell in 1950. Her parents Beverly, a homemaker, and David Johns, a decorated World War II veteran who worked as manager of a small store, stretched their income to care for their seven children. But then challenges struck. When Patty was 16, multiple sclerosis disabled her father. The family turned to welfare until Beverly was able to get government-funded training and find work as a bookkeeper and support the family.

In 1968, Patty chose Washington State University for college. At that time the student and faculty activism in Pullman was as much an education as the classes, says Murray. "I saw you had a choice to sit at home and gripe or go out to be involved."

To fulfill the requirements of her physical education degree, Murray left WSU for a semester and volunteered at the Seattle Veterans Hospital. "I worked with men and women who were coming home from Vietnam who were my age," she says. "I really saw what the reality was of people who went to war and came home. I have taken that experience with me ever since."

While studying in Pullman, she met Rob Murray. They were married in 1972, the year she graduated, and she found work as a secretary while he finished his degree.

After college they moved back to western Washington and settled in Shoreline. Rob signed on with the Coast Guard, and they started their family. For the first few years, Patty was a homemaker focused on raising Randy and Sara, but the closure of a state-funded cooperative preschool program turned her into an activist.

The time in the 1980s was much like today when the state budget was especially tight, says Murray. She drove to Olympia to argue for the program and was told by one legislator that she was telling "a nice story, but I couldn't make a difference," she says. "He said I was just a mom in tennis shoes." Instead of being discouraged, she was invigorated. She led the charge to get the funding reinstated.

After that first taste of success Murray decided to run for the Shoreline School Board. She lost by a narrow margin, but was later appointed to the position after a vacancy. From there she honed her skills working locally, and helped a friend run for state senate. Though the friend lost, Murray was left thinking that she herself could run for the seat in 1988.

She was very effective as a state senator, says lobbyist Lonnie Johns-Brown (no relation to Senator Murray), who worked with Murray on women's and children's issues. Murray's greatest success was helping to pass the state's first family leave act, says the lobbyist.

Murray wasn't in office a full term before she set her sights on the U.S. Senate. Watching the Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991 and seeing how the senators treated and reacted to Anita Hill, Murray could see that no one there represented her—a woman, a mother, someone from the middle class.

Murray on a 2001 tour of an apple packing house in Yakima. In February she was recognized by the Washington State Farm Bureau for her work on behalf of Washington State farmers. *Courtesy Murray Senate press office.*

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Nearly everyone around her discouraged her bid for national office. Some even laughed at the idea, she says. “Back then I was told, ‘You haven’t paid your dues. You haven’t been in politics long enough. You don’t have enough money. You don’t know how to raise money. You don’t know enough people. You don’t know the right people,’” says Murray. “But that wasn’t important to me. I wanted a name on the ballot. It didn’t have to be mine. But I wanted a name on the ballot of someone who understood the things important to families like mine.”

She brought it up during a meeting at her Shoreline office with Norleen Koponen, then Washington State’s president for the National Organization for Women and Johns-Brown. “At first we were like, ‘Oh, really?’” says Koponen. Both women realized it was a long shot. “It was pretty much a white male club for the national offices,” says Koponen. “People were looking at her bid unbelieving that she would even have the audacity to try.”

Murray, then 41, ran on a platform of representing the working middle class, ordinary families who cared about education, access to health care, and tax relief. Then things started falling into place. Incumbent Democratic Senator Brock Adams withdrew in the wake of a sex scandal.

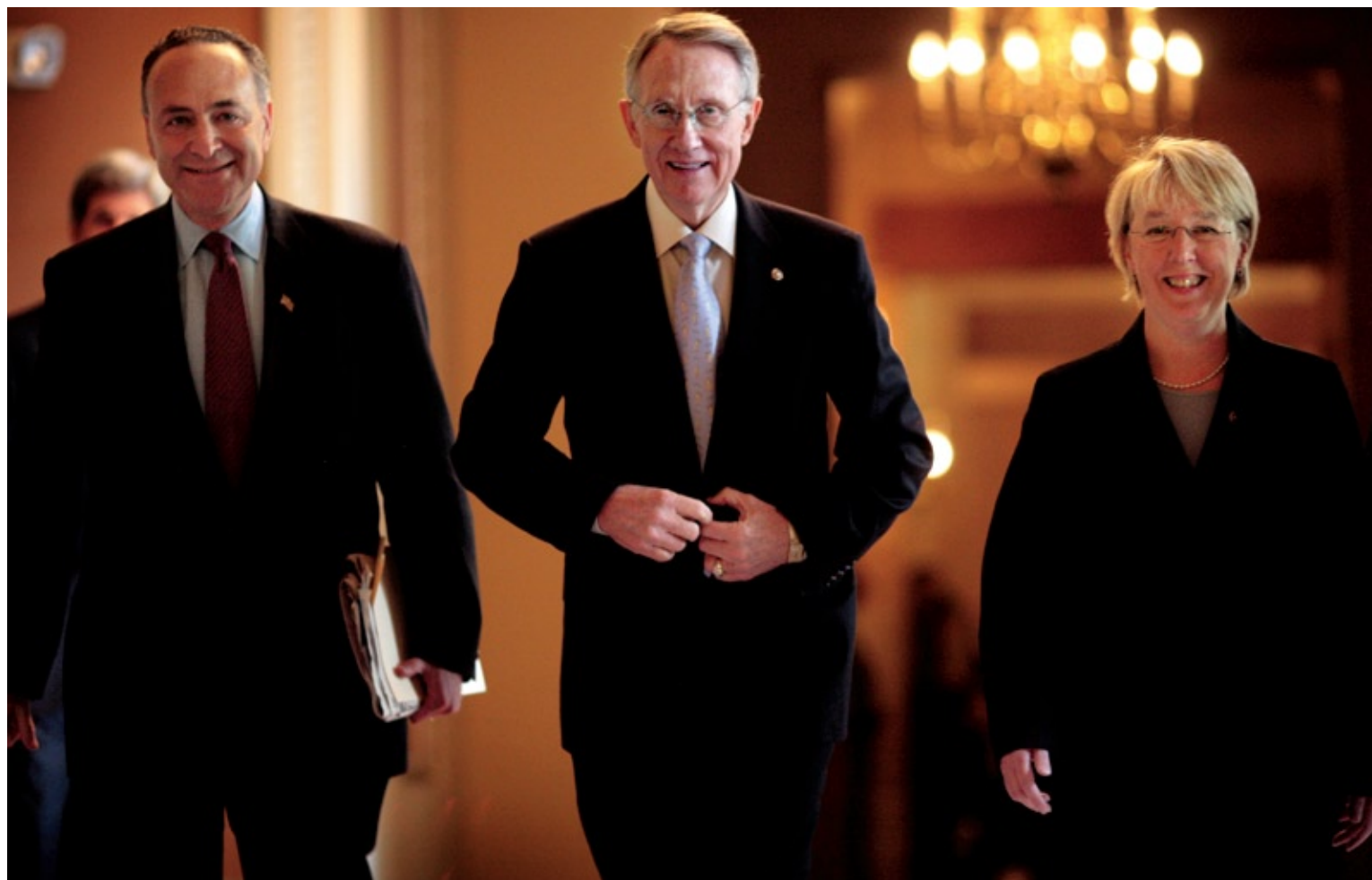
Momentum built when the National Organization for Women turned its attention to Murray. “We felt betrayed [by Adams], of course. And we felt an urgency to support her,” says Koponen. The NOW endorsement brought Murray other local and national support in its wake.

While Murray nurtured her plain-spoken, down-to-earth image, glimpses of a more savvy opponent showed through. In a debate for the Democratic ticket against Don Bonker (a D.C. lobbyist), she noticed for the audience that his watch was set to D.C. time. “She has that instinct, that indefinable thing—knowing when to play her weakness as a strength,” says Johns-Brown.

Ultimately, she faced polished Republican Rod Chandler, a U.S. Congressman from Bellevue. She played her ordinariness against his smooth political image. Though his campaign largely outspent hers, she won by a clear margin.

Murray wasn’t in Washington long before she became involved in a major sexual misconduct investigation. A fellow West-Coast senator, Bob Packwood from Oregon had been accused of sexual harassment and the

Patty Murray and Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) escort the newly elected Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) in November 2006. *Melina Mara/The Washington Post*



Murray tours flood-damaged Washington in January with Governor Chris Gregoire and Senator Maria Cantwell. Washington became the first state to have three women at once in its highest political posts. *Elaine Thompson/Associated Press*

Senate Ethics Committee was slow to bring charges against him. Murray publicly scolded her male colleagues, “You still don’t get it.” She was one of five female senators who successfully argued for public hearings on Packwood’s behavior—which resulted in his expulsion from the Senate.

The people of Washington weren’t the only ones she had to convince she was suited to be a senator. At first her Senate colleagues questioned her behaviors. “She was criticized because she didn’t show up for these after-hours cocktail parties,” says Koponen. “Instead she was going home to spend time with her kids.”

Today, Murray still doesn’t partake of the Washington social scene. She works late most days, then walks home to her apartment with her briefing papers in hand. “She doesn’t draw a lot of attention to herself. She’s not as outgoing as some people think a senator should be,” says Koponen. “But she’s hardworking, sticks to her beliefs, and works hard on the issues that affect women, children, minorities, and the underprivileged.”

Every weekend, with few exceptions, Murray flies home to be with her family. After her son Randy finished high school in Virginia, Murray’s husband and daughter Sara moved back to Washington State where Rob has a job with SSA Marine. They have a home on Whidbey Island. And they spend time with their children and their families. That time back home, “It’s the best thing I do,” says Murray.

Murray often runs into her neighbors at the grocery store or Home Depot. That’s her litmus test, says Alex Glass, Murray’s press secretary. If there’s something she can’t explain or justify to them there in the grocery store aisle, “She comes back and says ‘how do we explain this to X person in the Freeland grocery store?’” says Glass. “She’s always thinking about bringing it back down to earth for the people she represents.”

She may also be answering their questions about earmarks. This winter, Murray was criticized for being 12th among the senators for getting earmarks for her state in the omnibus spending bill. Her requests, some of which were made jointly with other members of Congress, totaled \$171 million.

She’s won some big items, including \$100 million for the light rail between downtown Seattle and the University District and another \$25.6 million to complete the project all the way to the Sea-Tac Airport. She also secured \$80 million for the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund. Smaller pieces include \$800,000 to expand a pediatric center in the Tri-Cities, \$3 million to improve road and rail systems to reconnect the city of Vancouver to its Columbia River waterfront, \$1 million for the nursing school at Washington State University in Spokane, and \$1.2 million for Pullman Transit to replace five of its oldest busses. Still, it would be hard to find a rodeo museum on her list.

“What makes her Patty, and so effective, is that she is really driven by the issues she cares about,” says Johns-Brown. One of the places where her character has really shown through is Veterans Affairs. When she started as senator, Murray asked to be appointed to the committee. Years

1950 :: Patricia Lynn Johns is born to Beverly and David Johns. She and her twin sister are the second and third of seven children in the Johns family.

1965 :: David Johns is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and over the next few years the family struggles with medical bills and has to, for a time, rely on food stamps. Beverly finds part-time work as a bookkeeper.

★ 1968 :: Enrolls at Washington State University, and pays for school with the help of Pell Grants and student loans.

1972 :: Interns at Seattle's Veterans Affairs hospital working with injured soldiers who returned from Vietnam.

Graduates from WSU with degree in physical education.

Marries Rob Murray '75.

1975 :: The Murrays move to Shoreline.

1976 :: Son Randy is born.

1979 :: Daughter Sara is born.

1983 :: Patty becomes a citizen lobbyist, sparked by a desire to save a state-funded co-op preschool program in her community. It was while she was campaigning to save the preschool that a legislator tells her she is just "a mom in tennis shoes".

1984 :: Starts teaching at Shoreline Community College.

1985 :: Joins the Shoreline School District Board of Directors and serves terms as president and legislative director.

1988 :: Elected to Washington State Senate.

1990 :: Becomes the state Democratic whip.

1991 :: Announces her plan to run for U.S. Senate.

★ 1992 :: Patty earns NOW's endorsement, which leads to other local and national support. Patty is elected. The number of women in the U.S. Senate climbs from two to six.

1993 :: Starts work as Washington State's first woman senator. Joins the Senate Appropriations Committee.

★ 1995 :: Becomes the first woman to join the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs.

2001 :: Becomes the chair of the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee.

2005 :: Exposes a greater-than \$1 billion shortfall in VA funding. Publically rebukes Senate colleagues and VA administrators for under-serving war veterans.

2007 :: Named Democratic Conference Secretary, the fourth most powerful position among Senate Democrats.

★ 2009 :: Patty participates in the signing of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act into law, continuing her efforts to support women's issues.

★ Patty attends Senate confirmation hearings for Gary Locke to become U.S. Commerce Secretary. Along with her rise to power in the Senate, the Locke confirmation, the appointment of Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske as the White House "drug czar," and the nomination of King County Executive Ron Sims to be deputy secretary of Housing and Urban Development are providing Washington State a growing presence in the Capital.



JOHN FROSCHAUER/AP

Chronology of a Senator

Using details from her own biography, news stories, speeches, and testimony, we have listed some of the key events along Patty Murray's journey from a preschool classroom in Shoreline to the marble halls of Washington, D.C.



JASON REED/REUTERS



ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

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later, when Congress voted to go to war in Iraq, and though Murray opposed the war, she redoubled her efforts with the committee on Veterans Affairs. "We ask people to serve us, and we've got to be there for them," she says. "I remember what happened during the Vietnam War... We have an obligation to take care of them when they come home."

"Senator Murray along with Senator Okaka and [Representative] Bob Filner have been carrying the battle for our veterans and military for quite some time," says Bill Schrier, of the Washington State American Legion. In 2005, Murray fought to get the federal government to spend more in emergency funding for health care for veterans, drawing attention to the debilitated states of VA hospitals around the country. It was an uphill battle. Even the Veterans Affairs secretary said the organization had all the money it needed, says Schrier. But Murray knew better. Just a few months later the \$1 billion shortfall was made evident. Murray came to the rescue. "She was able to immediately move forward with a spending bill," says Schrier. "Normally that flow of money doesn't happen that fast."

She also fought to keep three of Washington's VA hospitals open. "She's a key player along with Veterans Services," says Schrier. "She has fought some bloody battles for us, and it's good to have her in your corner when times get tough."

It's also good to have her around when you're trying to break in. Murray has helped many fellow Washington delegates get up and running when they get to D.C. "She loaned me her scheduler. She helped me set up my office and get started. And she offered me advice on committees and things of that nature," says Maria Cantwell, Washington State's other senator. Today the two senators work together on Washington's issues, as well as share the load by dividing up responsibilities, says Cantwell.

Murray credits Senator Barbara Mikulski of Maryland for helping her find her way in the Senate at first. "Breaking the glass ceiling is not the end of the day," says Murray. "It's turning around and making sure that other people can get through it as well."

Murray is as successful as anyone who has ever served Washington in the Senate, says Washington State Representative Norm Dicks, who in his 41 years in Congress has seen his share of senators. He conjures up the names Warren Magnuson and Henry "Scoop" Jackson. "She is right up there in terms of effectiveness," he says.

Washington State has a real involvement with the federal government, with Hanford, the Bureau of Reclamation, dams, parks, and the defense posts, he says. With a strong senior delegation and a Democrat in the White House, more good things should happen for Washington State, says Dicks.

AMIDST THE butter yellow walls and tall dark wood doors of the senator's suite Jaime Shimek '01 sits at her desk preparing for a meeting with a small crowd from the Washington Farm Bureau led by President Steve Appel '74. As Murray's key legislative assistant for issues including agriculture, energy, environment, tribal, and other issues, Shimek is on call to constituents every day. Shimek's father is a wheat farmer near Ritzville. She grew up in Washington and majored in communications



RAY LUSTIG/THE WASHINGTON POST

at WSU before coming to D.C. She started with an internship in Representative Norm Dicks's office, and later moved into jobs with Senator Maria Cantwell. After her first taste, she was loathe to leave. "They call it Potomac fever," she admits.

And the fever seems to be heating up. With Murray a member of leadership, and with a Democrat in the White House, "since November, it's a whole new world," says Shimek. Issues the senator has been working on for more than a decade seeming to be coming through. "It's not glamorous, but it's important work," she says. "And I love working for the people of the state I'm from."

Through the office walks another WSU alum, legislative assistant Travis Lumpkin '02, whose focus includes trade and transportation. Even with the recession and budget constraints, there is a lot of potential for Washington State's priorities—including transportation investment, agricultural research, and Hanford cleanup, he says.

Murray's team is known as a loyal, organized, and effective group. "Her staff is one of the best on Capitol Hill," says Dicks. That's in part why the Senate leadership has come to rely on Murray; she can get things done.

Looking back on her years in Washington, D.C., Murray sees that times have changed since she first ran for office. Women are now a force in the Senate, and the country has its first African-American president. But "the challenges in front of our country right now are greater than I can remember," she says, listing economics, security, health care, and jobs. "It's a very difficult time for families."

She'll be in the thick of trying to address all those things. "I'm at an amazing seat at the table with leadership and with a president and vice president that I know," she says. "The decisions we are making are extremely important, both about today and about how we want our country to be in the future."

Even so, Murray still clings to that tennis shoe image. "I'm still the same person who comes in here every day and goes to work and fights for the people of Washington State and looks at the priorities that are important to my constituents," she says. "I don't think I've changed at all." ✕