

The Minnesota Star Tribune, December 27, 2024, p. A5.

**MARY MURPHY** 1939-2024

# Longest-serving woman in the Minnesota House



Rep. Mary Murphy, DFL-Hermantown, made an impassioned nomination speech for Melissa Hortman for House speaker on Jan. 8, 2019, and encouraged members to read "Who Moved My Cheese?" for lessons on how to work together in the Legislature. Murphy died Wednesday at age 85. (Glen Stubbe/The Minnesota Star Tribune)



Former state Rep. Mary Murphy was known for showing up for community events ranging from parades to spaghetti dinners. (Photo submitted by Grant Hauschild)



Rep. Mary Murphy of Hermantown was congratulated by a Democratic colleague after the outdoor heritage bill passed in the House in 2009. (Jeff Wheeler / The Minnesota St)



DULUTH - On Fridays, Mary Murphy lunched. The longest-serving woman in the Minnesota House, retired just two years, routinely sat alongside other politicians and laborers at a downtown restaurant and talked shop – and listened.

The weekly lunch dates, first initiated by the late Judge Gerald Heaney, a labor-lawyer turned federal appellate judge here who has a courthouse named for him, have been going on for decades.

“People always like to hear her point of view, her history,” said longtime friend Beth McCuskey, vice president of the North East Area Labor Council, who in recent years drove Murphy to the casual get-togethers. “When Mary would have something to share, the table would listen.”

Murphy died Wednesday, days after she had a stroke and a “second series of complications,” according to Speaker of the House Melissa Hortman, DFL-Brooklyn Park. Murphy was 85 and just two years removed from politics. The Democrat from Hermantown was elected to the state House of Representatives in 1977 – and she held onto the position through 2022. She also taught at the former Duluth Central High School for more than 30 years.

“She was a wonderful state representative and human being,” Hortman wrote on social media. “So many people will miss her and remember her and her accomplishments fondly.”

Murphy had been active in local DFL politics for more than a decade when she first announced her intention in June 1976 to run for a spot in the Minnesota House, supporting parts of St. Louis and Carlton counties. At the time, she was also teaching social studies. Murphy was in her mid-30s when she won the seat.

In more than 40 years of state government, she had a hand instituting early childhood programs, helped establish Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College and initiated legislation to establish wind power in Minnesota. She won countless awards for her work as a teacher and in politics.

Murphy also went to numerous community events, from Proctor’s Hoghead Festival to community parades to spaghetti dinners.

“She showed up,” McCuskey said.

One of Murphy’s successes in recent years was a \$1.87 billion bonding bill to pay for hundreds of state infrastructure projects that passed in 2020. At the time, Murphy, who sponsored the bill and chaired the House Capital Investment Division, said legislators had heard from more than 250 communities and agencies looking for assistance.

“I can’t imagine how many water treatment plants she visited,” said Jeff Anderson, who worked alongside Murphy on campaigns during his time as a Duluth city councilor and as a

lobbyist. "It's a real hallmark of her time. She believed in investment in the state."

Murphy lost to Republican Natalie Zeleznikar in the 2022 general election by just 33 votes – but it wasn't the end of her political interests. Anderson said she continued to follow the Legislature closely. She was one of the state's 10 electors during the Electoral College Assembly just more than a week ago in St. Paul.

DFL state Sen. Grant Hauschild said Murphy was one of the first people he connected with when he moved to Hermantown. He found a leader focused on children and the future and someone he could learn from.

"I think her legacy will be that compassionate approach to politics," he said. "Focusing on people, focusing on labor. I think her biggest legacy will be kids and education."

McCuskey described her as "a great listener."

"When you had a conversation with her, you knew she was paying attention to you," she said. "She was listening; she stored it."

Murphy lived in the home she grew up in, one of Hermantown's signature Jackson Project homes built in the 1930s as sustainable properties. Much of her home's interior resembled what it looked like when she was growing up, according to those close to her. She was especially proud of her flower gardens.

Lee Cutler, of the North East Area Labor Council, remembered Murphy as a devout Catholic. "It's fitting that she died on Christmas," he said.

A few years ago, Murphy took Cutler for an hourlong walk along the grounds of her home, where she mowed her own grass with a tractor.

"She loved anything that grew, even weeds," Cutler said.

Murphy famously lived most of her life with just a landline telephone. A little-known secret: In recent years she had gotten a cellphone.

"I think only three people had the number," Cutler said.

Murphy attended Hermantown Public Schools and the College of St. Scholastica and did graduate work at the University of Minnesota Duluth, Macalester College, the University of Wisconsin-Superior, American University and Indiana University, according to a Minnesota Legislature biography.

When it was her turn to lead a prayer, she read the book "Old Turtle," a bestselling fable by Minnesota writer Douglas Wood with art by Duluth artist Cheng-Khee Chee.

The state's political leaders took to social media to remember Murphy. U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar described her as being ahead of her time in "so many ways."

"She was a strong advocate and so often the only woman at the table in northern MN," Klobuchar said on social media.

On Facebook, Gov. Tim Walz described her as "a true champion for the Northland."

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