

Johnson brings strong focus on children, education

For Rep. Ruth Johnson (DFL-St. Peter), several of life's turning points have pivoted around Gustavus Adolphus College. Her father was a Gustavus student when she was

born. After growing up in Nebraska, where her father was a Lutheran pastor, she, also, attended Gustavus Adolphus for her undergraduate work. Then, after receiving her master's degree from Indiana University, and



Rep. Ruth Johnson

working in various other places, she returned again to become the associate dean of students at Gustavus.

Now as a newly elected member of the House, Johnson has taken a leave of absence from her duties at the college to devote her full attention to the five-month legislative session. She is also negotiating with Gustavus to reduce her workload for the remainder of the year so that she can attend town meetings and respond to constituent calls and letters.

As a child, Johnson remembers herself as a patriotic Girl Scout and a Republican sympathizer. "How could you be against President Eisenhower?" In high school, she supported Barry Goldwater. "By the time I was 21, I voted for Hubert Humphrey," she said.

Like millions of other baby boomers, Johnson's political conversion took place in college around opposition to the Vietnam War. "I was involved in the anti-war movement at Gustavus and became friends of some of the guys in VVAW (Vietnam Veter-

ans Against the War) in graduate school," Johnson said. "Those were extremely shaping political movements for me. I recognized that we needed a change in our government and that the change would come from citizen involvement."

More practical political experience was to follow. She stayed on at Indiana University after graduate school to work in an experimental social justice program run by the Roger Williams Foundation. Later, while living and working in Kansas, Johnson volunteered on a congressional campaign where she "got an idea of what grassroots campaigning was all about." She also served on the Kansas Democratic Party's state affirmative action committee.

All of her previous political experience came into play last summer when former DFL Rep. Don Ostrom announced that he would not seek re-election in District 24B. After being encouraged by DFL party members, she decided to enter the race. "I had to hit the ground running in the middle of June and put a campaign together on very short notice," Johnson said.

"My district is typical small-town Minnesota," Johnson said. It includes parts of Nicollet, Le Sueur, and Blue Earth counties. The largest town is North Mankato. "People are concerned about kids," she said. "And the first place they look is education. That's perfect for me."

On her arrival at the Capitol, Johnson immediately joined in working on one education-related issue that is close to her heart. She and Rep. Mindy Greiling (DFL-Roseville)

are sponsoring an anti-hazing bill. If passed, the new law would explicitly prohibit student hazing. Such unofficial student initiatives have become traditions on some high school and college campuses. Hazings are typically humiliating and painful for the initiates and have occasionally resulted in injury and death.

"About two-thirds of the states have laws on the books against hazing," Johnson said. "Minnesota does not."

Much of the behavior involved in hazing is already illegal, Johnson said. But it is often difficult to prosecute or gain damages because, in most cases, the victim has consented to the hazing. "Our bill would remove consent as a defense. We also want to educate young people to realize that their legitimate desire to belong or go through a rite of passage can involve challenge but not risk. It was very helpful to us at Gustavus to put the word 'hazing' in our student conduct code," Johnson said.

—Steve Compton

District 24B

1996 population: 34,922

Largest city: North Mankato

Counties: Blue Earth, Le Sueur, Nicollet

Location: south central Minnesota

Top concern: "People are concerned about kids and the first place they look is education. There are also concerns about property taxes and about finding better paying job opportunities for young people so that they won't all move away."

—Rep. Ruth Johnson