

Staying connected

Legislator returning after two-year hiatus plans to stay close to her roots

By MICHELLE KIBIGER

When Rep. Ruth Johnson (DFL-St. Peter) left the House in 1998 to campaign for lieutenant governor with gubernatorial candidate Mike Freeman, she didn't realize the move would actually bring her back home to the place she always wanted to be anyway — a kindergarten classroom.



Rep. Ruth Johnson

Freeman lost the DFL primary in 1998, and Johnson returned to

St. Peter where she worked as a Title I teaching assistant at South Elementary School. She spent her time in the spring of 1999 working with kindergarten, first-, and second-grade students on their reading skills.

Johnson, who has a bachelor's degree in religion from Gustavus Adolphus College and a master's degree in college administration from Indiana University, said she initially went to college to become a kindergarten teacher.

The experience taught her the importance of preparing young children to start school and how teachers are succeeding even though their task is difficult in some cases.

"The teachers have to help them be prepared," she said. "They need more than the three R's. I got to see that for myself."

Johnson says education is her top priority in her return to the Legislature. She hopes to provide the necessary resources and rewards to schools and parents so students can be equipped to succeed.

Several proposals she supports that would accomplish that goal include loan forgiveness programs, alternative compensation plans, and other support for schools — K-12 or higher education — including infrastructure.

"We have to recognize that funding for education did not keep pace with inflation in the early 90s," Johnson said. "We're still playing catch up."

Johnson said it's important to encourage students to enter professions, not just

teaching, where there is the most need, but not necessarily the promise of a high salary.

"I have been ashamed of the level of debt that young people have had to assume to do the jobs that we require them to do," she said. "But we definitely need committed, compassionate, and caring people" in those jobs.

When Johnson was first elected in 1996, she was assigned to education, environment, and health and human services committees. This time around, she serves on the agriculture policy and finance committees, as well as the House Environment and Natural Resources Policy Committee.

Johnson says that gives her the opportunity

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to focus on "stewardship of the land, air and water resources," which bring her back to her rural/agrarian roots.

The daughter of a Lutheran pastor, Johnson spent most of her formative years in the predominantly rural communities of central and northeastern Nebraska. She said as a child she could walk out her front door and see the town dairy and walk a few steps into a cornfield nearby.

Today, her office in the Capitol complex is filled with paintings and photos of farm life, including the painting of a hog shed.

She says she supports loan programs and other plans to encourage farmers. In addition, she notes the importance of using alternative means to produce sources of energy, including ethanol, biodiesel, and biomass as fuel.

"We have forgotten as a nation that we need to conserve our energy," she said.

During her absence from the Legislature, Johnson also worked with a leadership program for low-income neighborhoods throughout the state to prevent crime and violence.

Johnson says much of that work involves connecting residents with community resources and with one another. This is especially important, she says, in Greater Minnesota as it becomes more culturally diverse.

One success story Johnson tells is the Lyndale Neighborhood Association effort to bring in economic opportunity. Businesses have begun coming in to the Minneapolis area, homeowners have begun fixing up their houses, and the community is revitalizing itself.

"People start to see each other as neighbors and not as strangers," she said. "Businesses are finding it a new opportunity, and that only adds to the economic base."

Though Johnson says she plans to devote most of her time now to being a legislator, she hopes she can stay connected to campuses and classrooms, where she has spent most of her career.

She said she enjoys returning to classrooms and sharing the importance of government with students.

"Public service is a wonderful way for them to give back to their communities," she said.

That's one of the significant lessons she took with her from the campaign for lieutenant governor — that people do care about government and want to be involved. But she takes her responsibility to communicate with constituents and promote the government as an institution for the people very seriously.

"We are the government and it can work better," Johnson said. "But it works best when people are connected."

DISTRICT 24B

1998 population (estimate): 34,729

Largest city: St. Peter

Counties: Blue Earth, Nicollet, LeSueur

Location: south central Minnesota

Top concern: "Education — What I hear from people is their concern about our schools. Education plays an extremely important role in the success of our children."

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