

New members . . .

Koskinen calls for early help for healthy children

Rep. Luanne Koskinen (DFL-Coon Rapids) was a political veteran long before she made her first run for office.

For 25 years, she had been pounding in yard signs, handing out brochures, and doing other forms of campaign legwork for a variety of political figures, including former state Sen. Gene Merriam, former U.S. Rep. Gerry Sikorski, and U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone.



Rep.
Luanne Koskinen

After helping to get Wellstone elected in 1990, Koskinen figured she would spend the summer and fall of 1996 working to help the senator win a second term.

However, a series of events in ensuing years prompted Koskinen to become a candidate herself.

Koskinen and her family were touched by tragedy in 1994. In the summer of that year, Koskinen's 33-year-old daughter, Kari, was taken from her New Brighton apartment and murdered. The suspected killer was the building caretaker, a man with a history of violence who later committed suicide.

Koskinen went to work at the Capitol the following year in an effort to prevent what happened to her daughter from happening again. The result of Koskinen's efforts was a law requiring background checks on caretakers.

Working to pass that legislation was a learning experience for Koskinen.

"[The law] is the best resolution that everybody can live with," she said. "I think that helped me realize that no matter what you do, you've got to hear what other people are saying and then attempt to make a decision.

"That's what I want to do — to help make the process such that people's lives are going to be improved one way or another."

While working to pass what became known as "Kari's bill" shed light on the legislative

process, Koskinen links her decision to seek office to another event during the 1995 session.

That year, Rep. Joel Jacobs (DFL-Coon Rapids), a longtime legislator from Koskinen's home district, resigned from the House to accept an appointment to the Public Utilities Commission.

Koskinen decided to seek the open seat in an April 1995 special election.

"I had very serious conversations with my family and with my friends and I thought, why not?" she said. "I have been a political worker for many years, and it was just an opportunity that came up.

"The other candidates were candidates with whom I wasn't really that comfortable, and the support of my family and friends convinced me that I should run myself."

Koskinen was defeated in the three-way special election vote won by Republican Eldon Warkentin of Coon Rapids. But in 1996, Koskinen emerged as the winner of a rematch race against Warkentin.

As she settles into her new role, Koskinen said she is aware that she will be recognized by many because of what happened to her daughter. But, she said it is not the basis for her entire political agenda.

"It was a major factor in my life. There's no doubt about that," she said. "But I think I bring capabilities that I could have brought to the Legislature even if my daughter hadn't been murdered. Maybe I would have been here now anyway, had that all not happened."

Aside from her many years of political activism, Koskinen has worked for the past 11 years as a business representative for American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 14. Earlier she spent a decade on staff for Anoka County as a financial worker and a child support officer.

She and her husband, Lauri, a retired school teacher, have four children and four grandchildren.

Koskinen built her successful House campaign around issues she considers essential to the growing, changing communities she represents. As a lawmaker, she aims to improve public education, foster safety within communities, and help to guide careful implementation of welfare reform.

She views early childhood programs and education to be keys to helping to alleviate some of the major problems facing society today.

"We should start with the families when the children are infants, give them the kind of experiences that will lead them to become productive citizens, and reserve our prison space for violent criminals," Koskinen said. "Each child should have an opportunity to grow up to be a productive citizen."

Koskinen is optimistic that the promise of bipartisan cooperation can help deliver legislation this session that will provide for positive changes to be made.

"We're going to work very hard to resolve the issues that come before us, and, hopefully, we can work together in a bipartisan way to do the best we can for the people of Minnesota."

— Nick Healy

District 49B

1996 population: 37,380

Largest city: Coon Rapids

County: Anoka

Location: northern metropolitan area

Top concern: "I think we need to be very careful about how we as a state implement welfare reform. We need to make sure that we exercise care, caution and compassion in how we frame our own welfare system now that the federal government seems to be relegating the states to provide the services that the federal government did at one point."

—Rep. Luanne Koskinen

Where to find information

Chief Clerk's Office

211 State Capitol (612) 296-2314

This office provides copies of bills at no charge, all agendas for House sessions, and the Journal of the House.

House Index Department

211 State Capitol (612) 296-6646

The House Index Department, a part of the Chief Clerk's Office, has a computerized

index available for public use. House Index lists bills by committee, topic, author, file number, and other categories. The office can also give you the current status of legislation.