

New members . . .

Otremba wins House seat in November special election

By Sandra Donovan

It was exactly two months from the day her husband, Ken, died that Mary Ellen Otremba (DFL-Long Prairie) won the special election to fill his vacant House seat, but that's not the only reason the election was particularly noteworthy.



Rep.
Mary Ellen Otremba

Otremba's success at the polls in District 11B marked the first DFL victory in 20 special elections, and the first such victory outside of Minneapolis/St. Paul in 25 years.

Still, Otremba's win was not what everybody was talking about when she was sworn in to the House last November. Onlookers were too busy buzzing about the fact that she would immediately be called upon to vote on what many considered the toughest, most divisive question in years — stadium financing.

For Otremba, her first vote on a bill was an easy call.

"I think most of my constituents are glad I voted no," she said. "I come from one of the poorer counties, so using public dollars to subsidize a sports team is just not popular. Of course, there are some who think I voted the wrong way, but every day I have someone thanking me for that vote."

And Otremba said she doesn't believe it was the toughest vote she'll make.

"I'm a very social-justice oriented person, and I make decisions based on that," she said. "I think there are a lot of tough votes."

Although the only other elected office Otremba has held was on her local Catholic school board, she is no newcomer to politics. She attended her first DFL precinct caucus

with her husband in 1976, and has since served as the DFL Party chair in Todd County and as a member of the party's state executive board.

"When Ken ran the first time [in a 1994 House race], the real question was who was going to run, he or I?" she said. "We were both very involved in county politics at the time — he as an elected official [on the county board] and I in the party. We made a great team because we bridged the gap between elected and party politics."

Ken Otremba won the House seat in 1994 and was in the middle of serving his second term when he died of liver cancer in September 1997.

"We talked about it before he died, and he wanted me to run," Otremba said.

She said she will continue to work on the issues that have long interested both her and her late husband — rural health care, agriculture, and education.

She began work last year with House Majority Leader Ted Winter (DFL-Fulda) on a bill that would raise the minimum milk price paid to dairy farmers. She also plans to push for the creation of a Midwest compact for dairy farmers.

"In the northeast, several states have initiated a compact to set dairy prices higher," she explained. "We're hoping to organize along those lines with Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota."

Otremba's committee assignments mirror her interests. She will serve on the Agriculture, Education, and Health and Human Services committees, as well as acting as vice chair of the Health and Human Services Finance Division.

"I can be all fired up about dairy farmers one hour and all fired up about health care the

next hour," Otremba said. "That's how I live my life — you have to focus on what you're doing at the time."

"I've learned very clearly that you have to take things one step at a time, after all I've gone through with Ken and the kids."

The youngest of Otremba's four children, Elizabeth, 11, will be home-schooled at the Capitol during this year's legislative session.

"She'll still be enrolled at her school, and she'll send work via fax and e-mail, but she'll be with me every day," Otremba said. "She needs that and I need that."

Otremba took a leave of absence from her job as a Family and Consumer Science teacher at Swanville High School for the session.

"One reason I keep teaching is to keep in that part of the real world," she said. "Ken always said that my job helped him to maintain a balance — not everyone talks and breathes politics all the time."

One decision Otremba has not yet made is whether to run for re-election this year.

"I'm leaning toward it and I probably will, but we keep talking it over as a family," she said. "We've always had those talks, every time Ken ran for office we had them. That's just how we are as a family."

District 11B

1995 population: 32,599

Largest city: Long Prairie

Counties: Douglas, Otter Tail, Stearns, Todd, Wadena

Location: north-central Minnesota

Top Concern: "My main concern is to faithfully represent the people [who] live in my district and in the state of Minnesota. I believe in trying to make decisions looking through the eyes of the 'poorest' person you know."

— Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba

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