

# Just call her Mary

New district has Kiffmeyer hoping to break bread with senators

By SUE HEGARTY

When Rep. Mary Kiffmeyer (R-Big Lake) began her first House term in 2008, people wanted to know what to call her. She had previously served as secretary of state, and protocol suggested she be called by her highest elected office, which was secretary rather than representative.

“Just call me Mary,” she said.

Now that she is seeking election to the newly redrawn Senate District 30 seat, she expects people will ask the question again if she wins the Senate seat.

As the only incumbent for the seat, she said the decision to run was based on her desire to continue working on legislation that she sponsors in the House: requiring some form of voter identification prior to voting in an election.

“I wanted to follow up with my voter ID constitutional amendment. I felt a responsibility to be there,” said Kiffmeyer, who previously was an election judge for 11 years.

She predicts her bill will pass the Legislature this session, and that the voters will approve a constitutional amendment at the November election to require identification at the polls. She “cloned” the bill, by introducing more than one version of it, to allow more legislators to acknowledge their support for the bill, by signing on as co-sponsor. Only 35 signatures are allowed on each House bill; and five in the Senate file.

When first elected to District 16B, she was being pulled in several directions for committee assignments, she said.

“I wanted ag. I wanted commerce. I wanted education and they said, ‘Mary, you’re a nurse. We need you on health. Mary, you have all this background in elections. We need you here.’” She was happy to serve on all the committees, especially the House Taxes Committee because “that’s where it all comes together. That perspective was helpful.”

Depending upon whether her party was serving in the majority or the minority, she said her role as a public servant changed.

“Majority has the responsibility to get the budget done. In the minority you have a different level of responsibility — being a voice. I got pretty good at working on amendments,” she said.

No matter how she’s serving the people, she always feels strongly about working with all interested parties. She considers her style to be clear and methodical. As a bill sponsor, her role is to “bring opposing sides together,” she said.

Regardless of how her next run for office turns out, Kiffmeyer said she’ll miss the friends she has in the House and the specialness of the Retiring Room behind the Speaker’s Rostrum.

“It is really, really special.”

She’ll also miss the “Dog Pound,” which is the seating section on the House floor to the left of the Speaker where traditionally the more conservative and argumentative Republicans have sat. The term stuck after it was coined in 1995 because members who sat there were the “attack dogs” and were awarded dog biscuits if they delivered a boisterous debate on issues.

Long before she was a state-elected official herself, she had another title: Mrs. Ralph Kiffmeyer. Her husband served in the House from 1985-1986.

Unbeknownst to her as a freshman legislator, she was assigned to the same desk where he sat during his term. It was when he served in the House that she started a tradition on the House floor that has senators now asking, “Are you going to continue the tradition for us?”

Each year, she waits until she knows there’s going to be a long floor session. Starting at 3 a.m. that day, she mixes bread dough from wheat she grinded the day before and bakes several loaves of whole wheat honey bread.

“I like it fresh; that’s when it’s best,” she said.

Then she pulls out her famous raspberry freezer jam and cinnamon honey butter to spread on the freshly baked bread. As tensions rise on the House floor, she requests a point of personal privilege to invite members to sample her homemade bread, jam and butter.

“I so enjoy when they come through the line and some just put an inch thick of cinnamon honey butter. But the real ones who are a hoot put both on and I say, ‘You can have two slices.’”



PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Mary Kiffmeyer considers her style to be clear and methodical — bringing opposing sides together.