

Rep. Susan Allen offers a unique legislative voice

● As the first American Indian woman to serve, she's keenly aware of the significance.

By ALLIE SHAH • ashah@startribune.com

When it's time to say the pledge of allegiance, Minnesota Rep. Susan Allen stands, places her hand on her heart and recites.

The woman who once abstained from the pledge to protest the government's treatment of American Indians now has a seat on the House floor.

"I do it because I do have respect for [the union]," she said. "There has been change. I can do this now." *Mpls ST*

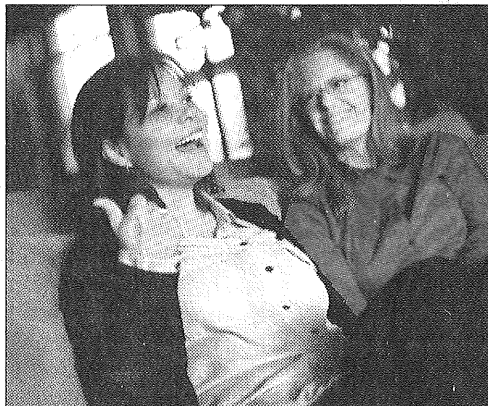
As the legislative session draws closer to an end, Allen is wrapping up her first season as the state's first American Indian woman to serve in the Legislature. She's made history on a national level, too — becoming the first openly gay American Indian woman to serve in any state legislature. *4-14-2012*

A tax attorney specializing in tribal law, Allen, DFL-Minneapolis, joined the Legislature after winning a special election on Jan. 10. She filled the House 61-B seat vacated by former Rep. Jeff Hayden, who is now a state senator.

Fellow lawmakers describe her as a thoughtful, gracious voice who doesn't shy away from debates.

"Generally freshmen are told to be seen and not heard by their caucus mates. If that's what she's been told, she doesn't seem to be listening," said House Majority Leader Matt Dean, R-Dellwood, laughing. "She is engaged in the debates on the floor."

Allen continues on B5 ►



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Rep. Susan Allen, DFL-Minneapolis, sat with her partner, Amber Gianera. Allen is also the first openly gay American Indian woman to serve in any state legislature.

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Rep. Allen conducted business on the House floor. "Generally freshmen are told to be seen and not heard by their caucus mates. If that's what she's been told, she doesn't seem to be listening," said House Majority Leader Matt Dean, laughing. "She is engaged in the debates."

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◀ ALLEN FROM B1

Her name is listed as one of the authors on 47 bills. The bills range from requiring labeling for genetically engineered foods, to repealing the proposed marriage amendment, to establishing a state-wide self-advocacy network for disabled people.

"In our state we have a lot of Native people, particularly in that district," said Ken Martin, Minnesota DFL Party chairman. "They have been without a voice for some time. Also having another woman and a person who is a single mom, who is a lesbian and who had to struggle in life to get where she has. All of those qualities bring a unique perspective."

Activist roots

Allen, 49, came of age during the heyday of the American Indian Movement and she says that, along with the activism of her parents, shaped her politics.

"It was huge, the social-political changes that were going on because of the American Indian Movement," she recalled. "Indian people were becoming attorneys. That time was when I formed my passion for social justice and law. That's when I decided to become an attorney. It was about survival. I understood that tribes had a political existence and in order to retain that, being an attorney was something I could fight for to help tribes retain their sovereignty."

REP. SUSAN ALLEN, DFL-Minneapolis

Age: 49

Family: Partner, Amber Gianera; son, Philip Chaltas; 3 grandchildren.

Home: Minneapolis

Education: B.A. in economics from Augsburg College; J.D. from University of New Mexico Law School; L.L.M. in taxation from William Mitchell College of Law

Career: Attorney specializing in tax and tribal law and partner at Fredericks, Peebles and Morgan law firm.

ALLIE SHAH

Her father was a member of Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota and her mother was born and raised on the Rosebud reservation nearby.

Allen is Lakota, Dakota and Anishinabe; she is an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe.

She spent her childhood years on the go, moving with her family to various cities and reservations across the Midwest and Southwest United States. By the time she was in eighth grade, she had attended 20 different schools.

Growing up on reservations and in border towns exposed her to the economic gap between Indians and their neighbors.

"For Indian people, it was still segregated. It was made to be unpleasant to frequent a restaurant or you'd get followed around a department store," Allen recalled. "My parents confronted that. My father would pretend it was normal for us to be there. We would spend our vacations — they would pick someplace that was segregated to go out to dinner. You'd go to the restau-

rant, and stand there and stand there and wait to be waited on. People would stare at us, or be openly hostile."

Allen went on to college at Augsburg and then to law school at the University of New Mexico. She earned a master's degree in tax law from William Mitchell School of Law in St. Paul. In her practice, she has represented different tribes and has presented information at the Legislature. But she did not run for political office until her friend Sharon Day approached her about the House seat.

When Day heard there may be an open seat, she said, she immediately thought of Allen. "She's probably the most logical person I know," said Day, executive director of the Indigenous People's Task Force.

Turning point

Allen wasn't so sure at first. "There was a time when I felt guilty," she said. "I thought I should be going home and working on behalf of my own people. But then I thought 70 percent of Indians live off res-

ervations. ... They're here and have similar issues as I had growing up. Really, I'd be more effective working here."

She also had to get comfortable with being in the public eye. "It was basically like I came out again," said Allen, laughing. She came out when she was in her early 30s, and both she and her partner, Amber Gianera, are open about their relationship.

But her historic win exposed her to hateful comments. After a story about her in Indian Country Today was posted on Facebook, she said, most of the comments posted took aim at her sexual orientation. "When I saw that I knew it was a problem. I was surprised at the extent. And there it was," she said.

Despite the flak, she says she has no regrets about running and says she feels good knowing that there will be American Indian children visiting the Capitol who will see someone who looks like them.

"We're such a small minority and yet we have this history with the state," Allen said. "When I go there and sit in that room, on the House floor, and all that history is there and I'm sitting there, in some ways it's just ironic. ... So it's really important for me to be there. Because it's like we are still here. We are *still* here. We still have a political existence. We have this place in the state and that needs to be recognized."

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