



Allen Fredrickson photo

ON THE FRONTLINES OF REFORM
WITH WRITER SUNNY SCHUBERT

Despite personal loss, Sen. Darling stays the course

Those who know state Sen. Alberta Darling consistently describe the River Hills Republican as one tough lady.

This year proved how right they are.

As co-chair of the powerful Joint Finance Committee, the 71-year-old Darling put in weeks of 18-hour days, shepherding what she called “a very tough budget” through the Legislature.

She and her colleagues managed to find more money for K-12 education — one of her top priorities — as well as health programs for the poor, while still holding firmly against tax increases.

She helped craft a deal that will keep the

Milwaukee Bucks in Wisconsin and create a glittering new sports and entertainment complex in downtown Milwaukee.

She led lawmakers in a reform of the state’s antiquated prevailing wage laws, which raised the cost of most public works projects. She helped make Wisconsin the nation’s 25th right-to-work state by stopping unions from forcing employees to join against their will.

And while Darling regrets having to cut \$250 million from the University of Wisconsin System, she is confident that other budget provisions give the system the flexibility to make the cuts as painless as possible.

And she did it all with a broken heart.

Lady

Frontlines

Bill Darling — her college sweetheart and husband of 48 years — died in March while awaiting a pancreas-kidney transplant. He was 71.

The couple had gone to Florida in December when Bill, a diabetic since his college days, made “the list” for transplant surgery. Their daughter lives in Miami, so it gave them time to be with her and two of their three grandchildren while they waited for the phone call telling them the organs were available.

But the call didn’t come until February, and by then it was too late. Bill Darling, a physician himself, had developed an infection from which he never recovered.

During those weeks of waiting, the senator kept up her work through emails and conference calls. At one point, she told her husband, “I think I should give up the chair” of Joint Finance.

“But he said, ‘Don’t give it up. We’ll be home by Easter.’ ”

Her blue eyes glisten with tears.

“I was home by Easter. But I came home without him.”

“He was my best friend, my biggest supporter, my playmate. We met in college, and he threw my 19th birthday party. We were together ever since,” she says.

Without him, she admits, “I’m not doing very well.”

She makes a sweeping gesture that manages to take in not just her Capitol office but the whole state. “This job, it keeps me together. When I’m here, when I’m working or when I’m meeting with constituents, I’m OK.”

“It’s the nights and weekends, when I’m alone, that hurt.”

But, like survivors everywhere, Darling keeps going forward, one step at a time.

She was raised in a family of Lithuanian immigrants who fled Eastern Europe after World War I; her grandmother came to the United States alone at age 14.

Alberta Statkus was born in Hammond, Ind., but the family soon moved to Cicero, Ill., where they lived in the same home as her grandmother and aunt.

That house was a hub for Cicero’s immigrant community. People came day and night, seeking help finding jobs, places to live

and health care as they negotiated the path to U.S. citizenship.

“My parents really believed in the American dream. They said, ‘You can be anything you want if you’re willing to work hard.’ They refused to teach me Lithuanian. They said, ‘We are Americans; we should speak English,’ ” she says.

Her grandmother was also a staunch Republican. “She — my whole family — really believed in the Republican philosophy of self-reliance,” Darling says.

In addition, having lived in Eastern Europe, they had learned

the hard way not to put too much faith in government, because government can turn on you.

Her father went to college and became a successful businessman, moving the family to Peoria, Ill. Darling became the first woman in her family to attend college when she entered the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

She earned a degree in secondary education, married Bill and taught high school English while he finished medical school. She planned on being a stay-at-home mom after their daughter, Liza, and son, Will, were born.

But soon she found

herself volunteering for more and more organizations, especially those focused on improving the lives of children and building a stronger community.

She joined the board of the American Red Cross in Milwaukee, which is where she first met a kindred spirit, Scott Walker, who had left Marquette University to take a job with the organization.

In 1990, a seat opened up in the 10th Assembly District, where the Darlings lived. She ran for office, and the vast network of friends she had made during her volunteer years came through. Two years later, the 8th District Senate seat came up, and she won it.

Since then, she has won every election, including a brutal \$8 million recall effort in 2011 after the passage of Act 10.

From the get-go, Darling has supported Wisconsin’s school choice program, first for low-income children in Milwaukee and now for all children statewide.

In doing so, she has earned the enmity of the once-powerful



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Alberta Darling was first elected to the state Senate in 1992.

teachers union. Most recently, the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association staged a protest at Auer Avenue School in Milwaukee, decrying a state budget provision allowing the Milwaukee County executive to take control of the city's worst-performing schools.

At Auer Avenue, Darling notes dryly, not a single child tested "proficient" in reading in 2013-'14, yet the union continues to block reforms. "We are going to get better schools in Milwaukee," she says firmly. "We're going to take on the toughest schools in the toughest neighborhoods in Milwaukee and make them better."

Wisconsin's recent education efforts — curtailing unions through Act 10, expanding school choice and empowering the takeover of failing schools — are getting nationwide attention, Darling adds.

"We spend a lot of money on education, and that's a good thing. But we've also been very reform-minded so we get more for our tax dollars. When I talk to legislators and educators from other states, we are seen as reformers. I call it 'the Wisconsin revolution.'"

Similarly, she says, upcoming proposals to reform higher education by merging certain technical colleges with UW's 13 two-year campuses may get taxpayers more bang for the buck.

"Our attitude is the university system and the tech system should be market-driven. They should prepare people for the world of work," she says. "We're trying to give them the freedom to match the university system to the world of work."

Another priority is improving the state's economy. "We have to remove a lot of the rules and regulations on businesses. I'm convinced that's why we aren't doing as well as our neighbors," she says, noting that despite recent corporate tax rate cuts, Wisconsin's business taxes remain higher than those in Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota.

And the state's high income and property taxes also discourage businesses from starting up in Wisconsin, she says.

Improving the business climate also means reforming the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., under fire since its inception. "We're going to reform WEDC," she says. The agency "has to get out of the business of picking winners and losers."

She is less optimistic about the chances for ending Wisconsin's Depression-era minimum markup law, which inflates the cost of gasoline and nonperishable food by prohibiting merchants from selling below cost.

"I support removing the minimum markup; we're one of the only states that have it," she says. "But a lot of people, includ-

ing a lot of Republicans, think small businesses need to be supported, and the minimum markup law still does that."

The senator bristles over questions about the gender gap that shows more men than women supporting Republican policies. "There is no 'war on women' in Wisconsin, absolutely not," she says.

"As a woman, I'm not one-dimensional. Abortion is not the only issue. Women need to be educated, they need to be healthy, they need good jobs. That's what Republicans are focused on."

Defunding Planned Parenthood, the state's largest abortion provider, is just not as big an issue as liberals make it out to be, she says. "Planned Parenthood is an outlier. We don't need Planned Parenthood. You can get birth control through BadgerCare and Medicaid."

Darling says, "We have one of the most effective health care delivery systems in the country. We are in the top 10 in terms of funding the uninsured. We have increased the number of insured by 140,000."

"What we need now is more women to be wealthier, to be better educated, to be leaders."

Darling believes the Legislature is slowly getting over the extreme partisanship of the past few years.

"I think a lot of people have realized that we can have differences of opinion, but we don't have to have enemies. I have a lot of friends on the Democratic side of the aisle. Eighty percent of the bills we pass are bipartisan," she says.

But the biggest bill, the state's biennial budget, is "never going to be bipartisan," she adds.

She notes that bipartisanship flourished when Wisconsin had a Republican governor — Tommy Thompson — but Democratic majorities in the Legislature. "When the majorities became really small, then it became very partisan. I think the whole state would be better off if we had more Republicans and Democrats working together."

She wants to remain part of that effort to move the state forward. "I'm going to run again in 2016," Darling says.

"If Bill were alive, we were going to retire after this term. We were going to travel, to take some time for ourselves," she says. "But now ... I have a hole in my heart and a need to make a difference. I still have a lot on my plate to accomplish."

Those who know her would say Alberta Darling is tough enough to make it happen.

"My parents really believed in the American dream. They said, 'You can be anything you want if you're willing to work hard.'"

Sunny Schubert is a Monona freelance writer and former editorial writer for the Wisconsin State Journal.