

Freshman GOP senator wins appropriations slot

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Growing up on the south side of Chicago, "among all those Democrats," state Sen. Shirley Johnson decided early in life — at age 8 — that she was a Republican.

"My mother worked all night during the Dewey-Truman election counting votes at the precinct ward in Chicago. They were always looking for Republicans because they were hard to find and you need to have someone from the other party there to watch the counting," Johnson said last week.

"She came home the following Wednesday morning, and she was just jubilant because there was the Tribune and Dewey had won. I can't remember seeing this woman so excited. My sister and I went to school, and we came home for lunch to peanut butter sandwiches and 'There, help yourself' to a mother who was just hysterical because, whoops, the Tribune was wrong. She had turned the radio on and she was just stunned."

"And I think right then and there, I just hated every Democrat that ever existed ... I just carried the flag for her."

Today, Royal Oak's state senator serves on the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, an appointment she gained as recently as June.

Because she was just elected in March, Senate Majority Leader Dan DeGrow, R-Port Huron, wanted to name her to the committee until the budget cycle, ongoing at the time, was completed.

Johnson won office in a special election to replace Michael Bouchard, who left to take over as Oakland County Sheriff. Her district includes Madison Heights, Hazel Park, Pleasant Ridge, Ferndale, Huntington Woods, Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills and Troy — what she believes is one of the most diverse districts in the state.

But Johnson had legislative experience. Let's face it, she'd served 18 years in the House of Representatives, leaving this past December only because of term limits. And much of that time, she served on the House's Appropriations Committee.

In fact, she was the first woman on that committee. She explained she fought to get the post because her first election in November 1980 was a hard run race against an incumbent. Reapportionment changed the district to contain more Democratic voters. So she needed a committee appointment of substance.

But her gender was not an issue in the way the committee worked after her appointment.

"I worked very hard to understand the rules, and they were rules made by men. When the men would get going, and sometimes it would turn into playground language. As long as it was not directed at me, I didn't take it personally. It wasn't an issue because I didn't let it be an issue," Johnson said.

Although she is not the first woman to serve on Senate appropriations, it is rare for a freshman in that chamber to win such a powerful appointment. She attributes it to her experience in the House, and to term limits.

"Only six Republicans out of the 23 in the Senate can return after the next election," she said. "And I would be the only one of the six with appropriations experience."

So term limits have both hurt and helped her.

"I never supported term limits. I see a lot of problems in the House because of it. On the other hand, there are positives. The fresh blood is beneficial and there's a new perspective. Of course, they don't have a choice. When you only have six years, you have to get in and make your mark. When I came in, at six years, you were just a kid."

Johnson has only been in the senate for about two months, but has noticed differences

from the House.

"Being one of 23 instead of one of so many in the House, that's a definite difference. There's more decorum. It's rowdier in the House. There's more verbal abuse and debate ... and for some reason I always seemed to be in the middle of it. The Senate is more dignified."

Johnson said, because there are fewer senators, she'll likely have involvement in a wider variety of issues.

"I've also noticed that information moves a whole lot faster. The information is much more readily available and it moves with much greater speed than it did over in the House, where the committee chairs would tie it up, where they would count votes, and it would obb and flow as to whether they had the vote or they didn't."

In part, that speed is because senators work in smaller committees. Senators have larger staffs. Agencies like the Senate Fiscal Agency have fewer people to supply information to, she said.

As a result, the Senate serves as a check on some of the legislation that comes out of the House Representatives.

Growing up in Chicago, Johnson eventually married her high school sweetheart. After her husband completed law school, he went to work for the Chrysler Corp., bringing them to Michigan in 1965.

They chose to reside in Royal Oak because of the school district.

"We're still in our starter home. I guess we're not ever going to get out of it either," she said. She stayed home then to take care of the children, but got involved in volunteer activities like the PTA and the Republican Party. Her activism eventually led her to politics.

She'd never held elective office before running for the state House, although she had managed her predecessor's campaign.

At the time, her only experience was serving on a county committee, charged



Determined: Sen. Shirley Johnson says she knew at age 8 that she was a Republican. A former state representative, Johnson is now a senator and has been appointed to the powerful appropriations committee.

with the task of rehabilitating HUD housing. But the committee wasn't spending the money properly and the county was in danger of losing federal funding.

"Wally Gabler appointed me, and three weeks later he called me into his office and said, 'Now I'm appointing you chairman. Get in there and clean it up,'" Johnson said. "I didn't know a BOCA code from a ... But it was good experience for me."

She was considering running for the

county board of commissioners before the house seat opened up. Her predecessor left to take a judicial appointment. Her first race was a tough election, but she said she spent most of her shoe leather on it, walking door to door.

"If I could tell my colleagues anything, it would be to knock on doors, and not just in an election year. That is the one way you really develop a very healthy rapport with your constituency. Pick up the phone and randomly call a

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