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Women of Impact

Barbara Ballard

by Bob Luder, photo by Steven Hertzog



The seeds of a life in public service were sown early in Kansas Rep. Barbara Ballard, who gained her drive toward civic duty from her all-female high school and college, as well as with hands-on experiences during the Civil Rights Movement.

At the end of this year, Barbara Ballard will complete her 30th year as a member of the Kansas State House of Representatives, representing Lawrence’s 44th District. And having just been reelected last month—she ran unopposed—to a 15th two-year term beginning in January, at least a 31st and 32nd year in the Legislature appears certain.

At 78 years young, the ebullient and energetic Ballard shows absolutely no signs of slowing down.

“I’m asked all the time how long I’m going to keep doing this,” Ballard says from a conference room inside the Dole Institute on the University of Kansas (KU) West Campus, where she serves as associate director of Civic Engagement and Outreach. “When I wake up one morning and say, ‘That’s it,’ then that will be it. As long as I feel I’m making a difference and have energy to do it, I’ll do it.

“I enjoy what I’m doing, and I hope it’s apparent I enjoy it,” she adds.

As Ballard is quick to point out, only 165 people—125 House representatives and 40 state senators—have an opportunity to serve the people of Kansas in the state Legislature at any given time, and she’s never lost sight of the honor and privilege she has been bestowed by her district constituents the last three decades.

“Serving is not easy,” she says. “You have to adjust your life to what you’re doing for your constituents. Keeping a positive outlook in what you’re doing is important.”

All evidence indicates the state’s Legislature has been the better for her service.

Since 1996, Ballard has served in House leadership and on the Appropria-

tions Committee. She has been chairperson of the House Democratic Caucus and has served as ranking minority member on the social services budget and calendar and printing. She also has served on the Robert G. (Bob) Bethell Joint Committee on Home and Community Based Services and KanCare Oversight.

In 2007, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators named Ballard its Outstanding Legislator of the Year.

“Barbara is just a really nice person, a really caring person, and she listens,” says Brenda Landwehr, Representative of the state’s 105th District, which encompasses the Wichita area, and who has served for decades with Ballard on appropriations and social services budget. “She doesn’t play all the games. Social services can be very difficult. You hear some really sad stories, and it’s difficult to not get emotional and determine where the greatest needs are.

“Barbara’s been able to do that,” she continues. “She’s young at heart, and she really cares.”

Learning To Serve

Ballard grew up the second of four children. Her father was a master sergeant in the Army, but she’s quick to point out she was not brought up as a prototypical “army brat.” She only knew two homes growing up. Born in Petersburg, Virginia, the family quickly moved to Hawaii, where Ballard would spend much of her formative years.

She says when she was 14 or 15, her father was reassigned to El Paso, Texas, and it was there she received the seeds of a life in public service.

“The high school I went to in El Paso was the Loretto Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school,” she says. “All the students there were involved in so many things. That had a big impact on me.”

She says because there were no boys at Loretto, the girl students weren’t relegated to the background, as was the norm back in those days, and were actively involved in all sorts of civic endeavors. Her civic-mindedness was further bolstered when she attended Webster College, in St. Louis, which was operated by the same order of nuns that ran the Loretto Academy and also had an all-female enrollment.

During her sophomore year, in 1965, she joined a group of Webster students that flew to Montgomery, Alabama, and participated in the Selma to Montgomery protest marches.

“I remember the Western Union man (arriving with a telegram) the night before from my father giving me permission to go,” Ballard says.

While sowing the seeds of a life of public service, Ballard also found time to graduate from Webster with a degree in music performance and education.

She married Albert Ballard in 1969 and moved to Monterey, California, where she taught music and fifth grade. She originally stayed in Monterey when Albert, who also served in the Army, was reassigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, but eventually joined him in central Kansas. She would go on to earn a master’s degree in guidance and counseling, and a Ph.D. in counseling and student personnel services, both at Kansas State University.

Albert’s retirement from the Army eventually would lead to the Ballards’ moving to Lawrence when Barbara accepted a position as the director of the Emily Taylor Women’s Resource Center at KU. She was responsible for organizing activities for women students and advocating for victims of sexual assault. She later was promoted to associate dean of student life and then to assistant vice chancellor of student affairs.

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In 1985, Ballard became the first African American woman to run and be elected to the Lawrence School Board. She served two terms through 1993. It was around that time that Jessie Branson, then-representative for the 44th District, announced she would be retiring and asked Ballard if she'd consider running for the seat. That began a three-decades-long career in state Legislature of which she's grown quite fond—and proud.

Pride in Social Services

Ballard has had a hand in passing much legislation through the House during her 30 years in office, but there are two pieces she says are particularly memorable.

After a constituent crashed a car into the back of a trailer that was sticking out onto a highway at night, she crafted a bill requiring all trailers to have reflector lights at the rear. What was memorable, however, was that, after the bill passed the House, it had to go through the Senate, which attached a motorcycle helmet requirement to it.

"I bet I had every motorcycle rider in the state at my door," she laughs now. "And I had nothing to do with it."

The helmet requirement eventually was taken off, and the bill passed.

The other accomplishment that makes Ballard especially proud had to do with appropriating funding in 2019 for a comprehensive plan to repair, update and reopen the Osawatomie State Hospital, which had closed in 2015.

"I am most proud of my work on the Social Services Budget Committee over the years," she says. "It has provided our committee many opportunities to fund services, including mental health services in Kansas, Home and Community Based Services, Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services, Kansas Department for Children and Families, Veterans Affairs and Guardianship Program for guardianship or conservatorship services for vulnerable adults.

"Our efforts have made a difference in the quality of Kansans' lives," Ballard says.

Barbara Ballard has made a difference these last 30 years for the 44th District, Lawrence and Kansas.

"Barbara understands bipartisanship; she's effective at working across the aisle," says Paul Davis, a Lawrence-based attorney who served on the legislature with Ballard from 2003 through 2015. "Social services has always been her passion. She's been a big voice for people in the state who don't have a lobbyist or someone else to represent them." ▲

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