

Educator, lawmaker, advocate, mom

Slawik prepares to leave on a high note for her key issue: early childhood

By Nick Busse

When Rep. Nora Slawik (DFL-Maplewood) first took office, she was eight months pregnant with her second child. Much of her life thereafter, both inside and outside the House chamber, has revolved around children.

“My specialty became early childhood. Part of it was having my daughter in my first term, and the other part was it’s an intense interest of mine,” Slawik said.

Her seven non-consecutive terms in the Legislature have been marked by the dual struggles — and rewards — of a single mom raising two kids and a hard-working policymaker working diligently on early childhood issues. For a while, those two responsibilities went hand-in-hand.

Slawik’s children campaigned with her and marched with her every year in the local parade. They ran around on the House floor and became frequent customers at “Ulcer Gulch” — the affectionate moniker given to the Capitol’s second-floor snack food market.

“In many ways, this is a great working mom job, because you’re working part of the year and have the rest of the year off. And so for my kids growing up, it really worked great,” she said.

Today, Slawik’s life and career are at a crossroads. With her son Sean in college and daughter Tori set to join him, Slawik’s obligations to her family are changing. Her kids need less of her time and more of her financial support. She needs to focus more on her private career.

“It’s time for me to get a job that pays better, so I can contribute more to their college expenses,” she said.

She’s happy to be able to leave the House at a time when many exciting things are happening in the area of early childhood policy.

Several key measures that Slawik

spent years working toward have recently been put into effect, including creation of an Office of Early Learning within the Education Department; an expansion of the child care quality rating system; and the state’s \$45 million Race to the Top grant for early childhood funding.

“Everything has sort of come together, and that’s been very gratifying to watch,” she said.

Slawik served four years as chairwoman of the House Early Childhood Finance and Policy Division — something she calls “a wonderful experience” and the highlight of her legislative career. One of the things she’ll miss the most is the opportunity to work with like-minded advocates, parents, experts and policymakers.

“I’ll miss the work on early childhood and the variety of people I get to work with,” she said. “I’ll definitely miss the relationships a lot.”

Slawik said the Legislature has become more partisan over the years. She considers herself a moderate and worries that other moderates, both DFL and Republican, are leaving the House.

“Folks are either really liberal or really conservative,” she said.

The tone has even changed among her constituents, she said. As she’s out campaigning and door-knocking, Slawik sees more people are now divided along party lines. She blames a lack of focus on priorities at the Capitol.

“I think it’s really unfortunate that legislators and those who will be running this summer have to talk about issues like voter ID and these constitutional amendments. I came here to talk about education and health care and jobs and very basic issues, and the conversation has really changed,” she said.

Slawik currently teaches a fall class at the University of Minnesota on, appropriately, early childhood education policy. It’s been tough to maintain a career outside the Legislature — something Slawik said has become a common problem for legislators in a certain age group.

“We tend to now be getting either people that are really young or people that are retired. Because those folks that are in their working years and raising family years, 30s and 40s, it’s very difficult on their families,” she said.

Before coming to the Legislature, she worked for nonprofits like the Boy Scouts of America and the United Way. She plans to return to the nonprofit sector when her legislative career is over. Though she won’t get to vote on bills anymore, she basically hopes to continue the same work she’s being doing as a lawmaker.

“I hope to just build on my work here and go back into the community and do good work,” she said. 🌿

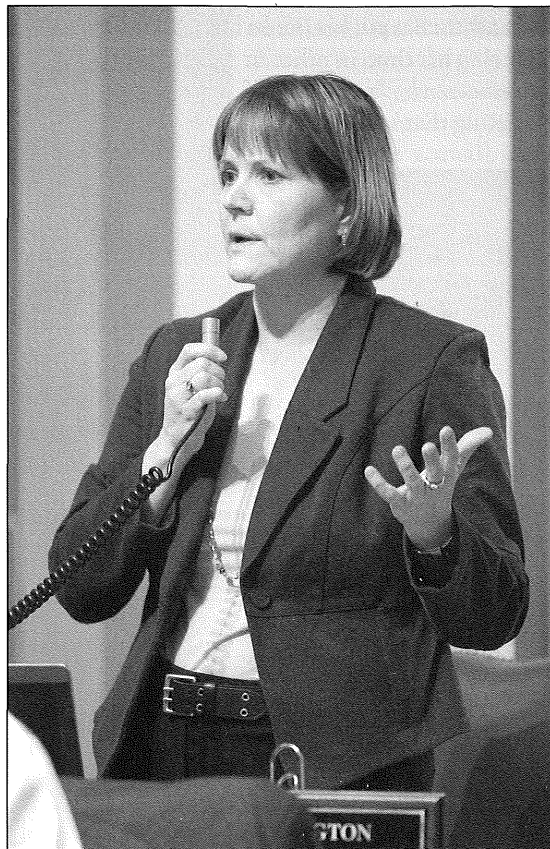


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Nora Slawik said the highlight of her career was serving as chairwomen of House Early Childhood Finance and Policy Division.