

DEBBE LEFTWICH: FOLLOWING IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

When her husband Keith died of cancer, Debbe Leftwich's family, friends and neighbors urged her to continue his legacy of public service.

by Malia K. Bennett

September 2004 marked two important milestones for Senator Debbe Leftwich. It was the one year anniversary of her husband's death and of her decision to carry on for him in the Oklahoma Senate. That journey actually began years earlier.

It was Dec. 9, 1980. A recently divorced mother, Debbe protested when a friend said he'd like to introduce her to Keith Leftwich. She was unprepared for his directness.

"The first thing he asked me was, what was my political affiliation and did I like basketball. I thought, 'Wow, I'd heard of a lot of lines, but talk about cutting to the chase!'"

Her answer: "I said Democrat, and 'I played varsity in high school and college. Is that good enough?'"

Keith immediately asked her out to dinner. They were married the following October.

The two had a great deal in common. They'd both been involved in student government and had served as pages for the Oklahoma Legislature. Each had also worked on various local and statewide political campaigns while still in high school.

Before they met, Keith had made an unsuccessful run for the House of Representatives. When the seat (in south Oklahoma City) came open a year after they'd married, Debbe was happy to roll up her sleeves and help with the campaign.

"I went door to door with my 4-year-old son Kevin. He'd hand the folks a brochure and say, 'Please vote for my new daddy.'" Keith won the election.

Debbe's interest in politics didn't end with that campaign. She got involved with various organizations within her party and

served in several leadership positions over the next several years, as well as managing statehouse races.

Debbe had also given birth to another son, Kurt, in 1984. In the next few years, she added Little League coaching, Sunday school teaching and PTA mom to her many activities. Keith continued to rise in the ranks of the Legislature, eventually winning a seat in the Senate and passing landmark legislation on a wide range of issues.

"Keith was always very in tune with the issues and needs of our district and the people who lived there. But he also had the ability to see the big picture and how those issues would play out on a state level. That's why he was a true visionary when it came to writing important legislation," she says.

It was certainly the case when Senator Keith Leftwich wrote and passed Oklahoma's first bill dealing with gang violence.

"In the early 1990s, many members of the Legislature thought this wasn't necessary. They told Keith that this was a problem in places like Los Angeles, not in Oklahoma."

That changed when a south Oklahoma City high school wrestling star, Tommy Byas, was killed in a gang-related shooting.

"The young man was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. But it brought home the fact that even in America's heartland, gangs were becoming a problem. With Tommy's family as advocates, Keith was able to pass his bill that gave police and prosecutors the tools they needed to go after gang-related crimes like drive-by shootings."

Debbe continued to pursue her own political path, as well as raising their two sons



WITH THE GOVERNOR
Senator Leftwich discusses economic development issues with Governor Brad Henry.

BOOKS ON HER NIGHTSTAND?

An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963
by Robert Dallek.

WHAT KEEPS HER AWAKE AT NIGHT?

Thinking about Keith.

WHAT WOULD SHE BE DOING IF SHE WEREN'T A LEGISLATOR?

Continuing my work at the medical examiner's office.

and working for the state medical examiner. She was appointed to the Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women, a bipartisan panel created to bring attention to issues directly affecting state women, and served a stint as chairman.

In 2002, Senator Keith Leftwich authored Oklahoma's telemarketer registration law. It was a major victory for him, but it was tempered by another pivotal event: Earlier that year, doctors had found a cancerous tumor.

"The surgery and treatment were declared a success, and Keith ran for another term. But three months after his re-election, we learned the cancer was back," Debbe says. This time, it was much more aggressive.

Keith continued with treatment while working in the Senate, passing another landmark piece of legislation—a bill to move Oklahoma's presidential primary from March to February.

"He said he wanted Oklahoma to be as important to the presidential candidates as it is to Oklahomans. It worked. After years of bypassing Oklahoma, every major presidential candidate spent time here."

Senator Leftwich saw his vision become a reality as he attended a Democratic presidential candidates' forum in August at the Oklahoma State University campus in Stillwater. It was his last public event. He died on Sept. 19, 2003.

Days later, Governor Brad Henry announced a special election would be held to fill Senator Leftwich's seat. Friends carefully broached the topic of whether Debbe would consider running.

"It was hard on people—they didn't want to be insensitive, yet I understood as well as anyone the timetable involved. But when I heard the date of the general election, it really got me. It was going to be on Dec. 9, the same date that my husband and I first met. In a way, it felt like a nudge from Keith."

"Keith was known as 'the walking candidate' because he walked every street and knocked on every door in his district. That's why his campaign signs had a shoeprint on them. My signs were almost identical, except it was a lady's shoeprint."

Debbe won the election. While the 2004 session was her first, she was a key player, helping to pass critical legislation dealing with issues ranging from access for women to breast and cervical cancer treatment to tougher penalties for domestic violence.

Her efforts did not go unnoticed by Governor Henry, who had served with her husband in the Senate.

"Keith was the model state lawmaker, the

kind who lived and breathed public service 24 hours of every day of every year. Everyone thought he was going to be an impossible act to follow, but Debbe picked up right where he left off and did great things as a first-year legislator. She's not only carrying on Keith's legacy, she's building her own."

Senator Leftwich also helped pass legislation to build the state's first comprehensive cancer research center—legislation her husband had hoped one day to pass.

Fellow Senator **Dick Wilkerson** said she



SENATOR

DICK WILKERSON

OKLAHOMA

was such a factor, at times he forgot it was her first session.

"She really hit the ground running. I think she's going to be a player and an asset not only to the Senate, but to the state of Oklahoma."

The respect isn't limited to her party. Republican **Harry Coates**, a Seminole, repre-



SENATOR


HARRY COATES

OKLAHOMA

sents the district where Debbe was born.

"She came to the Senate under sad circumstances, but she's done very well. She's a woman of intelligence, humor and strength. We don't agree on every piece of legislation, but we have become friends over this short time we've served together."

Despite the fact that she has indeed followed in her husband's footsteps, it should be clear that Senator Debbe Leftwich is a formidable legislator in her own right. Still, at a recent luncheon, someone approached Senator Leftwich and commented how she had always been the woman behind the man.

"I told him the truth was that I was never the woman behind the man. I was always the woman beside the man. Keith never made me feel anything less." 

A QUICK GLANCE AT ... OKLAHOMA

- ◆ The Sooner State. Nicknamed for white settlers who crossed into Indian Territory before the official land run in 1889.
- ◆ Was the 46th state to join the union on Nov. 16, 1907.
- ◆ Oklahoma comes from the Choctaw Indian words "okla" meaning people and "humma" meaning red. The state is home to 39 federally recognized tribal nations.
- ◆ Home to the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum.
- ◆ Population approximately 3.5 million.
- ◆ Main industries: oil, gas, agriculture and tourism.
- ◆ More manmade lakes than any other state.
- ◆ Home to humorist Will Rogers, folk singer Woody Guthrie and contemporary entertainers Toby Keith, Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks and Vince Gill.