

Helping people is main reward for Omaha senator

By Patti Gallagher

When Marge Higgins says the most rewarding aspect of being a state senator is "getting involved and helping people with their problems," it's not just an empty slogan. She has her evidence ready.

Evidence: LB87. Legislation that would allow removal of intoxicated persons from public places. The bill was introduced in response to complaints from her elderly constituents in Omaha—45 percent are older than 65 in Higgins' 9th district—that "the derelicts were becoming bolder and bolder."

Evidence: LB503. This bill would give a judge the authority to give grandparents the right to visit their grandchildren when parental custody rights might otherwise interfere.

Evidence: LB504. This bill would penalize inmates forcing homosexual acts upon other inmates with an additional one-year sentence, without parole. A guard or other official involved in homosexual acts would be imprisoned for two years in the bill's provisions.

Evidence: Liaison persons. Higgins said she has one liaison in each of her district's seven senior citizens apartment buildings, who channel complaints through a volunteer in her Omaha office. The volunteer deals directly with the problem—usually state agencies—to get action for the citizens.

Evidence: A new apartment. When an 80-year-old woman called Higgins to avoid having her water turned off, the senator—with a few strategic phone calls—got the woman a new apartment. The woman, who was living in a two-room house with only a cot for furniture, had heard on the radio that "Marge Higgins says her primary concern is the elderly."

"I will be voting for anything that's good for the elderly. Whether it's in Omaha, Nebraska, or outstate Nebraska," Higgins said.

Yet Higgins' list of bills is not restricted to concerns of the elderly. Among the 11 she sponsored are bills to change provisions for reimbursement of sales tax collections, to exempt judgments against counties from the budget lid, to require the auditor of public accounts to be a certified public accountant, and to change provisions relating to insurance reserves.

Some of the bills, Higgins said, were introduced on behalf of other parties. She doesn't know the details of a couple of her bills. She signed one at least only to get it introduced before the deadline; she said she may withdraw her name after further consideration.

But she says she feels she has an obligation to look into the things important to her constituents. Helping people, she repeats, is the most rewarding thing.

"It isn't even getting your bills introduced, getting your bills on the floor, getting them debated," Higgins said. "It's being in a position to help people."

What Higgins sees as her most important bill—the one that could potentially help the most people—is LB307. The bill would prohibit use of public funds by private organizations. It is aimed at the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce.

From her years as the Douglas County Democratic chairman, Higgins said the chamber of commerce is misusing tax dollars. The continued allocation of taxes to the chamber from the City Council and the Douglas County Board of Commissioners, led Higgins to resign her position before the end of her term.

She said that when Sen. Ed Zorinsky was mayor, he discontinued shifting city taxes to the chamber. However, the commissioners gave the chamber \$40,000 last year, she said.

"I don't think that tax dollars should be used for that purpose," she said. But, she said, the bill will probably not get out of committee.

"The Chamber will have already taken care of it." She added, however, that "I've got four years to keep it up."

Higgins legislative position is her first public office. Crediting her husband of 25 years as "the man behind the

woman," Higgins said he encouraged her to pursue the spot.

Besides the fact that "there is not enough time for the bills that are coming at you," Higgins enjoys her work. It has, she said, changed her opinion of state senators.

"Before I ran for office, I did not have a very high opinion of our legislature. I've changed that 100 percent," she said. "They're super people."



Photo by Jon Natvig
Sen. Marge Higgins of Omaha.

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ASUN Legal Services selects new director

By Mary Louise Knapp

Gaining the authority to represent students in court is one of Shelley Stall's main goals as director of ASUN Student Legal Services.

Stall, a 1978 graduate of the UNL College of Law, was recently hired by ASUN to replace Robert Hardt, who resigned in November to take a position with an oil company in Houston, Texas.

"There is a need for expanded service in this office," Stall said, explaining that Student Legal Services attorneys are allowed only to give legal advice and counsel to students.

Stall said that granting the Student Legal Services director further authority would require student support and the approval of the NU Board of Regents.

"Other campuses have let people from student legal services represent students in court," she said. "I think that it would work here."

"The students have to show that they want it too," she said.

Lincoln native

Stall, a Lincoln native, attended Lincoln Southeast High School and received her bachelor's degree at UNL in social science.

After graduation, she worked at the Rehabilitation Center for Emotionally Disturbed Students in Chicago.

"We helped prepare them to go back into the community," she said.

Stall said she was not entirely sure what career to pursue after graduation, so she "took some time off to work and think about it."

A former ASUN senator, she said she is glad the ASUN office has expanded and is

offering more services to students than it did when she attended UNL.

For example, the ASUN credit union did not exist at that time, and plans had just begun for the legal services office.

Campus different

Stall said she has not had time to observe ASUN or the attitudes of students of today, but she said the campus seems "quite different."

"The campus was not another Berkeley," she said, "but there was considerably more student unrest. Students now are dealing with different issues than we did."

After graduating from law school, Stall worked as a research analyst with the Nebraska Department of Corrections for six months. She then moved to North Platte, where she served as assistant public defender until she was hired as ASUN Legal Services director.

Stall said she wanted to move back to Lincoln for many reasons.

Her family and friends, most of whom live in Lincoln, were a major factor in her decision, she said.

Consumer problems, DWI charges, traffic violations and minor assault charges are among the wide variety of legal problems Stall encounters daily.

"The most common problems are landlord-tenant conflicts," she said.

Students who need further legal counsel are generally advised to go the Bar Referral Service, a group of Lincoln lawyer specialists.

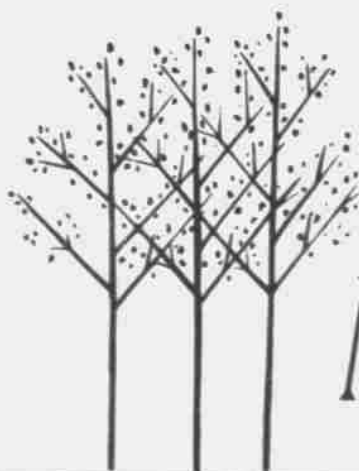
The service puts students and lawyers in contact with each other. Legal fees are generally lower through the Bar Referral Service, she said.

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