

# A 'father' figure for Nebraska

Gov. Ben Nelson says his record of service to the state's people has prepared him for Washington.

By **CHAD LORENZ**  
Senior Reporter

He lives in Omaha, he works in Lincoln.

Although he's a Democrat, many of his stands are conservative.

And when he's not busy governing the state, he's campaigning for the U.S. Senate.

Gov. Ben Nelson plays many roles, some of them opposite roles, but he has committed himself to one.

Nelson has tried to be a father-figure, a caretaker, during most of his life.

Besides being the father of four children, two biological and two adopted, Nelson has also taken care of his great-aunt and his mother in her later years.

And for the past six years, he has been "father" of the state, doing his best to take care of Nebraska's children and senior citizens.

During Nelson's college years at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, he spent a lot of time around older people when he worked at Lincoln churches.

At church lunches, dinners, baptisms and funerals, Nelson would chat with the parishioners, many of whom were seniors.

"I like their history, I like their stories," Nelson said. "I never got tired of older people."

Until his mother's death in August, Nelson made sure she got the best care possible. Dealing with his mother's Medicare benefits made him realize that there was a problem in the system.

"I had never seen such confusing forms and useless paperwork until I began overseeing my mother's Medicare filings," he said.

Nelson met with more demands as a father after his first wife died in 1977 — raising his son Pat and daughter Sarah.

"I had to struggle like most single moms and dads do."

At the time, Nelson was the president and chief executive of Central National Group Insurance. His important role at work and at home sometimes caused problems, like when a baby sitter would cancel before a company meeting.

Through all the challenges, Nelson realized parenting lessons and strengthened ties with his family.

"I enjoyed it," he said. "It created a bond and a love because most fathers aren't put in that position."

Nelson's role as father didn't end with his family. As governor, Nelson said, he has tried to look out for Nebraska's children in trying to give them an education.

His push for public education in the campaign reflects his appreciation for his own education: a 10-year UNL career including graduate work and a law degree.

Nelson earned his bachelor's degree in philosophy while living and



JAY CALDERON/DN

**GOV. BEN NELSON** shakes hands with football fans before Nebraska's game against Kansas.

working as a counselor in Selleck Residence Hall.

While chatting with students there last month, Nelson commented that things didn't seem very different from his years there — and that the food was probably just as bad.

While working on his master's degree in philosophy, Nelson taught undergraduate students in Philosophy 410: logic. His former students sometimes approach him and remind him of the grades he gave.

Also during graduate school, Nelson worked in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and later in the State Insurance Department.

His part-time work during the school year and his summer jobs supplemented his scholarships in financing his college tuition by himself.

Nelson graduated with no debt and a brand new Ford Galaxy 500. But that was the 1960s.

"You can't do today what I did." In days of low tuition and economic abundance, Nelson still watched every dollar.

"I watched it so closely, I still have expense calendars with entries to the Nebraska Bookstore," Nelson said.

Nelson said his compulsion to save and his reputation for being "tight as three coats of paint," carried over from his parents' lifestyles.

Surviving the Great Depression made them value their few assets, he said, so they taught their only son the same. Rationing food and supplies during World War II also made a young

Nelson realize all things were limited.

It was also during his childhood that Nelson was exposed to political role models.

Every Memorial Day, Nelson's father would take him to the cemetery where the Nelson plot was just down from the grave of an outspoken Nebraska senator. Nelson's father would repeat the senator's history again and again.

"I grew up in the shadow of George Norris," Nelson said. "It was drilled into me to the point no script was needed."

That memory carried into high school, where Nelson was elected governor of the Hi-Y model legislature.

In the YMCA-based state youth government, Nelson won by getting the block votes from Lincoln and Omaha.

"That's when the seed was planted," Nelson said.

That early boost of confidence always reminded Nelson of the possibility of becoming governor. He talked about it during college and in his early career, but friends and family urged him to run in 1990.

Before running for governor, Nelson's only political experience came from working in the upper ranks of Central National Group Insurance and as executive vice president of the National Association of Insurance Commissioners.

In 1985, Nelson turned from insurance and opened a private law practice, which he kept until he took office as governor in 1991.

## Earl Benjamin "Ben" Nelson



Age 50. Born May 17, 1946, in Madison, Neb.

Home town: Omaha

Occupation: Attorney; Governor of Nebraska

Family: Diane; four children: Kevin Gleason, 27, Christie Gleason, 26, Sarah Nelson, 24, son, Pat Nelson, 25.

Education: Graduated from the University of Nebraska, 1963; received master's degree in philosophy, 1966; graduated from the University of Nebraska School of Law, 1970.

**Political Experience:** Served as state insurance director under Democrat Gov. Jim Egan, 1975-76; state chairman of Democrat Helen Boocalls' campaign for governor, 1986; elected governor 1990; re-elected in 1994. Other experience: insurance-law expert and consultant, Kennedy Holland DeLacy & Svoboda of Omaha, 1985-1990; board of directors, First Executive Corp., 1988-1990; executive vice president, National Association of Insurance Commissioners, 1982-85; president and chief executive officer, Central National Insurance, 1980-81.

He admits he didn't feel completely prepared to take command of the state's government.

"You feel insecure about it," Nelson said. "Even though people call you 'governor,' it doesn't mean you feel like it."

It wasn't until two months into his term, during a time of crisis, that Nelson realized how a governor typically feels.

The Nebraska Supreme Court had just thrown out a law on personal property tax — a move Nelson fought.

"I remember I was walking outside the Capitol and one of the local reporters passed by and said: 'You became governor today.'

"It's when you take charge," Nelson said. "That's when you become governor."

It's that take-charge attitude Nelson said he wanted to take to Washington. Nelson thinks he can give Nebraskans a "higher level of service" by looking out for their interests in the Senate.

Even though Nelson promised Nebraskans in 1994 that he would complete his four-year governor term, he said he'll let the people decide what job they want him to do.

"When I've talked to the folks, they say 'I like what you've done. I wish I could have you in both jobs.'"