Judy Morrison: Retiring lawmaker reflects on political career built from the ground up

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Judy Morrison in the Shanna Morrison Memorial Rose Garden at West Flanders Park in Shawnee.

Judy Morrison got into politics from the ground up — literally.

It was sidewalks, to be precise. In the late'80s, when Morrison's terminally ill daughter Shanna returned home to Shawnee from treatment in Texas, Morrison found it nearly impossible to push Shanna's wheelchair on the crumbling sidewalks near the family's home.

So she decided to hit the pavement by herself, knocking on the doors of people with imperfect sidewalks and asking them if they wanted them fixed.

After a few weeks, she invited those residents — and two Shawnee City Councilmen — to her house on 69th Street for a sidewalk summit.

It was a full house. One of the councilmen said he'd never seen such a crowd, even at a council meeting.

The sidewalks got fixed.

That and other grassroots activism — lobbying Shawnee (again successfully) to limit when residents can burn, and Kansas (unsuccessfully) to allow residents to carry concealed weapons — put Morrison on the local political map.

And in 1999, when the 23rd District representative in the Kansas House, Cliff Franklin, announced he was stepping down, the Republican Party picked Morrison, who was then serving as a precinct committeewoman for the party, to replace him.

"I couldn't believe it," said Morrison, who will not run for another term this fall. "It was scary. I had no idea what I should be doing."

Once she got over the challenge of learning how to be a state legislator, Morrison faced another one: convincing voters in a largely moderate district to elect a staunch conservative.

According to one of those moderates, Fred Krebs, a history professor at Johnson County Community College and a former Republican committeeman from Shawnee, Morrison did it four times by treating everyone, regardless of party, as an individual whose ideas were worthy of consideration.

"The thing I respect about Judy is her tolerance, her ability to get past the political preference to understand the human being," said Krebs, whose early support was crucial to Morrison's being tapped to replace Franklin. "She has that quality Confucius called 'human-heartedness.' She was concerned about people."

Krebs recalls debates with Morrison over issues like school funding and the separation of church and state. Even when they disagreed, Krebs said Morrison always worked hard to understand his position and to take him seriously.

Looking back, Morrison explains her success based on what constituents have told her.

"People said they voted for me because they thought I was honest, even though they didn't agree with me on many issues," she said. "They trusted me — I'm sure the gray hair helped."

Morrison cites legislation cracking down on human trafficking, the establishment of a DNA database for missing persons, a Social Security tax break for working-class people and opposition to the construction of a NAFTA "superhighway" through Kansas (for which she earned air time with CNN's Lou Dobbs in early June) among her proudest legislative achievements.

In her post-political life, Morrison hopes to find the time to write a book about Shanna, who succumbed to leukemia in 1988, and how families of sick children can learn from the Morrisons' experience.

Morrison stressed she couldn't have survived in politics for almost a decade without the unwavering support and help of husband Ken, her "house secretary," as people in Topeka came to know him.

She said she leaves Topeka with no regrets.

Pulling out of the capitol for the last time, the Queen Anne chair from her office peeking out of the bed of her truck in the rearview mirror, Morrison found herself humming James Brown's "I Feel Good."

"At the end of your service, if you can look at yourself in the mirror, and if at night you can lie down and sleep, that's good, and that's the feeling I have," she said. "I'm very happy about that."