

INTRODUCTION

by Kate Sparks

In 2010, I began the process of reading through and organizing the memos, bills, statements, and press files that chronicled Senator Kohl's four terms in the U.S. Senate. I was well placed to assemble a summary of his record having served as a legislative assistant for the Senator from 1990 to 1993 and as his legislative director from 1993 to 2007, keeping in close contact with the office in the years after that.

The project started as an attempt to index the masses of papers detailing the Senator's legislative accomplishments, as a precursor to archiving the collection. But it soon became evident, at least to me, that the record of service emerging from the office files was a story that needed to be told more fully. Senator Kohl entered the Senate in 1989, a private man with a solid background in business and a firm grounding in centrist principles – a man who pledged to work across the aisle and for all Wisconsinites, regardless of political party.

He leaves at the end of 2012 having done exactly what he set out to do 24 years ago: He opened his office to any Wisconsin family, business, elected official, or individual who had an idea, concern, problem, or opportunity. He made sure each got a hearing and whatever help he could offer. And he served as Wisconsin's voice in the Senate, tirelessly promoting the interests and the values of the state.

The result is a significant record of achievement that has shaped the state and bettered the nation -- whether it be a dairy farmer finally receiving a fair price for her milk; or hungry child getting a free lunch during the summer school break; or a laid-off auto worker who is retraining for a better-paying green job; or daughter who is able to find a safe, quality nursing home for her mother; or a tech company who finds an opportunity to compete and create jobs; or a family farmer who is finding new markets with organic produce, specialty meats, or artesian cheese; or a welder who has a new job building the littoral combat ship; or the child of immigrant parents who will become the first in her family to attend college; or a hiker who is enjoying the Ice Age Trail; or a small businessman opening shop in an industrial park that was once a toxic waste dump – the list goes on and on.

The following set of papers is my attempt to lay out the legislative history behind the all the myriad of ways the Senator's work has measurably and positively impacted the lives of so many people. I need to emphasize that this story is from my point of view, and that I am the one who has insisted it be told. Much to the dismay of his staff and political consultants, Senator Kohl actively avoids taking credit for work he has done, preferring to let others have the limelight.

That said, Senator Kohl has reluctantly agreed to let us chronicle his record of service, convinced, I believe, by two arguments. First, a four-term Senator, especially one as effective as Senator Kohl, is an integral part of his state's history. In recognition of that, Senator Kohl is donating his Senate office papers to the Wisconsin State Historical Society. But as we collected the boxes and megabytes of material this donation involves, it quickly became apparent that we needed to impose some structure for this material to provide any sort of historical record. These papers try to do that.

The second reason we have written them is, in my opinion, even more important. At a time when public faith in government, and Congress in particular, is at a low – at a time when too many public-minded private citizens are turning away from federal service – the story of the how -- working quietly, diligently, and with focus -- Senator Kohl was able to do so much public good is one that might, if not inspire future leaders, at least offer hope to those disillusioned with politics today.

Of course, as Senator Kohl would be first to acknowledge, he could not have achieved all he did for Wisconsin and the nation without his incredible and loyal staff – far too many to mention here. That is also true of this collection of papers. Everyone in (and some from outside) the Kohl enterprise has pitched in on this project, but a few deserve special mention:

In 2010, as a private consultant, my firm built the database that provided the background to these papers, with the bulk of the cataloguing done by Debbie Cohen Lehigh and Ann Sparks with editing help from Fredda Sparks. Vivian Sparks Telgarsky provided the initial design ideas in early 2012, and then returned in the last few days of production to clean up the mess we had made of her original concept.

Members of Senator Kohl's personal staff in DC authored many of the final chapters: Harry Stein wrote the first draft of "Defending our Nation;" Sarah Levin, of

“A Commitment to Affordable and Accessible Health Care;” Mike Lavender, of “Wisconsin’s Farm Lands;” Aliza Fishbein, of “Healthy and Safe Food;” Jessah Foulk, of “Educating our Future Leaders;” and Nick Barbash, of “Conserving and Protecting our Natural Resources.”

Senator Kohl’s Aging and Judiciary Committee staff members were the primary authors of several more chapters. Given their high level of expertise in their fields, I did not change their contributions. These include: “Protecting Consumers by Championing Antitrust Laws” by Seth Bloom; “Supreme Court Nominations,” by Caroline Holland; and “Protecting Senior’s Savings” by Cara Goldstein and Joel Eskovitz.

Thanks are also due to Sonia Acosta for amazing technical support; to Phil Karsting for agreeing to start on this project two years ago; and to Lynn Becker for, as always, everything – from proofreading to advocating for the project every step of the way.

A final and most heartfelt thanks goes to Senator Kohl for doing so much worth of writing about. It has been an incredible privilege and honor to work with him these twenty-four years. Through him, I have had everything anyone could ask for in a career: fulfilling and interesting work; the chance to help thousands of people; the company of brilliant and hardworking colleagues; and a boss who was always demanding yet fair – caring and kind – wise and wickedly funny – and a true and lifelong friend.