



Meet Kathleen Falk

As Falk candidly shares with her friend Linda S. Balisle, we have an opportunity to see how this Wisconsin gubernatorial candidate's personal and political life shaped her vision of a "tough but fair" government.

by Linda S. Balisle | image by David Nevala | May 1, 2012 | 0 comments

You were an early supporter of domestic partner benefits for same-sex couples in Dane County. How did you get that implemented?

In 1999 I sat down with the unions and put domestic partner benefits on the bargaining table, because I thought it was not fair that one union member had family benefits and another one didn't.

Tell us about your family.

My dad died before I was 30, of alcoholism. Mom died unexpectedly right after I started my first run for county executive. She was 69 and still working because she had to. She was a fabulous person, very Irish, and I knew she

would want me to continue in the race. My son, Eric, is in New York and works for the DA in Nassau County in his campaign work. He went to east-side Madison schools, including East High School.

When I lived in the same east-side area as you, we were concerned about some of the children in our neighborhood. I remember that you had some children living with you.

Yes, a number of kids over the years. They're still a part of my life. Some were my son's friends; others were kids in the neighborhood. A couple of the kids were homeless and a couple had moms who were struggling. I was frustrated in my inability to make a permanent difference in their lives. It actually contributed to my wanting to run for public office. I've worked hard to increase the standard of living of low-income families in Dane County.

You're married to Peter Bock, former representative and all-around great guy.

He's out there campaigning for me; he's a warrior.

Your family didn't have money, so how did you go to college?

I started at UW-Waukesha, which was my local campus. I worked a couple of jobs. Tuition was about \$200, and I lived at home. One of my part-time jobs was typing manuscripts for a professor. He said, "You should go to Harvard." I thought it was a boys' school. I couldn't imagine me going there. Then he said, "Then go to Stanford." I'd never heard of it, so I thought it would be okay for me to go there. I applied and I got a letter back from Stanford accepting me. I wrote them back and said, "Great, but I have no money." They wrote back and gave me a full ride at Stanford. I was there two years in school and stayed a year later doing odd jobs while applying to law school.

Was housing included?

No, there was a housing shortage at Stanford. They had housing for freshman but not for transfer students, so I knew I had to find a place to live.

I had never been to California, but my wonderful Catholic mother said, “You go to the Catholic center and ask for help.” So I got on a plane and arrived in San Francisco. I met this man on the plane and he gave me a ride to a bike store in Palo Alto. I bought my first new bike of my life. I biked to the Newman Center, which is the Catholic center near campus, with all my belongings on my bike.

I knocked on the door and said, “I’m a transfer student I have no place to live—can I stay for the night until I can find a place tomorrow?” They said, “Sure.” I never left. It was a house of men; priests, former priests, or studying-to-be-priests. They were an incredible group of people who are to this day some of my dearest friends, who come visit and have helped me on some of my campaigns.

How did you earn your room and board?

I was the gardener because I have no culinary skills. They made sure to keep me out of the kitchen. I have a great green thumb.

You eventually did attend Harvard, didn’t you?

I graduated from Harvard’s Senior Executives in State and Local Government program after I was Dane County executive.

Your hometown, Waukesha, is a major Republican area. What kind of support do you have there?

There’s a great environmental core, as well as former classmates, friends, aunts, and uncles, who are a great help. One of the things I’ve learned working around the state is that we do have these shared values, no matter where you live. It’s true in Waukesha, just as it is everywhere else.

A great environmental group that arose in Waukesha about 20 years ago had a fundraiser about a week ago in Brookfield. My former high school and grade school classmates showed up. That is where I started out, and it’s where I promised where I’d go the day after the election. I think we need to heal our state. And that’s where I’ll go to start that healing process.

How are you going to compete with Tom Barrett in Milwaukee? What kind of presence are you going to have?

I'm in Milwaukee a lot, but it's important to be everywhere in a statewide campaign.

So you're not going to concede Milwaukee as Tom's base?

Absolutely not. I was born there. Aside from having a slew of relatives there, I have tremendous support from many people. Lynde Uihlein, a leading woman philanthropist who cares about women, the environment, and many good causes, is a big supporter of ours. Many others in Milwaukee are doing good work for me.

On the south side at the Voces de la Frontera office, I met with a young man worried about how he will finish college. They are worried about the cuts to the UW system and tuition. Some of the plans I have launched really build off what I learn in Milwaukee, such as why we have to build more manufacturing jobs.

One of the examples I use is, UW-Milwaukee has this brand-new, state-of-the-art center for freshwater fisheries. We are home to one of the largest freshwater bodies on the planet. We have the best scientists who are doing the research here that the world needs. So why can't we also be manufacturing the equipment and technology that's close to that research, in an area of Milwaukee that needs good paying jobs?

What kind of support do you have outside of Dane and Milwaukee County?

I worked all over this state for the Environmental Decade and the State Public Intervenor. When I travel the state, people I met during those many projects greet me. I've got great support throughout the state and it continues to build. I've worked on the recalls since last summer and I have traveled to meet many of the people who collected signatures for the recall. I've had great conversations with people all over and learned a lot.

Let's talk about the work you've done throughout the state. My memory is that when you graduated from law school, you were

working for Wisconsin Environmental Decade for \$100 per week.

Actually, it was \$35, to be exact. It eventually went up to \$100, but that was a big increase. I was co-director and the only attorney.

What was it like to be a woman lawyer in the '70s and '80s?

Usually the court reporter and I were the only women in the room. I was asking courts to say things they had never said before. I wore pantsuits because it was important then not to draw attention to the fact that I was a woman. Things have changed about some of that, but that's how it was then.

You argued several cases of first impression to our Wisconsin Supreme Court. Tell me about the significance of those cases.

There was a new federal environmental law, and the courts had not applied it or interpreted it yet. We had to work to get the laws in place in Wisconsin, and there were so many questions of interpretation of what they meant. My job was to make sure that these new laws had the breadth we thought they were intended to have.

When you make local law in Wisconsin, how does that affect the national law?

Early on I was getting the court to say that when you determine the environmental impact of an action, you not only look at immediate consequences but the long-term environmental consequences. That was very revolutionary at the time. Then courts around the country would pick up our court's cases and use them in applying the federal law.

What did you do as Public Intervenor?

From 1983 to 1997, I represented the public throughout the state on mining, wetlands, land use, transportation, and public access to lakes and streams.

When you ran for Dane County executive the first time, did you have the property developers' support?

No. There was a concern about the environmental advocate related to land-use planning. My opponent had the builders', developers', and Gov. Tommy Thompson's support. I had never run for office before. I had support of the

environmental community, working men and women, and women who thought it was time to elect a woman.

So the fact you were a woman made a difference in the race?

It was an interesting campaign because there was a question about whether a woman could do the job. The comments and questions were frequent and direct. Not subtle.

After the primary, I ran against County Board Chair Mike Blaska, who had a 15-year-old daughter. My son was 15 at the time. At one of the forums, a very nice man expressed that he was worried about who would take care of my son when I had to work long hours. I thanked him for caring about my son and hoped he would ask the same question of Mr. Blaska about who would take care of his daughter. Those kinds of things were normal.

During the first years of my tenure, all eyes were on, “Can she balance a budget?” I did balance the budget, every year for 14 years—even after the recession in 2008.

What was the first thing you did after you got elected?

The very first day after the first election, I thought, there were two ways to operate here. I did not run to be in politics, but because I wanted to get something done. My job as top executive is how to get the job done. Normally politics is how to beat the other side, which is not a successful long-term strategy for getting things done.

So the day after election, I called the builders’ association and I said, I’m calling to ask for your help. Will you work with me? I had to figure out what that would mean. How could I get both sides—developers and the environmentalists—to see that they shared the same ultimate goal of what the county ought to look like? It was in nobody’s interest to misuse our natural resources and have sprawl.

So I did this exercise. The hottest issue was land use, and anytime we had a hearing we’d have a packed room. So I called an open meeting in the Dane

County Exhibition Hall (now the Alliant Center). I knew a lot of people would show up, and they did. I set up a bunch of round tables with a map of Dane county on each table. I put a bowl of M&Ms on every table.

The card-carrying Sierra Club member would sit next to a builder. People of varied interests were at each table. I said, "Let's put the M&Ms on the map where you want development to occur in Dane County." They started putting the M&Ms on the map and when we looked at the end, they all put them in the same place. It told them they shared the same goal. But for their different views about how to get there, or the role of government or the Sixth Amendment "takings" clause, they really wanted the same thing. Then I had to figure out what could they work on together to carry out this shared goal in a way that neither side had to give up strongly held philosophical views, which no one wanted to do.

I knew from my years of experience, sometimes governments can't regulate and you have to do it the old-fashioned way and "buy the land." So I asked, "Why don't we put together this conservation referendum where we go to the public in Dane County and ask them to support using \$30 million to buy more park land over the next 10 years?"

It represented shared values, shared philosophy, and a tremendous outcome. Both sides okayed it. I said, "But you have to campaign together. Builders, developers, and environmentalists campaigned and that was extraordinary. Then on the night of the election where the referendum passed by 76% in 1999, all sides appropriately congratulated each other. They could have at that point said, "We did this, now bye." Instead they said, "Now what do you want us to do?" And over the next 12 years we created some of the best environmental protections measured by any barometer.

Have any of these developers and builders supported you in your subsequent elections?

Yes. Now Jeff Rosenberg, one of the largest homebuilders in the state, is supporting me for governor, as well as the Sierra Club and Clean Wisconsin Action Fund.

Much has been made of the multiple endorsements of you by the unions and your commitment to veto any budget bill that doesn't restore collective-bargaining rights. While you've been Dane County executive, have you and the unions always agreed on everything?

No. When we had major funding cuts in 2008, I talked to each union personally. I went to see the folks at the highway department, showed them the numbers I had to work with and asked them, "Will you work with me on how to do this?" While it was not easy and took some months, the unions agreed to pay cuts and benefit contributions three years in a row.

Sounds like you asked the unions to take the same pay cuts and make the same increased contributions to their benefits that Governor Walker asked of state workers and Mayor Tom Barrett asked of Milwaukee unions. If it's the same, why are the unions supporting you?

Because I worked with them face-to-face at the bargaining table instead of taking away their rights. I respected them. They also saw me ask for similar sacrifices from every department. Everyone had to share the pain we were going through. They thought I was tough but fair.

You held the Dane County executive position for 14 years, which is the longest anyone has held the position. But some people ask, why did you leave a few months before your term ended?

I had completed my promises. When I ran in 2009, I said I wanted to get two things done. First I wanted to launch a citizen-wide alcohol coalition, given my belief that the single biggest threat to our safety is misuse of alcohol. The second thing I wanted to do was to get the manure digester up and running. I wanted to help our dairy industry grow (three-quarters of a billion dollars a year), keep the manure out of our lakes, and create a green economy and new jobs. It wasn't easy, but I got it done and it is a model for the future.

On Facebook posts and other statements during county budget deliberations, it seemed that the city, through Mayor Dave—and some County Board members—did not like your budget proposals because they cut too much in different areas. How did you decide what was the right level of budget cuts or additions?

I decided on certain guidelines we had to meet, which were lower than what some in the city government and county board wanted. My responsibility to the taxpayers is balanced by the needs of our community, but we had to have standards for setting a budget.

But the advertising that is already out by Republicans paints you with the “tax and spend” brush. Some say you raised taxes and had excessive budgets. So which is it? Did you increase budgets and taxes a lot or did you hold a line on your budgets?

At the time each budget was debated I was criticized for not allowing more to be spent. I knew we had to keep it in line and deal realistically with the major cuts that were pushed down to cities and counties. I balanced the budget every year for 14 years even during the worst of the economic downturn. I’m a very frugal person and have no problem figuring out ways to get more from what you have. That’s what families have to do and that’s what responsible government has to do.

You know what a statewide race is like and how it feels to lose, yet you constantly encourage people to run. Why is that?

If you lose a campaign, your family and friends still love you, and if you win, you can change the world.

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