

Her suit says Junior League, tailored and classy. Her words leave no doubt that she is bright yet still accessible in a "just folks" way. Her hair resembles that of a windswept jock. Tammy Baldwin is some package.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has," says Baldwin, quoting the late Margaret Mead.

It was the mantra of Baldwin's congressional campaign, and Mead's words were emblazoned upon the wall of the campaign office so nobody would forget.

And no one did, which may be the reason Baldwin, 36, snagged a victory—and a place in history—this past November, when she became the first openly gay nonincumbent elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. (Others have come out after their elections to Congress.) She is also the first woman Wisconsin voters have sent to Washington, D.C.

The Democrat represents a district that includes the Madison area, the place where she was raised and still lives.

She gushes an enthusiasm about the lakes, the hills and people of her home region.

"I'm there because I want to be," she says.

Her one stint away was for school. Baldwin ended up at Smith College, situated in Northampton, Mass., a community known for its preponderance of lesbians.

She came out as a lesbian in her junior year. "My college classmates were wonderful, just completely supportive," she says.

Still, Baldwin didn't tell her family until she returned to Madison to attend law school.

"I was a very, very lucky person, both in terms of how old and how mature I was when I came out, and the fact that my friends and family were absolutely amazing," she says.

Acceptance anxiety returned when she ran

LESBIAN IN THE HOUSE

Tammy Baldwin charts new territory with her win as an out lesbian by Bob Roehr

for a county council seat at the age of 24, while she was still in law school.

"I remember vividly the night before the first newspaper article was coming out, and being terrified again of what was going to happen," she recounts. However, the sky did not fall during the eight years she served on the council.

had just read about her in his morning newspaper. "The remarkable part of what he had to say was, 'I feel differently about myself today,'" she says, adding, "I get emotional every time I think about that because it was the first time I had a glimpse of how powerful the symbolism truly is.... It's important not to forget those moments."

But Baldwin acknowledges that not everyone is pleased by the prospect of a high profile lesbian.

"I'm never going to convince those hateful people," she says. "The people I'm going to reach are our allies and those in the middle.... I think that we will be most successful when we

Baldwin offers thanks to her supporters.

"When I was first elected to the county board in 1986, I attended a conference of openly gay elected and appointed officials. There were 14 of us, including one from Great Britain. Now we are pushing toward 200," she says. "There are not nearly as many glass ceilings to shatter."

Baldwin says the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, founded in 1991, played "an absolutely key role" in making that happen. "They started thinking about what ingredients needed to be in place" in terms of resources, training and skills to help elect openly gay and lesbian candidates at every level of government, she explains.

"What we learned...is that the electorate was absolutely ready for candidates who come prepared and well qualified to address their issues," she says.

Baldwin laughs in acknowledging that she was the fund's "poster child" in 1993, the year she stepped up from the county council to statewide office. And she jokes that with this last election she has become a "second generation" poster child for the group.

She also credits the Human Rights Campaign for endorsing her very early in the election cycle, when she was running against other strongly pro-gay candidates in the congressional primary. (HRC lobbyist Kris Pratt is now Baldwin's legislative director.)

In the nation's capital, Baldwin is trying to get to know her new colleagues. She also says her principal legislative goal is "passing a universal health care bill [and] making sure that every citizen in this country has access to health care."

She made that mission the centerpiece of her campaign.

"But I'm a pragmatist and I know that it is going to take a long time, and that there is a lot of political groundwork that needs to be laid first," she says.



PHOTOS BY BOB ROEHR

"But the state media made a lot of my election to the state Assembly [in 1993]," she says.

The mainstream press ran stories that screamed: "Out Lesbian Elected to the State Legislature," and "First and Only Openly Gay or Lesbian Person to be Sworn In."

Upon her election to the Legislature, Baldwin recalls a poignant phone call from a man who had "a youthful sounding voice that was very shaky."

According to Baldwin, the fellow told her he

do our best to turn the other cheek and keep on with our work."

Baldwin takes pride in having successfully sponsored a campaign finance reform law while she was a state legislator, as well as having played a part in defeating her state's equivalent of the Defense of Marriage Act.

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