

Remembering Her Roots

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

cient town, “A total community and we had our own schools, had our own shopping centers,” she said.

Winters was first elected to the state House in 1998, re-elected in 2000 and elected to the state Senate three times, in 2006, 2010 and 2014. Her term is up in 2018, when she plans to run again.

“I think I’ve already filed,” she said.

Before running for office, Winters worked for Gov. Tom McCall and later for Gov. Victor Atiyeh. She joined the Republican Party of McCall and Atiyeh because back then, she said, they were the ones who got things done.

“It was the McCall years. That’s who I was working for, working with, and that’s who I learned from,” she said. “And I saw those who were willing to open up their doors for jobs were Republicans. I saw those that were willing to give a helping hand up were Republicans, when I was with Tom.”

That contrasts with the perceptions of many about the current national GOP agenda, but during a recent visit to Portland, Winters declined to discuss the national



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A few days after being elected as Senate Minority Leader and the first African American to lead a legislative caucus in Oregon, Sen. Jackie Winters embraces the man she replaced, Sen. Ted Ferrioli during a December meeting in Portland. Ferrioli left the post to join the Northwest Power and Conservation Council.

stage.

“I’m not there,” she said firmly. Winters entered the political arena

from working at the state capitol, but she got her interest in politics long before from her father.

“I heard about politicians practically all my life from my dad,” she said. “He never ran for office, but he would discuss politicians and could tell you about most of who was running, whether they good, bad or indifferent.”

One politician her father particularly liked was former Vice President Charlie Curtis, who served as vice president under President Herbert Hoover following a career in Kansas politics. The reason her dad liked Curtis so much was that he was a minority: as a member of the Kaw Nation and the first person of non-European descent to reach second highest seat in U.S. government.

“Charlie Curtis was part Native American, so that was very special to him,” she said.

Winters had two black colleagues early in her Senate term. Sens. Margaret Carter and Avel Gordly were Portland Democrats but also long time friends, groundbreakers on the state political scene, and the three of them held sway for several years as the leading black women in the state capitol.

Carter and Gordly left the Senate around 2009, but working with them was an experience Winters treasures.

“We worked together the entire time that they were there and we all three served on Ways and Means together,” she said. “Either one of them held the gavel or I held the gavel. We still communicate with each other. It was a close relationship that was developed by the three of us that had nothing

to do with party, at all.”

Winters may have less in common with some current members of the Senate than with Carter and Gordly, but using cooperation, convincing and collaboration is the way Winters works.

“You can’t get anything done unless you’re bringing others with you, and so that means you have to work both sides of the aisle,” she said. “When I was in the executive branch, those are the lessons that you learn. No one has a lock on any one issue.

“There are 90 of us and we don’t all think alike. And so you’ve got to start being convincing in your point of view,” she said. “And sometimes, you have to say, ‘OK, I think what you’re saying has value, but it’s not all one way or the other. It doesn’t exist in families and it doesn’t exist in politics.’”

Winters’ accomplishments and awards are many, too many to list, and on top of being a state senator, she’s long been involved in community leadership. She chaired Salem’s first \$1 million United Way campaign, was twice awarded Salem’s Distinguished Service Award, founded Oregon’s first food share program, and helped establish the Oregon NW Black Pioneers Association to raise money for student scholarships. She has served on the Salem-Keizer Blue Ribbon Committee for Excellence in Education, and was a member of the Board of Directors of the Oregon College of Education Foundation, now the Western Oregon University Foundation.

Winters toured the with a tap-dancing troupe as a teen, and still goes out to dance in the clubs every chance she gets, which helps keep her young, she says.

“I tap danced all the way from Albina to the statehouse,” she likes to joke. But her colleagues, even on the other side of the isle, don’t expect her to be sidestepping any issues, said Senate President Peter Courtney.

“Sen. Jackie Winters has an inner strength that is unmatched. She has faced hardship. She has experienced suffering. She has triumphed over every challenge,” he said. “She’s a true Republican and a true Oregonian. Jackie’s wisdom and sense of fairness will make her an exceptional leader and will help make the Legislature work.”

Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, said she has known Winters for years, before their time together in the Senate.

“She is a dedicated public servant who puts the interests of Oregonians above all else,” Burdick said. “As a woman of color, she has broken many glass ceilings, her current position being just the latest. She commands deep respect from both sides of the aisle and I am looking forward to working with her for the benefit of all Oregonians.”

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