

# Mill City Times

covering the central riverfront neighborhoods of minneapolis

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## Never on the Sidelines: An Interview with State Representative Phyllis Kahn

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2016 AT 4:11PM | [DAVID TINJUM](#) | [SHARE ARTICLE](#)



*Above: St. Catherine student, Alexandra Kerlin, interviews Rep. Phyllis Kahn*

The phrase, “All politics is local,” is commonly associated with the legendary Massachusetts Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill who entered the political fray back in 1935. The phrase implies that a politician’s success is directly tied to her ability to understand and influence the issues of her constituents, sometimes mundane and everyday, rather than focusing on more universal concerns.

However there are times when this principle is out of whack with reality – for example when large issues that impact society as a whole intersect the lives of those living in a defined geographic area.

Such seems to be the track record of Minnesota State Representative Phyllis Kahn, who for the past 21 years has represented District 60B, which covers a large swath of both the west and east sides of the Central Riverfront including St. Anthony Main and the entire University of Minnesota campus.

While dutifully serving the needs of this lush riverfront district by obtaining funding for parks, trails, historic preservation, and the expansion of community and urban forests, Kahn has also fought indefatigably for such universal issues as health, environment, and women’s rights, setting precedents that expand to lives of citizens beyond our modest borders.

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## Parks & Landmarks

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[35W Bridge Memorial](#) ↗

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Entering politics in 1972 when women were mostly relegated to the roles of wife and mother Kahn had already experienced gender bias head on.

“Oh yes, there are more than a few incidents of pure gender discrimination in my journey. Early on, while applying for grad school a male interviewer told me there was no hope for me – that I should just go home and be a housewife. Later, after I’d proved him wrong, I still had to use the name of a male colleague in order to apply for a prestigious grant in my field of science.”

Kahn won that grant earning her doctorate in the male dominated field of biophysics from Yale University and a Master of Public Health from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. And, yes, Phyllis Kahn was a wife and mother of two!

This past Monday I sat with Kahn and St. Catherine student, Alexandra Kerlin, at Wilde Roast Café in St. Anthony Main to learn more about her long career in public service and her views on science, technology, public health and women’s rights.

Opportunely, Kerlin questioned Kahn on a more personal note about how someone her age, specifically a young woman, could make a difference in society, and Kahn presented an equally personal three-pronged response.

“First of all,” she advised, “never be afraid to be involved. Don’t be relegated to the back of the room and *always* encourage other women. We need to support each other.”

But, Kahn added, for women to raise the bar they must also create strong coalitions across the board.

“I learned early in my legislative career how to form strong alliances with my fellow legislators, male and female, Democrat and Republican. One piece of legislation of which I’m very proud was forged with Republican Keith Downey. Together we hammered out a law to revamp the State’s antiquated computer systems, thereby facilitating more open, transparent and accessible communications for elected officials, staffers and citizens alike. This kind of lawmaking can only happen when you forge solid working relationships across the aisle and the gender divide.”

Finally, Kahn strongly advocates that ordinary citizens become involved in the political process. “That is one certain way to make a difference.”

The more people participate – the more democratic is our society. The most obvious way to do that this week is for all Minnesotans to find their caucus locations and get involved. You can do this by finding your local site. The Secretary of State’s office has prepared a handy [caucus finder](#) and there is an [online caucus tip sheet](#) prepared by a former Capitol staffer.

Kahn, who is running for another term, understands the value and the impact of full throttle involvement. Attending Minnesota’s legendary caucus process allows every citizen to hear and be heard.

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