



Tammy Baldwin.

Baldwin, Tammy (b. 1962)

by Linda Rapp

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The first out lesbian elected to the United States Congress, and the first out gay United States Senator, Democratic legislator Tammy Baldwin has been a strong supporter of glbtq rights, but she is far from a one-issue politician. Because of her solid record on such concerns as health care, the environment, education, and farming, her constituents in Wisconsin elected her to seven terms in the House of Representatives and then to the United States Senate.

Baldwin grew up in the home of her maternal grandparents. Her mother divorced her father soon after Baldwin's birth on February 11, 1962 and moved back to her parents' house with her infant daughter.

When Baldwin was nine years old her mother remarried. Her stepfather was African-American, and Baldwin recalled that when they were out in public together he was frequently stopped and questioned about what he was doing with a "blond, blue-eyed kid." Baldwin stated that this helped her to "understand the allocation of privilege in our society."

For much of Baldwin's childhood her mother struggled with an addiction to prescription medications, but she was eventually able to overcome the problem and become a counselor to others. Baldwin has expressed pride in her mother for rising to the challenge. Her family experience has made her aware of both the financial and emotional toll of addiction and has contributed to her commitment to make adequate health care available to all Americans.

Baldwin graduated first in her class at Madison West High School in 1980 and went on to Smith College, from which she received a bachelor's degree in 1984 with a double major in government and mathematics.

After her undergraduate studies Baldwin returned to Wisconsin, where she soon began her political career. In 1986 she was elected to the Dane County Board of Supervisors for the first of four terms. She ended her service there in 1994. At the same time she continued her education, earning a law degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1989. She practiced law for the next three years.

Baldwin made her first bid for state office in 1992. Her victory put her into the Wisconsin State Assembly, to which she was reelected twice.

In 1998 Baldwin set her sights on the national scene. In a close contest she won election to the House of Representatives, becoming both the first woman from Wisconsin and the first openly lesbian woman elected to the United States Congress.

As a congresswoman Baldwin has been a strong supporter of glbtq rights. She has spoken out in favor of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA) and federal hate crime legislation. She has been a visible and articulate opponent of initiatives to limit the definition of marriage to unions between heterosexual couples.

These stances are important to Baldwin because of her own experiences as a lesbian, but her political agenda is much more diverse. Some of her other priorities also reflect situations that she has encountered herself.

Among Baldwin's main concerns is health care reform. She has seen her beloved grandmother grow frail and in need of extensive help, some of which Baldwin herself has had to provide. Her understanding of the need for family members to provide for each other has made her a champion not only of the care of the elderly but also of day care for children.

A lifelong resident of the upper midwest, Baldwin is distressed by the degradation of the environment in her home region and throughout the country. Her record for supporting ecologically responsible legislation is unsurpassed.

Education is also an important issue to Baldwin, whose district is the site of seven universities and colleges, including the main campus of the University of Wisconsin.

Baldwin's commitment to students has been rewarded with strong support from that segment of her constituency. She has spoken on campuses to encourage young people to get involved in the political process, and they have responded enthusiastically, volunteering in large numbers to support her runs for Congress.

Students made a difference in the 2000 election, Baldwin's closest campaign. She won with 51 percent of the vote to her Republican opponent's 49, but had a substantial lead among university students.

Baldwin's lesbianism became an issue in the election of 2002, when some 20,000 households in her district received postcards with a photograph of two men embracing and the printed question "Is this Tammy Baldwin's vision for Wisconsin?" The card encouraged voters to thank her conservative Republican opponent, Ron Greer, "for standing up to protect marriage and Wisconsin families."

Greer denied association with the mailing, which had been done by a Virginia-based organization called Public Advocate of the United States, which in turn claimed that Greer was unaware of their efforts on his behalf. Greer had, however, sent out fundraising letters condemning Baldwin's supposed "radical homosexual agenda."

The homophobic tactics failed, and Baldwin was returned to congress. She won again in 2004 with a decisive 63 percent of the vote.

In the House of Representatives, Baldwin served on the Budget and Judiciary Committees as well as the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Baldwin entered into a committed relationship with Lauren Azar, an environmental lawyer, in 1996 and subsequently formed a domestic partnership with her when they became available in Wisconsin.

On May 28, 2010, however, Baldwin's press secretary issued a statement announcing that the couple had ended their relationship and would terminate their domestic partnership, adding that "Neither Tammy nor Lauren will have any further public comment on this very private matter."

Throughout her political career Baldwin has worked vigorously on many issues, but she is mindful that she is doing so in the context of being a lesbian. In a 1999 interview she recalled a telephone call that she had received six years prior, on the day of her inauguration in the Wisconsin State Assembly. A young man from the northern part of the state told her that he had never heard of her before reading a story in the morning paper, but he said in a "nervous, shaky voice," "I want you to know that I feel differently about myself today."

Baldwin described the call as "very moving," adding that she understood the "symbolic importance" of her election as a glbtq person and for glbtq people. She resolved "to challenge stereotypes" and be an advocate for the whole panoply of her constituents.

"When a senior in our district says, 'That Tammy Baldwin's fighting for my Social Security,'" she commented, "everything else that I am is secondary because what I'm doing is fighting for her."

In 2012, Baldwin announced plans to run for the United States Senate, a risky move in that she was widely regarded as too liberal for her ideologically divided state. Moreover, the run would involve giving up her safe seat in the House for an uncertain future.

She swept to victory in the Democratic primary, but then had to face not only her Republican opponent Tommy Thompson, a former four-time governor and cabinet member who enjoyed considerable name recognition, but the implacable opposition of well-funded super-pacs that targeted the Wisconsin seat as an easy gain for the Republicans.

Although she was initially a distinct underdog, as the race developed, it was viewed by many pundits as a toss-up, with neither candidate establishing a durable lead. Throughout the campaign Thompson tried to portray Baldwin as an extreme liberal, while she ran proudly on her progressive record and on her support for President Obama.

In the end, Baldwin gained momentum, and she defeated Thompson by a margin of 51 to 46 percent.

After her victory Baldwin stated that she was "well aware" of the historic nature of her election to the Senate, both as the first woman elected from Wisconsin and as the first openly gay person ever elected to the Senate. But, she declared, "I didn't run to make history, I ran to make a difference." She cited helping "families struggling to find work" and "seniors worried about their retirement security" as among her priorities.

Nevertheless, her election was widely celebrated in the glbtq community, both because of her personal popularity and because of the milestone she achieved. Coming as it did on the same night that President Obama, who had earlier announced his support for marriage equality, was re-elected and marriage equality measures were passed in Maine, Maryland, and Washington, her election was interpreted as further evidence of the increasing acceptance of gay people in the United States.

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