



Jewish Chicagoan of the Year 2009
REP. SARA FEIGENHOLTZ: Compassionate wonk



Rep. Sara Feigenholtz

In her 15 years in the Illinois legislature, Rep. Sara Feigenholtz has become known for championing legislation in such fields as health care, women's issues, stem cell research and adoption. The reasons, she says, lie deep in her childhood.

Feigenholtz likes to tell a story that illustrates, she says, "what brought me to public service." It starts with her late mother, Florence Buky M.D., an extraordinary Jewish woman who graduated from medical school in 1932, at a time when no hospital would allow a woman on its staff.

"One day, when I was a small child, this person came knocking on our door just as we were finishing dinner," Feigenholtz recalls. It was a man with a very ill child, whom Dr. Buky examined and treated on the family's kitchen table. Many years later, in the last weeks of her mother's life, a man came to visit her in the hospital while Feigenholtz was there. It was the father of the child, coming to thank the dying woman for saving the

toddler's life.

"When somebody tells you something like that, it kind of closes the circle," Feigenholtz, who is 52 but looks at least a decade younger, observes. "It's experiences like that, knowing that health care is a right and not a privilege, that drove me to fight for the voiceless and gave me a desire to be a public servant."

Her Jewish background influenced her in the same direction. "Judaism has very much been a guiding light in my life, has very much driven what I do and how I operate," she says. She soaked up a Jewish background not only at home, but at the schools she attended, Arie Crown Hebrew Day School and Ida Crown Jewish Academy.

Feigenholtz went on to graduate from Northeastern University, then briefly worked for the Israeli Consulate - "the last 'job job' I had," she says with a smile. Her political life began shortly afterwards, including serving as chief of staff to Illinois Sen. John Cullerton for a number of years. Since 1994, she has represented Chicago's 12th District, which includes the neighborhoods of Lakeview, Lincoln Park and the Near North Side.

Earlier this year, she set her sights on a bigger prize, the U.S. House seat that was vacated by Rahm Emanuel. She lost in the primary, but says she has not given up on the idea of joining her friend and colleague from the Illinois legislature, President Barack Obama, in Washington.

"There's a part of me that is considering other things I could do to contribute, while Barack Obama and many of my other friends are working in Washington, to make life better for people in Illinois, which was ultimately my goal in the first place," Feigenholtz says, noting her attachment to "geeky-wonky-nichy stuff but also some broad-based stuff," particularly concerning health care issues.

For now, though, describing herself as "unmarried for the first time" in a number of years, she's content to shuttle back and forth between Chicago and Springfield, where she chairs the House Human Services, Appropriations and Adoption Reform committees. In Chicago, many progressive, involved and informed constituents - and her elderly, beloved cat, Habibi - await her return.

Feigenholtz's presence on the Adoption Reform committee is particularly significant to her. She was adopted herself; meeting her birth mother years later, she discovered that her adoptive mother (whom she considers her "real" mother) had delivered her and her brother, then gone on to give the children the kind of life their birth mothers were not able to.

So that other adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents could have similarly positive experiences, she has sponsored model legislation dealing with adoption that other states have copied, including a bill that made Illinois one of the first states in the country where all adoptions are strictly not-for-profit. "I think I've improved the system, but we still have a long way to go," she says.

That goes for many areas, especially health care, and while she admits that she's looking toward Washington as a new arena, her priorities will remain the same wherever she is. Looking back over her career, she says, "it's been a great ride." But she's not getting off the train just yet.