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Long ready for first term



By Christopher Sardelli

Deborah Long has gone back to school.

In preparation for her first term as the state House District 45 representative, and armed with a 4-inch notebook crammed full of duties, expectations and House rules, Long, a Republican, traveled to Columbia last week for her “freshman orientation.”

“It’s just like going back to school with all the papers and pencils. I felt like all I needed was to bring a bag lunch and an apple for the teacher,” Long said.

Long spent almost two days with the rest of her freshman class, other representatives elected to their first terms, learning the ins and outs of the State House. There, she listened to several panel discussions and learned both the rules for conduct and tips for surviving the freshman year.

“The subjects are serious, but they try to make it fun,” Long said. “They stressed that constituent service is why you are here and they can help us do that.”

Long, 53, recently won the District 45 seat against Democratic challenger Fred Thomas, a County Council member from Lancaster.

She made history by winning the race. She will be the first woman to represent Lancaster County in the State House.

Long said she’s proud of the way the two ran their respective campaigns, placing a priority on the issues and steering away from dirty politics.

She only spoke to Thomas briefly on election night, but she said they both respected each other from the beginning. In fact, they promised after the election to pick up each other’s campaign signs if they came across them.

Her campaign, she said, was definitely a learning experience.

“Being a novice at it, I go through and look back on it and say this is what I should’ve done,” Long said. “But I liked the results, to get a district of people to give you the honor of serving them in the State House.”

She isn’t sure what committees she’ll be assigned to, but knows she’ll support the issues she discussed throughout her campaign, such as education funding and tax reform.

First on Long’s agenda is to familiarize herself with the various organizations and procedures at the

State House.

“With 124 people in there, your vote is less than 1 percent of the vote,” Long said. “You have to learn to work together and cultivate relationships.”

A family matter

Something Long was dealing with during her campaign had nothing to do with education issues or public policy, but instead the health of her husband, Jim.

For months, he had not been feeling well, but they didn't know the full extent of his problem until Labor Day.

That's when her husband was told he'd need a heart transplant.

He was placed on a transplant list, and only five weeks later, received his new heart.

The couple, who have been married for more than 27 years, decided to keep the matter private during the campaign.

“He's already feeling better,” Long said. “He'll be getting back to things soon. He already feels much better than he has in a couple of years.”

Interest in health care

Born in Chapel Hill, N.C., Long moved with her family several times while she was young before finally settling in Gastonia, N.C.

In between, her family lived in Atlanta and as far away as Chicago.

She attended the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and graduated with a degree in biology in 1976.

Soon after, she attended a four-year program at the Southern College of Optometry in Memphis, Tenn., and graduated with a doctorate in 1980.

She always had a desire to work in the health-care field, but originally wanted to be a veterinarian.

It was only after she was introduced to a family friend who was an optometrist that she found her calling. She's now the owner of Fort Mill Vision Center.

“I thought it was kind of cool working with eyes and helping people see better,” Long said.

Settling in Indian Land

After finishing her schooling to become an optometrist, Long knew she wanted to move back to the Carolinas.

She wasn't sure where to move to until a doctor friend asked her to fill in at his Fort Mill practice while he was on vacation.

She said she “fell in love” with the area and moved to Indian Land in 1988.

There, she helped raise her stepchildren, Phil and Leta, who are both grown and have children of their own now.

Interest in politics

Long said her interest in politics began during the 1990s while traveling back and forth to Columbia as a member of the S.C. Optometric Association.

She worked to get legislation passed crucial to her group, and eventually served as president of the association.

Earlier this year she sat down with Mick Mulvaney, the incumbent District 45 representative who was then planning to run for the state Senate District 16 seat, which Greg Gregory was going to step down from after four terms.

The two discussed who should run for District 45 seat.

Long initially suggested her husband, but Mulvaney suggested she run instead. After “mulling it over,” Long decided to throw her hat in the ring.

Like Long, Mulvaney, also a Republican, won in his race.

Long is glad she made the choice to seek the House seat.

“Sometimes you have to step up to the plate and say I’ll give it a shot,” she said.

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