

Prince George's County Delegate Melony Griffith:
Clinical Social Worker in the Maryland Assembly

Margot Aronson

Delegate Melony Ghee Griffith, LCSW-C, reflects on the impact her social work training and experience has on her legislative work. "I use my social work skills all the time: problem solving; connecting resources; building consensus; looking at the systems." As a social worker, she says, she starts with people: who will be affected by this change in legislation? Who might be hurt? What are the unintended consequences?

We met with Del. Griffith – GWSCSW lobbyist Alice Neily, Legislative Council co-chair Betsy Amey, and I – on a cold morning in early December, well before the frenetic pace of the legislative session had begun.

From January to April, Del Griffith spends long hours in Annapolis representing District 25, Prince George's County, in the Maryland General Assembly. She balances her political role with her full time job as Director of the Prince George's County Center for Healthy Life Style Initiatives (CHLI) and her busy family (she and her ??? husband have two ??? sons).

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"I grew up in an air force family, always moving," she told us. Born in Texas. High school and college in Montana. She came East for an MSW at Howard University (1987), and here she decided to put down roots.

"Politics was not on the horizon, but then I bought my first house. It was in Suitland, Maryland, and I loved the neighborhood. But I'd barely moved in when I was robbed... four times! And I decided I didn't want to move." Instead, she worked with others to start a Neighborhood Watch program.

“That was the beginning. We met with other Neighborhood Watch groups and found that our block wasn’t the only one with these problems; it was citywide.” She was asked to take the message to wider community meetings, where she got to know local resources and civic organizations. Soon she was working to organize a Suitland Crime Action Team, equipped with federally funded cell phones and neighborhood police patrols.

One reason it was hard to get the County to invest its resources in Suitland, she surmised, was that there was only a 20% local turnout at election time. She became a voter registration volunteer and started a voter education campaign.

By now she was being urged to run for County Council, but it was the State level that beckoned. After an unsuccessful first run for the Assembly, she ran a Statewide voter registration drive for the Democrats. While she lost in the next election, she garnered an impressive 4600 write-in ballots and gained the political attention she needed to win in the 1998 election.

Her proudest political achievement, she says, came in 2004 when she was chairing a Joint Working Group on Public School Construction. On a bill that was at first strongly opposed by labor, Del. Griffith used her social work skills (plus an amendment she requested the Assembly’s “phenomenal policy analysts and research staff” to develop) to bring everyone to the table in agreement. “And this legislation had the potential of helping everyone: the children, the teachers, the housekeepers, the laborers... the whole community.”

Elected in 1998 and again in 2002, Del. Griffith now serves on the Appropriations Committee and the Special Joint Commission on Pensions. Her subcommittees include transportation and the environment, public safety and administration, and she’s vice chair of the capital budget subcommittee. During her first term, she was on the Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families “and it would have been obvious, with my social work background, to stick with that. But I’ve never wanted to be a stereotype – the typical female,

typical black, typical social worker. No, I want to be able to stretch myself," she says.

Still, she'll be paying close attention to what's proposed for child welfare, for juvenile services, for prevention and health education programs. She'll also be following the trail of those infamous "excess" social work license dollars taken from the Board of Social Work Education last year for a proposed Child Welfare Academy that hasn't materialized.

Most of all, Del. Griffith says, she wants to be seen as "fiscally prudent and socially responsible." Pay-as-you-go makes sense to her. "It's the balance that's so important," she reminds us: on the one hand, the distribution of resources but on the other, as a fiscal leader, protecting resources.

Before our meeting ended, we asked what Del. Griffith would like from Social Workers. Her answer was clear: get out there; participate in career days in elementary schools and high schools; let people know what social workers do. "We paid to learn how to be social workers; I want people to know and respect that. Too many people think of social workers only in crisis." She added, "And by the way, we have to attract new life to the profession!"

Wife and mother, clinical social worker, community activist, delegate to the Maryland Assembly. Melony Griffith promotes healthy lifestyle choices as CHLI Director and herself lives a life rich in family, community, and service. It will be a pleasure to watch – and support -- her progress in Maryland politics.

GWSCSW past president Margot Aronson, LICSW, is editor of News & Views. She is currently serving as temporary chair of the Legislative Committee, and urges interested members to become involved.