Profile:
Sue Kelly, Advocate for Half a Million New Yorkers

by Debra Hornstra, M.A.

It is just over 50 scenic miles from the Westchester County Medical Center, at the southern tip of her district, to Sue Kelly's main office in Fishkill, New York. I clocked the distance as I drove there in September to interview Kelly, my Congresswoman and a 1985 graduate of the Health Advocacy Program. As I traveled almost due north through Westchester and Putnam counties, the landscape got greener, the hills started to rise and swoop, and exit ramps and other signs of civilization all but disappeared. The journey's upward trend in elevation caused my ears to pop just as I crossed into Dutchess, by which time New York, Yonkers and even White Plains seemed far, far away.

Congresswoman Kelly's office sits behind a Taco Bell off a divided highway filled with similar establishments. On the day I visited, the activity level inside was high but things were very much in control. Phones rang steadily and youngish aides remained in almost constant motion as they attended to matters high and low. I was a bit early, so I flipped through the military and senior citizen magazines available in the outer office, and took note of the many citations on the Congresswoman's walls.

I already knew something about Sue Kelly's eclectic brand of politics. In her very first campaign for elected office in 1994, Kelly, then 58, defeated Hamilton Fish 3d, and was sent to Washington to represent the half million people of New York's 19th Congressional district. Mr. Fish was the son of the retiring Congressman, but he was also the former publisher of The Nation, and much more liberal than his father. Ideologically, it was Kelly, and not the heir apparent, who conveyed the values of the elder Hamilton Fish, and that's what voters wanted.

Kelly's 1996 re-election campaign was notable for the way she outclassed upstart challenger Joseph DioGuardi for the Republican nomination before defeating a relatively weak Democratic opponent in political newcomer Richard Klein, M.D. DioGuardi, running on the Conservative and Right-to-Life tickets, had moved to the 19th district specifically to challenge incumbent Kelly for the nomination. DioGuardi's strategy was essentially to brand her with the dreaded labels "liberal" and "radical" for her support of abortion rights and lifting the ban on fetal tissue research, as well as her vote to keep funding the National Endowment for the Arts. It didn't work.

Kelly has indeed proved herself quite electable in her district, which includes all of Westchester north of White Plains, Putnam county, and parts of Dutchess and Orange counties. Voters here have consistently supported candidates of either party who favor conservative economic approaches and relatively liberal social policies . Kelly's ideas are a concoction of liberal and conservative thinking that goes down well with the locals.

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A doctor's daughter, Kelly grew up in Ohio, where she majored in botany and bacteriology at Denison University. She met her husband, real estate developer Edward Kelly, while working as a researcher at Harvard. The couple raised four children in Katonah while the future Congresswoman forged an active civic life: she founded the Bedford chapter of the League of Women Voters, served a stint as president of her children's PTA, and held leadership positions in organizations as diverse as the American Association of University Women, the Westchester County Board of Tourism, and the Bedford Presbyterian Church. For decades, Kelly was also actively involved in local Republican politics, and she ran a couple of small businesses, including a flower shop.

Kelly continued her education, finishing two years of law school at Pace University, and later pursuing a Master's in Health Advocacy at Sarah Lawrence. She completed the program in 1985 and took a fulltime job as a patient representative at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. Kelly had done her final placement at St. Luke's, spending a lot of time in the emergency room, a rewarding experience that led her to become a rape crisis counselor.

While at St. Luke's, Kelly concluded that "the best patient representatives can swallow their own power, put themselves in someone else's shoes, and 'feel their pain.'" While acknowledging that empathy has become something of a cliché, Kelly maintains that the most effective patient reps she knew "could walk away after having dealt with a patient and have a good cry."

Congresswoman Kelly's approach to patient advocacy hardly ends at the tissue box, however. "Patient representatives should look at hospitals as an organic whole," she suggests. "When I was a patient representative I found myself advocating for the overworked, underpaid doctors and nurses as much as for the patients themselves." Some of that took the form of lobbying the hospital board for more money. Kelly is concerned about the trend toward downsizing patient representative departments. "I think cutting back on patient representative departments sends the wrong message to patients, and I bet my bottom dollar that as patient representative departments are cut back, there will be more lawsuits."

Later, Kelly returned to Sarah Lawrence to teach Health Advocacy II, using the book she says was most influential during her own advocacy training, *Getting to Yes*, which presents a strategy for coming to agreements developed by the Harvard Negotiation Project. (Kelly says she uses the techniques in this book "all the time," and

particularly recommends re-reading it if you're called to jury duty!)

In 1994, newly-minted Congresswoman Kelly went to Washington with 71 other Republican freshmen, many of them washed in with the tide that was Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." Kelly signed the Contract, but her voting record still reveals no particular form of political correctness. She generally votes pro-business and anti-tax, but she supported the minimum wage increase in 1996; her record on the environment is mixed.

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Kelly is a champion of deregulation; she thinks the unemployed and uninsured will benefit most from business-friendly policies that allow entrepreneurs to create jobs that pay good wages and offer health benefits. In her capacity as Chair of the Subcommittee on Regulatory Reform and Paperwork Reduction, Kelly works to lessen the administrative burden on small businesses and thereby free them for more productive and socially useful activities.

She is tough on crime and illegal drug use and a strong defender of the right to bear arms. Kelly is on record as favoring expansion of the federal death penalty, more federal prisons, and limits on appeals by death row prisoners. In 1996, after she reversed herself to support the repeal of the assault rifle ban, the National Rifle Association told gun owners to "enthusiastically lend their support to Sue Kelly, who," they said, has "consistently supported us at every opportunity."

But the Congresswoman also favors increased funding of homeless shelters, low income housing projects, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers. She wants tax incentives for companies that hire and train homeless people and an increased tax deduction for individuals who contribute to charities that help the poor. Kelly is against imposing time limits on welfare recipients. She likes term limits and the flat tax, and was one of only five Republicans who voted with President Clinton against the ban on so-called partial birth abortion, which she once called a decision between "a woman, her doctor and her God."

In other health matters, Congresswoman Kelly has distinguished herself as an outspoken advocate of the rights of senior citizens. Seniors, Kelly notes, "grew up in another world, and they have different expectations." As she said in her address to the 1996 Republican convention, Kelly is adamant that promises made to the elderly must be promises kept. She has consistently supported reforming Medicare to ensure its survival into the next century. In a recent poll of sixty-five special interest groups, only the 60 Plus Association gave Kelly a 100% rating. (Other groups rating Kelly at 90% or above were the National Abortion Rights Action League, the Business-Industry Political Action Committee, the National Federation of Independent Business, Associated Builders and Contractors, Zero Population Growth, and the National Tax Limitation Committee.)

Kelly is also a co-sponsor of the *Women's Health and Cancer Rights Act of 1997* which she hopes will make it into law this legislative session. The act would guarantee coverage of second opinions for all forms of cancer, and ensure that doctors are not penalized by HMOs for recommending a longer than average hospital stay. (Thanks largely to pressure from U.S. Senator Alfonse D'Amato, whose Long Island base is hard-hit by breast cancer, a similar bill has already become law in New York state.)

"The health care system in the US," says Kelly, "is in such a state of flux right now that it's hard to judge whether things are good or bad. And the changes are happening too rapidly for Congress to deal with them. One thing is clear, people in this nation want freedom and flexibility. "She went on to clarify, however, that she thinks it reasonable to impose certain limitations on the freedom and flexibility afforded Medicaid recipients, "since others are paying the bills."

Congresswoman Sue Kelly credits the Health Advocacy Program with teaching her to believe in herself. "I had done a lot of things before I came to Sarah Lawrence, but I never thought of myself as strong. I never thought my opinions were important. At Sarah Lawrence, they believed in me. Not only did they believe I could do the course of study, but they believed I could hold a job and do it well. At Sarah Lawrence, I came to see myself as a strong woman.

"I would advise new graduates to consider all their options. I prefer to work inside the system because it's easier; you're not viewed as the enemy, you're viewed as an agent of change. Current students should kick back and enjoy the program, it's a wonderful program."

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Debra Hornstra, H.A. '97, writes on health topics and is currently building a Website devoted to advocacy issues. Ms. Hornstra is particularly interested in maternal/child health and seeks to incorporate an international perspective in her work.

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