Chapter 4

The Political Life

Margaret Collins Schweinhaut

Introduction to Margaret Collins Schweinhaut

Senator Schweinhaut is the longest-serving woman—and, according to many of her constituents, the most admired member—in the Maryland state legislature. She has been a member of the General Assembly for over thirty years and, since 1961, a member in the Senate. For twelve years she has chaired the Executive Nominations Committee, which reviews all gubernatorial appointments. In 1971 she was named to the Legislative Policy Committee that controls the operations of the Senate, served in this important capacity for eleven years, and was reappointed to it in 1986. Currently, she is also on the Judicial Proceedings Committee.

As a member of the Maryland legislature Senator Schweinhaut’s achievements reflect the depth and breadth of her concerns. To cite a few examples, she was author of the legislation that created a statewide public defender system; leader of the successful effort to establish a Maryland Commission on Aging and


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chairman of that commission for twenty-four years; author of an amendment that significantly broadened educational opportunities for the handicapped and disabled; chief proponent of legislation that outlawed drug paraphernalia; sponsor of legislation that broadens the protection afforded to school teachers who report instances of drug abuse; responsible for the enactment of a nursing home patient bill of rights; co-sponsor of legislation creating an office for a special prosecutor to investigate and prosecute official wrong-doing; and responsible for the enactment of an innovative program of sheltered housing for older citizens, enabling many elderly persons to maintain independent living.

In addition to her broad and intensive legislative efforts, Senator Schweinhaut is a long-time member of the League of Women Voters, a board member of both the National Council of Senior Citizens and the National Council on Aging, and a former consultant to the secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. St. Joseph’s College awarded her an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. She has been recognized for her outstanding service by such diverse groups as the Montgomery County Association for Retarded Citizens, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Knights of Columbus, the Cerebral Palsy Association, and the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce.

She is the mother of two daughters and has seven grandchildren. Now widowed, she lives in Kensington, Maryland, with her twin sister Marie McGuire Thompson, and continues to serve with distinction in the state legislature. She is seen as unbeatable in her district. Her strongest challenge came in 1978, but when her opponent suggested she was too old, the tides turned into a landslide for her. In a recent interview for the Washington Post Senator Schweinhaut brought up the 1990 elections and said she will probably seek re-election. The only concession she makes to a long-standing visual deficiency is to have a staff member read written materials aloud to her. She dictated her chapter on tape.

I have been a member of the Maryland state legislature, representing Montgomery County, since 1955, serving now in the upper house, the Senate. How did I get there? What did I do? Do I have anything to say that will help young people, especially young women, who wish to enter the political arena?