

# Praising Arizona

## A FREEWHEELING STATE SENATOR TAKES ON SUNBELT POLITICS

**I**T'S TWO WEEKS AFTER THE NOVEMBER election, and Arizona state senator Gabrielle Giffords, MRP '97, is taking her pickup truck to the mechanic. She just got back to her Tucson home from a business trip to Shanghai, and next week she's hosting her good friend Robert Reich, the former Secretary of Labor, and a pal who's a space shuttle astronaut. Also on the calendar: tours of Arizona's death row facilities and the cryogenics lab that is preserving the head of baseball great Ted Williams. "A car just drove by with a bumper sticker saying 'Viva Bush!'" she says, her clear, crisp voice cutting through the usual cell phone fuzz. "People on the East Coast talk about cultural diversity, but diversity—cultural, political, you name it—is our reality in Arizona."

On the East Coast, pundits will be debating red and blue states for four more years, but politicians have never colored inside the lines in the American West. The thirty-four-year-old Giffords is the latest in a long line of western lawmakers who have broken with tradition. She was the youngest woman ever elected to the Arizona senate when she won her first term in 2002, and the Democrat has just been re-elected to serve two more years in the Republican-controlled body. As state senator for the 28th district, which covers the Tucson neighborhoods bordering the University of Arizona campus, she represents college professors and blue-collar families, Anglos and Latinos, Democrats and Republicans. Only half of Arizona's state legislators have a college degree; Giffords has a master's—and a 1972 BMW motorcycle. Is it a coincidence that she serves the state that produced Senator John McCain, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and Wonder Woman (or at least the actress who played her,



DANIEL SNYDER

**Western style: State senator Giffords and her vintage bike make noise in Tucson.**

Lynda Carter)?

"Arizona likes mavericks," Giffords says. "My family has lived in Tucson for three generations, and I was raised to think for myself." Her grandparents owned

a gas station, and when her father took over the business, the elder Giffords enjoyed an unconventional retirement—which included road trips in their Buick Skylark that took them as far as Argentina

and explorations in nudist culture. For their granddaughter, they set an example of tolerance and global awareness that made a profound impression. Back home in Tucson, Gabrielle's father turned the gas station into El Campo Tire, a business that became an important player in the area's economy.

Growing up, Giffords learned to speak fluent Spanish, rode horses and motorcycles, and shared her mother's scholarly interest in Latin American art and culture. After studying at Claremont College in California, Giffords spent a year as a Fulbright Scholar in Mexico and then headed east for the regional planning program at Cornell. "I remember storming up Libe Slope in my cowboy boots and fringed leather jacket to beg for a stipend," she says. "I loved the international environment at Cornell, but it gave me strength to remind myself that I was from the West."

Price Waterhouse hired Giffords to work on economic development issues after she finished her degree, but she had only been at the job for a few months when she got a call from home—her father needed her help with the tire business. "When your family asks you to do something, you get in your truck and you drive back across the country and you do what you can," Giffords says.

Her graduate school friends couldn't understand why an Ivy League grad with an interest in international development would go back to Arizona to sell tires. But for Giffords, it made perfect sense. "I saw all these people who were using their degrees as planners in areas of the country or the world where they did not live—they didn't have to spend the rest of their days in the communities in which they're planning these projects," Giffords says. "Here was a chance for me to be involved with the economy of my hometown."

While working as the tire company's CEO, she became aware of the larger problems that Arizona faced. "I would open up the paper in the mornings and drink a cup of coffee before work, and here my home state was ranking forty-eighth in per capita funding for K-12 education, first in the rate of teen pregnancies," Giffords says. "I was so naïve. All I

knew is that Arizona is a great state, and people here deserve the best of opportunities, but they weren't receiving them." When her family sold the tire company in 2000, Giffords decided to run for office. "I didn't have any political background at all," she says. "But you look around and you say, if not me, then who?"

Not many young professionals are interested in state office in Arizona, where the annual salary for a senator is \$24,000. Thanks to the sale of the company, Giffords had some financial security, and in 2000 she won a spot in the Arizona House of Representatives; two years later, she moved to the State Senate. Her constituents have a broad range of backgrounds, but they share an interest in politics. In 2004, District 28 had a whopping 85 percent voter turnout. Giffords picked up two-thirds of the votes, and with a mandate like that, she's going to push on with her agenda: encouraging growth in the state's high-tech industry, establishing ties to the global marketplace, and funding education. With a Republican majority in both the Arizona house and senate, it hasn't been easy for Giffords to get her bills to the floor. "Sometimes I feel like Sisyphus," she admits. "I know that it's always going to be an uphill battle, but I just can't stop rolling that stone."

Her efforts have earned her spots on lists of the party's rising stars, such as the Democratic Leadership Council's Top 100 and Gannett News Service's Top Eight Young Leaders. Giffords can't imagine spending a lifetime in politics, though. She's concentrating on what she can achieve with the office that she holds now.

"One of my biggest accomplishments was passing a Dark Sky bill to limit light pollution," says Giffords, whose state is home to several major astronomical observatories that are threatened by the streetlights from its burgeoning population. "We have a \$100 million astronomical industry in this state. It's also important to me, though, that kids can go out in their backyards at night and look up at the stars and get a sense that we are part of a larger system. For me, it's all about connections, between us and the universe, between Arizona and the larger world."

—C.A. Carlson '93, MFA '96