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A behind-the-scenes player on state's new gun, marriage laws

Senate Democrats rely on McEvoy to help them 'react, think and come up with solutions'

BY ANDREW MALONEY

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One of the few decorations adorning the desk of Caitlyn G. McEvoy's sixth-floor office at the Illinois State Capitol is a framed card depicting Abraham Lincoln and his stovepipe hat.

"Whatever you are, be a good one," it says.

There's some dispute as to whether Lincoln was the one who actually uttered those words. But no matter the source, it's an appropriate line for McEvoy, given her mixed path to becoming an attorney and the multitude of tasks she now tackles in her role as assistant legal counsel to Senate President John J. Cullerton.

McEvoy, 29, tried on various hats as an undergraduate student at Bradley University in Peoria.

"It wasn't the type of thing where, when I was younger, I thought, 'I want to be a lawyer,'" she said.

"I really liked writing and research, and I thought journalism would be a good fit. And then I took a history class and realized, 'This is really what I'm interested in.' Then I sort of focused that more toward international relations, and then after undergrad I was thinking, 'Do I want to go get a master's or a law degree?'"

After graduation, McEvoy got a job in 2006 at what was then known as AzulaySeiden Law Group, working on immigration cases.

"That definitely solidified that I wanted to go to law

school," she said.

She attended The John Marshall Law School and graduated cum laude in 2011.

A professor at John Marshall helped her land her first job after graduation working for the Cook County Shakman complaint administrator. After a handful of months, she arrived at the Capitol in Springfield and began working for the Senate Democrats in January 2012.

This year, her second full year on the job, McEvoy worked on two of the most salient, controversial issues in Illinois politics — gun control and same-sex marriage.

Legislators at the end of 2012 were given 180 days by a federal court to pass a law allowing citizens for the first time to carry firearms in public.

Illinois was the last state in the union without some type of concealed carry law on the books, but it wasn't simply because of procrastination.

Few issues illustrate the philosophical gulf between Chicago and downstate Illinois quite like concealed carry. Coupled with ongoing gang violence in the city and last year's tragedy in Newtown, Conn. — where a gunman killed 26 children and adults at an elementary school — the politics of the issue this year were arguably at their most volatile.

But McEvoy mastered a large crop of policy nuances and, alongside Sen. Kwame Y. Raoul, began wrangling together the competing interests of the National Rifle Association,



Caitlyn G. McEvoy (left) reads legislative documents with Sen. Heather Steans on the Illinois Senate floor earlier this year. McEvoy, a staff attorney for the Senate Democrats, played a key role in the development of concealed carry and same-sex marriage proposals that passed this year.

Caitlyn G. McEvoy

Assistant Legal Counsel to Illinois Senate President John J. Cullerton

- **Career:** Cook County Shakman complaint administrator, 2011-2012; assistant legal counsel to the Illinois Senate president, 2012-present
- **Age:** 29
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 2011
- **Interests:** Road trips, traveling

Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence and both Democrats and Republicans.

After various factions filed their "wish-list" bills at the beginning of the 2013 legislative session, McEvoy charted the ins and outs of each of them and constructed color-coded spreadsheets that were enlarged and used as a visual aid and negotiation-starter for legislators and others who visited Raoul's office to talk about the issue.

"I did not have one of those conversations without Caitlyn, because there were inevitably some questions that would be asked that I wouldn't have the answers to and she would," Raoul said.

Raoul, a Chicago Democrat who also led negotiations on pension reform this year, said he leans heavily on staff members to help him fully understand all the provisions in a particular bill.

"I involve myself in a wide variety of public policy issues. It's impossible to be an expert on all of them," he said. "So you rely on staffers like Caitlyn to keep you informed and give you information that helps you react, think and come up with solutions."

In July, the legislature overrode Gov. Patrick J. Quinn's veto of the concealed carry bill passed by the General Assembly earlier in the year. The measure allows Illinoisans to carry guns in public, but contains a laundry list of places — such as schools, parks and government buildings — that are still off-limits.

McEvoy and others know the debate is far from over, as gun control and gun rights groups will continue lobbying for measures that strengthen or chip away at the law, and legal challenges playing out in the court system could also produce some of the same results.

Despite the political and policy challenges on guns, however, McEvoy said she remained optimistic throughout

negotiations.

“When you really sit down and start to talk to people, I do think everybody can agree on major things,” she said. “People across the state want safe cities. People across the state want gun violence reduced. It’s more of, ‘How can we all get there?’”

McEvoy had a similar, hands-on role in crafting a bill to legalize same-sex marriage.

Although the issue was more straightforward, a key component in making same-sex marriage legalization a reality was somewhat technical in nature — writing the bill to balance religious freedoms with fair treatment under the Human Rights Act.

If a church rents out a hall to the public, for instance, but bans a same-sex couple from using it for a reception, whose rights should be given precedent? The

language in the bill had to be tailored so that it didn’t force churches to perform ceremonies it was opposed to, but at the same time provided for fair treatment.

“The people on one side were trying to say that that provision doesn’t go far enough to protect religious institutions; we should say that it’s just a blanket decision that is up to the church,” McEvoy said.

“Whereas, on the other side they were saying, ‘Well, if you’re holding yourself out as a public accommodation, you’re subject to the protections under the Human Rights Act.’ So there was a lot of back and forth.”

Sen. Heather Steans, a Chicago Democrat who sponsored the marriage bill in the Senate, agreed that the talks between legislators, Lambda Legal, the American Civil

Liberties Union of Illinois, the Catholic Conference of Illinois and others were sometimes dizzying.

“At least three or four times, we thought everyone had agreed on the actual language, and then somebody would think about it overnight and come back with a problem, and it wasn’t just once but several times,” Steans said.

Throughout that process, she said, McEvoy put in hours of research, listened to concerns and found ways to accommodate most everyone.

“She’s a good listener and is pretty low-key and understated, but really sharp, so when she has a point, it’s always well-taken,” Steans said.

Besides some of the technical challenges, the marriage debate resonated on a different level for McEvoy than did concealed carry.

“That issue was just more

personal to me, because it’s something that I really, personally believe in,” she said.

“And I felt like that was sort of the epitome of why I went to law school, because I felt like this is something that is just and fair, and we need to do this because everybody deserves to be treated equally.”

McEvoy herself is planning on getting married next year to fellow Senate Democrat staff member David M. Usellis.

McEvoy, a native of west suburban Glendale Heights, said before going to law school she always thought she wanted to move out of state.

But now, staying in Illinois seems to have paid off.

“Who knows what would have happened if I would’ve taken another path?” McEvoy said. “But I’m happy where I am now.”