

# Gillibrand turns empathy into political stock in trade

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(Photo: J. Scott Applewhite, AP)

Former New York Gov. David Paterson first met with Kirsten Gillibrand to discuss her possible appointment to the U.S. Senate the day after "Saturday Night Live" had lampooned him as a bumbling Mr. Magoo type — a dig at his blindness.

Paterson's gubernatorial staff found the skit funny, but the governor found it "insulting with a 70 percent unemployment rate in the blind community."

Paterson asked Gillibrand what she thought.

"She said, 'Governor, you can laugh along, but you have a job, and some of these people will never have a job,'" Paterson recalled in an interview. "She completely got it."

Paterson said Gillibrand's comment wasn't the reason he later appointed her to replace Hillary Rodham Clinton in the Senate, but it helped cement his belief that she sympathizes with the voiceless.

Five-and-a-half years later, Paterson is sure he made the right choice in making the appointment. Gillibrand, he said, demonstrates "an emphasis of fighting for people who don't have a voice, and that's how I was my whole career."



Anna, center, a survivor of sexual assault, with her mother Susan, right, joins Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., left, during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, July 30, 2014, to discuss "Campus Accountability and Safety Act" that is before the Senate. Anna was an 18 year old student at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in central New York when she was sexually assaulted by fellow students at a fraternity party, just three weeks into her freshman year. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)(Photo: J. Scott Applewhite, AP)

That empathy, a quality embodied by former President Bill Clinton and to a lesser extent, his wife, has been key in helping Gillibrand build a political following.

All elected officials cultivate that image. President Ronald Reagan would invite "real people" with compelling personal tales to sit in the House gallery to put a face on the stories he told about their situations during State of the Union addresses.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie saw his popularity soar after he began bear-hugging people on the Jersey Shore who had lost homes to Hurricane Sandy.

"He literally wrapped his arms around people," said Ruth Mandel, director of the Rutgers University Eagleton Institute of Politics. "When people are afraid and scared, they want some big daddy to come in and reassure them."

Gillibrand is no big daddy. But she's learned her legislative agenda stands a better chance if backed by average Americans with compelling personal stories.

Paterson appointed Gillibrand to the Senate in January 2009 after Clinton resigned to become secretary of state.

The most important legislation Gillibrand inherited from Clinton's portfolio was the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation bill, which had languished since its introduction in the House in 2004.

Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., who had won passage of emergency aid for Hurricane Katrina victims, advised Gillibrand "to explain to them why you care. Because if you can't explain to them why you care, they will never care."

"That was really important advice," Gillibrand said. "So that's when I began to spend more time with the survivors, more time with the 9/11 heroes."

Gillibrand began working with the first responders to visit various Senate offices, the same technique Democratic Reps. Carolyn Maloney and Jerrold Nadler of Manhattan were using to push equivalent legislation in the House

The first responders brought Senate staffers to tears with their first-hand accounts of Ground Zero workers becoming sick after volunteering at the site. Positions softened.

Demolition supervisor John Feal, whose foot was crushed at Ground Zero five days after the twin towers collapsed, developed a personal relationship with Gillibrand, who offered him and other 9/11 volunteer lobbyists a Senate conference room in her Washington office suite as a base of operations.

"She sensed the urgency," Feal said. "She felt our pain and she felt our suffering. And every time I went to D.C., we brought new people that were sick. I had guys who walked the halls of Congress with oxygen tanks that are dead now. And she met a lot of them. And that was on her to get that bill passed."

Gillibrand worked closely with her New York colleague, Sen. Chuck Schumer, to overcome Republican objections to the bill's financing before it finally passed in December 2009.

"Giving these survivors, these heroes a chance to speak from their hearts and tell the world what happened to them was the most powerful advocacy in the world," Gillibrand said. "This lesson of being able to understand and feel what another person is going through and then using that emotion to fight harder for someone is something I've learned at this job. You get some training in that as a lawyer because you become an advocate, but it's not as painful, it's not as traumatic."

Former Army 1st Lt. Dan Choi describes it as "radically inclusive empathy."

Choi came out as gay on MSNBC's Rachel Maddow show in March 2009 while the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy was still in effect.

A West Point graduate who had served as an Arabic interpreter and negotiator in Iraq, Choi was immediately served with a discharge notification from the Army. He decided to publicly fight it.

A lawyer friend suggested Choi meet with another lawyer and brand-new senator — Gillibrand.

"She changed my life," Choi said. "She reminded me how important my voice can be."

With Gillibrand's help, Choi, then a member of the New York National Guard, was granted a delay in his honorable discharge until the summer of 2010. He became a leading voice in the effort to repeal "don't ask, don't tell."

Choi recalled getting "a lot of feigned empathy," but he said Gillibrand was a good listener who really understood him.

"She gets to the foundational truth of all these stories and then she sees how she can transform the victims, the survivors, the hurt, abused, the disaffected, into leaders who can use their voice," he said. "Realizing you cannot fix that past, but you can be a leader. What I get from her is a charge to become that leader who helps others."

Polls show Gillibrand has the highest favorability rating among statewide elected officials. She was re-elected in 2012 to a full six-year Senate term with a record-setting 72 percent of the vote.

Last year, Gillibrand used her position as chairwoman of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel to convene a hearing on the continuing problem of sexual assault in the military. Veterans told heart-rending stories of rape before the national media.



Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., is flanked by Sarah Plummer, left, a Marine Corps veteran and victim of sexual assault, and Kate Weber, right, a veteran who was sexually assaulted during her service in the Army, during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2013. They are joined by supporters of her proposal to let military prosecutors rather than commanders make decisions on whether to prosecute sexual assaults in the armed forces. At far left is Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., stands at far right. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)(Photo: J. Scott Applewhite, AP)

Gillibrand has worked with other members of the Armed Services Committee to enact a series of reforms. So far, though, she has failed in her effort to remove the military's chain of command from the process of deciding whether to prosecute sexual assault cases.

Gillibrand also is one of the many members of the New York and New Jersey congressional delegations who successfully fought for emergency federal aid for victims of Hurricane Sandy. She was more likely than other lawmakers to turn emotional when recounting personal stories of families who lost relatives in the storm.

As a feminist, she has emphasized family issues. She lobbied the Consumer Product Safety Commission to enact the December 2010 ban on drop-side baby cribs and led an unsuccessful effort in the Senate to block cuts in food aid for low-income families. She also is fighting an uphill battle to get paid family leave, a proposal with only a slim chance of passage any time soon.

Annie Clark and Andrea Pino, co-founders of End Rape on Campus, visited Gillibrand's office in March because of her work on military sexual assaults. They subsequently arranged an hour-long meeting with Gillibrand in May — their first face-to-face discussion with a member of the Senate.

"She definitely cares," said Clark, a former University of North Carolina student. "It's not just that a PR façade. She's invested, not only in her constituents but issues she is passionate about."

End Rape on Campus and other sexual assault survivor groups worked with Gillibrand and other senators on the Campus Accountability and Safety Act introduced July 30. Gillibrand has become the lawmaker whom sexual assault victims go to for information about the bill.

"Some of them come to us to talk about what happened to them," Gillibrand said. "Some say, 'I want to help in any way I can.' Some just stand behind others. We had a young woman when we did our press conference in New York City who wasn't ready to tell her story but afterward she said, 'I really wish I had told my story. When I heard those other girls speak up, I felt like I should speak up.' We are very careful to let people do what they want to do."

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