

## Values into Action

### Senator Barbara Mikulski

The longest-serving woman in the history of the U.S. Congress, Barbara Mikulski began her political career when she was elected in 1971 to the Baltimore City Council, where she served for five years. In 1976 she was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and then in 1986 to the U.S. Senate, where in 2012 she became the first woman to chair the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee. She currently serves as vice chair of that committee as well as a senior member of both the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. Mikulski also holds the unofficial post of Dean of Senate Women, a role in which she mentors new women senators and forms coalitions among women senators of both parties. As Mikulski explains here, her career is rooted in a commitment to serving others, a value she learned as a child growing up in a close-knit Baltimore neighborhood.



#### Born to serve

I became a social worker because of the values I learned from my family, like listening to people and seeing how you could be of help. When I was growing up, my mother and father had a little neighborhood grocery store. Every day, my father would open up the doors saying, "Good morning, can I help you?" That's the way I was raised.

And it's those values of neighbor helping neighbor

that I take with me to the Senate each day.

#### Following my strengths

Growing up, I wanted to be a scientist. My parents took me to see a movie about Madame Marie Curie, the first woman to win the Nobel Prize. I quickly learned, though, that science was not my calling. Although I went with my strengths and became a social worker, I haven't lost my love for science. And now as a U.S. Senator, I sit on the committee that funds our great science agencies like the National Institutes of Health.

#### Birth of a community organizer

I wanted to make a difference in the lives of people. I was working as a social worker in Baltimore, helping at-risk children, when I learned that some powerful people were going to run a 16-lane highway through older ethnic neighborhoods. They were going to take people's homes and not even give them money to find another.

We organized a group of all the different ethnic groups. I worked with SCAR—the Southeast Council Against the Road. I stood in the path of the expressway and said, "The British couldn't take Fells Point, the termites couldn't take Fells Point, and, by God, the State Roads Commission can't take Fells Point!" And you know what? We won.

#### Opening doors

The road fight sparked an interest in working for communities from the inside. We won by knocking on doors. But when I knocked on the doors of City Hall, they didn't listen. I learned I would rather be opening doors for others from the inside than knocking on doors from the outside.

It was a turning point for me. It wasn't about the highway, it was about saving neighborhoods.

I ran for City Council and took on the political bosses and beat them. This led the way to the House of Representatives and then the U.S. Senate.

#### Local politics

My goal has always been to serve the day-to-day needs of Marylanders and the long-range needs of the nation. I have never forgotten my roots and have always made my home in Baltimore.

I've put my values into action. Patriotism. Hard work. Neighbor helping neighbor. Those are the values I learned growing up. I carry them with me every day.

Throughout my career, I've gone home each night to the city of Baltimore. From city activist to United States Senator, I've always believed that all politics and policy is local.

I am proud to be the Senator *from* Maryland and the Senator *for* Maryland.

#### Points of pride

I have a strong belief in constituent service and staying close to the people. I've focused on supporting jobs and opportunity for families and communities.

I fought to pass the Spousal Anti-Impoverishment Act, so the cruel rules of government didn't force people into

bankruptcy when they had to turn to a nursing home for their spouse or loved ones. For young people, I've supported national service by working to create AmeriCorps. And I have worked for access to quality education to prepare them for successful futures.

I led passage of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in 2009 as a down payment toward equal pay for equal work, and am continuing to fight to pass my Paycheck Fairness Act to finish the job and end pay discrimination once and for all. I've worked across the aisle to support women's health. That means fighting to save lives by breaking down the barriers to scientific research and opening up access to healthcare.

And I've never stopped fighting for Maryland. Cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay. Fighting for jobs at the Port of Baltimore. Looking out for federal employee jobs like those at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center. Doubling funding at the National Institutes of Health.

For me, it's never been about how long I serve, but how well I serve the people of Maryland and the nation.

### Circle of power

As Dean of Senate Women, I've worked to create a zone of civility among Democratic and Republican women. We have a monthly dinner together where we have three rules: no staff, no memos, and no leaks. We talk about everything from our hair to the hair-raising!

At a historic 20 women serving in the Senate, we're not a caucus, but we are a force. We've shown that we can disagree without being disagreeable.

### Get in the game

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand has a book and organization called *Get Off the Sidelines*. And that's what I think we need to say to inspire our future leaders. They think all the battles have been won, or that if you can Google it, it will be solved.

We need to show that politics is local, and if you want to get involved, you need to find your passion at the local level.

We need to tell our young people, especially young women, to get off the sidelines. Because each one of us can make a difference, and together, we make change.



In November 2015, President Obama awarded Senator Mikulski the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award of the United States.

### Attention future leaders

First off, nobody does it alone. You don't get to be "me" without a whole lot of "we." That can be your parents, your teachers, and institutions such as your school or library.

Second, there are always teachers in some surprising places. Be sure to look for them.

Third, road blocks and detours are just geopositioning systems to put you on a new road, which can turn out to be the right road. I wasn't good at science like my hero Madame Marie Curie, so I became a social worker, and that's what put me on a path to City Council, the House, and the Senate.

Finally, every time you hear "No," turn it into "Yes!" I heard, "No, you can't stop that road! You can't win that election!" I said, "Yes, I can stop that road. And yes I can run against the political machine for City Council—and win!" ■

Learn more about Barbara Mikulski online at [congress.gov](http://congress.gov).