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The real Mary Burke: How longtime friends and business partners describe her



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MIKE DeVRIES — The Capital Times

Mary Burke listens to a question at a WisPolitics luncheon held at the Madison Club.

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April 16, 2014 1:00 pm • By [Jack Craver](#) | The Capital Times

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Jack Craver



Jack Craver

Jack Craver joined The Capital Times in January 2012 to write about state and local politics. As a UW-Madison student, he founded a local political blog, The Sconz, which became a popular source of news and commentary on campus, city and state issues.

Allen Sperry remembers the way one of his Harvard classmates described their mutual friend from Wisconsin.

"He said, 'If I was living in a log cabin on the prairie and we were being attacked by bandits, the one person I'd want with me is Mary Burke,'" recalls Sperry, now a New York investor.

"She would have a baby in one hand and a gun in another," he jokes.

Sperry's take on Burke, the presumed Democratic nominee for governor, contrasts starkly with the image constructed of

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her by allies of her opponent. Supporters of Gov. Scott Walker have sought to portray the "Madison millionaire," as they refer to Burke, as spineless and incompetent.

Even many of those inclined to support Burke worry that her campaign is boring and wimpy. She has barely mentioned the fact that Walker's staff has been the subject of at least two investigations, the first of which led to three of his close aides being convicted of ethics offenses.

Wisconsinites still haven't formed much of an opinion of Burke, a current member of the Madison School Board who spent two years, from 2005 to 2007, as secretary of commerce under former Gov. Jim Doyle. Her resume also includes 12 years, during two different stints, as an executive at Trek Bicycle, the company her father founded in the 1970s.

Still, a poll conducted at the end of March by Marquette University Law School indicated that most Wisconsin voters are unfamiliar with the presumed Democratic nominee. That's not particularly surprising; it is still early in the race and Burke's campaign has barely begun to run ads, which is how many casual voters are introduced to candidates.

But among those who have dealt with the 54-year-old Madisonian as a businesswoman, philanthropist and public servant, the overwhelming response is positive. They describe her as a tireless worker, a humble and generous friend and, above all, extremely smart and analytical. Even those who have pushed to get a candidate to challenge her in a Democratic primary express respect for her, suggesting she may be winning over her detractors from the left.

"She never trumpets her own success"



Democratic gubernatorial candidate Mary Burke listens to Chris Meyer, founder of Sector67, during a tour in March.

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"I'm sure she was far and away one of the smartest people in our class," recalls Sperry, who met Burke as a classmate at Harvard Business School in 1983. After graduating from Georgetown with a degree in business and finance in 1981, Burke spent two years working at a management consulting firm in Washington D.C. before entering business school.

In describing Burke, Sperry emphasizes her analytical skills and ability to process large amounts of information. It was those mental tools, he says, that landed her a top job at consulting giant McKinsey & Company after grad school.

At Harvard, where grades were largely based on class participation, Burke's hand was always the first to shoot up, Sperry says. She was always prepared to make a case for a particular business decision.

"You could tell who are the people who know what they're talking about, and Mary was always one of those people," he says. "When she talks about accounting and finance, she really knows what she's talking about."

It was his confidence in Burke's abilities that inspired him to quit his job at Drexel Burnham Lambert, a top Wall Street investment banking firm, to start a business with her. Burke had spent three years as CFO of Intrepid Corporation, Trek's parent company.

The concept of the company, "Manhattan Intelligence," seems ludicrous in the Google era. But in 1989, hiring 15 workers to compile reams of data on every imaginable Manhattan destination — museums, restaurants, shops, salons, hypnotists — and charging people for access to that information seemed like a solid idea.

A New York Times article in 1990 marveled at the company's potential. For \$175 a year, one would gain access to a multilingual call center that would respond to a query — "Where can I find a Celtic lap harp?" — by either drawing an answer from its massive database or by sending one of its gumshoes to track down the necessary facts.

"We won't ever say, 'No, we don't know,'" Burke told the Times.



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Sperry was the company salesman while Burke was in charge of operations. In that role, he says, she was indefatigable, working at all hours.

"It was just amazing the amount of work she'll do," he says.

Manhattan Intelligence never reached the potential they had envisioned. The company ran out of capital and Burke sold her shares to Sperry only days after the New York Times article ran and returned to Wisconsin to work for her father at Trek Bicycle. Sperry continued a scaled-down version of the business that focused on selling data to major corporate clients, rather than running a call-center for individuals.

Sperry suspects Burke was eager to get back to the family business out of admiration for her father, Richard Burke, who started Trek in 1976, when Mary was 17. Originally based in a barn in Waterloo, Trek specialized in making high-end bikes before expanding into the entry-level market during the mountain bike boom of the early 1990s. Lance Armstrong famously rode a Trek in the Tour de France, as did former President George W. Bush when he wiped out on his Texas ranch in 2004.

Richard Burke died in 2008. Along with a brother, John, Trek's current president, Burke has three sisters.

"She was extremely proud of her father," recalls Sperry. "If there was anybody who she talked about in glowing terms, it was him."

In contrast, he says, Burke rarely speaks of her own accomplishments.

"She never trumpets her own success," he says. "You'll never get out of her that she went to Harvard or whatever."

Sperry also says he doesn't ever remember Burke talking about entering politics, a vocation he considered an unnatural fit for a woman he calls "incapable of not telling the truth."

Denise DeMarb, a Madison City Council member who worked at Trek for two decades, including a

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nearly 10-year stint as director of finance, was never as close to Burke as Sperry was, but worked with her enough to be impressed by her analytical skills and dedication to hard work.

Burke's job involved setting up sales offices in Europe and revamping the company's global supply chain analysis. DeMarb recalls that Burke was tasked with developing a system to analyze sales data and forecast the number of bikes needed from the company's manufacturing operation in Asia.

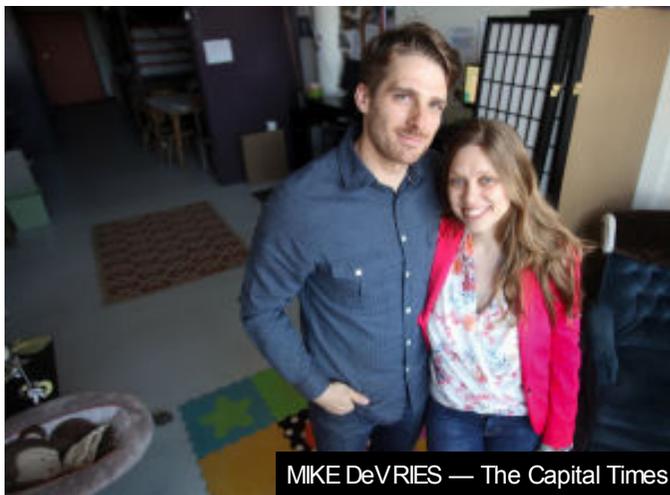
"We needed that desperately and she brought that to the organization," says DeMarb. "The sophistication was not there. People were trying to forecast inventory needs and she took it to a whole other level."

Those who have worked with Burke say her zeal for business does not come from a love for money. That's evident not just by the millionaire's modest, \$235,000 house on Madison's east side, but in the help she has given other businesses after leaving the corporate world herself.

Matt and Clare Stoner Fehsenfeld recall receiving an email from Burke three years ago while they were in the middle of starting Quince & Apple, a small company that makes jam and fruit syrups. Burke wanted to know if they would like a "mentor." She had tried their product, felt they had potential and figured they could use some help on making the business profitable.

"It was the point at which I was starting to have more time and I really enjoyed business," says Burke. "It's a way of me being able to stay in touch and keep involved in business. I know it's tough being an entrepreneur."

Although the couple found it weird that a woman



MIKE DeVRIES — The Capital Times

Matt and Clare Stoner Fehsenfeld, owners of Quince & Apple. "She really pushed us to think about our business with more confidence," Matt says.

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of Burke's profile (she attached her resume to her introductory email) would be interested in helping their fledgling start-up — free of charge — they quickly understood the value of her counsel.

Before Burke convinced the two to invest \$20,000 on an automated ladle machine, Matt had filled 70,000 jam jars by hand, consuming time and energy that Burke convinced them was better spent elsewhere.

"For us to make that kind of investment was kind of terrifying," he recalls. "She really pushed us to think about our business with more confidence."

While Burke's advice was greatly appreciated, what struck the couple was her humility.

"I think the most helpful thing she does is ask a ton of questions," says Matt. "It's not like she's coming in here with set solutions because I don't think that would be that helpful."

Why do they think Burke sought them out?

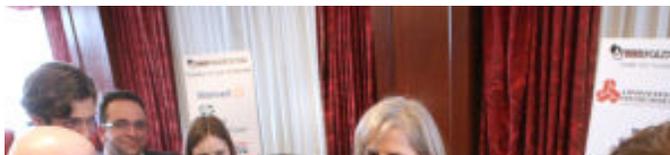
"My perception of Mary is she's just kind of an interesting, good person who likes to do things for people around her," says Clare. "She likes to be part of the community and invest in the community."

"One of the hardest working people I have ever met"

While working as an administrator in the Philadelphia Recreation Department, Michael Johnson's performance apparently caught the eye of someone important. A head-hunting firm working on behalf of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County wouldn't leave him alone.

"They kept calling," he recalls. "I talked to this lady from QTI and they put me in touch with Mary Burke."

In her capacity as president of the Boys and Girls Club board in 2010, Burke was trying to hire Johnson as the organization's CEO. The club



provides programming — after-school, tutoring, summer camp, leadership training — for nearly 3,000 kids and teens at its two Madison-area facilities.

"I just couldn't believe that somebody of her influence was so actively involved in this process," Johnson says. "She was emailing me at 11 o'clock at night, 6 o'clock in the morning."

The support he knew he'd get from Burke was one of the reasons he chose to take a chance and move to a new city for a high-profile position.

"I had learned from staff that Mary was in the club on weekends, doing accounting on her spare time, doing fundraising," he says. "It's very unique to have a donor who gives you money but is also very interested in being involved in the execution of the plan."

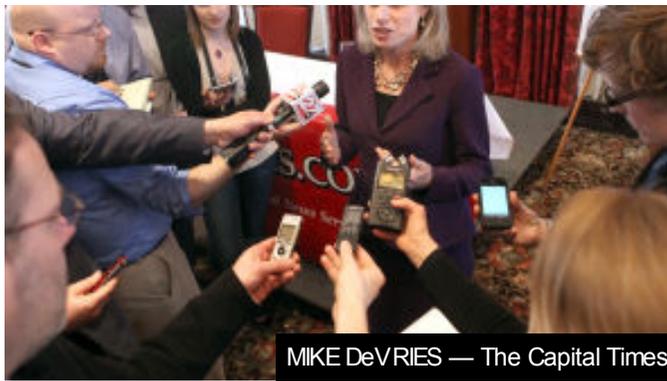
After leaving her post as state commerce secretary in 2007, Burke essentially devoted herself to nonprofit volunteerism, a decision shaped by her experience mentoring two boys through the Boys and Girls Club in the late 1990s. She served as president of the club's board from 2002 – 2010.

One of the key initiatives Burke spearheaded was the development of AVID/TOPS, a college prep program run jointly by the Boys and Girls Club and the Madison School District designed for middle-achieving students.

Since Johnson took the reins, the club's revenue has soared from \$1.4 million in 2009 to \$3.6 million in 2013.

While most credit Johnson for the club's expansion, he says he couldn't have done it without his biggest backer. Just like Sperry, he calls her "one of the hardest working people I have ever met."

And Johnson says Burke is even more generous with her money than people are aware. He says it



Mary Burke speaks to reporters after a WisPolitics luncheon held at the Madison Club.

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is because of her that the Boys and Girls Club can bus over 500 kids from schools to the club's sites every day. She has also lent help to individuals struggling to pay for college.

"She is personally paying for some kids to go to college and she'll never tell people that," Johnson says.

Selena Pettigrew, a community coordinator for the Boys and Girls Club, says she has enjoyed interacting with Burke because she has never felt her charitable efforts were a "ploy."

"She's just interested in helping," Pettigrew says.

Others note the benefit of Burke's business savvy in her nonprofit work.

"She had a lot of really good instincts as we were assessing funding priorities or grants," says Jac Garner, CEO of Webcrafters, who served with Burke on the board of the Madison Community Foundation in 2011. "She was disciplined, well-prepared, structured in her comments, structured in her analysis."

Those involved with Burke's nonprofit work all emphasize that they are staying out of the governor's race, but Johnson did have one suggestion for the candidate: Don't be so modest.

"If I had to give some advice, she has to tell people what she has done in this community," he says.

Burke says she is proud of her work with nonprofits, but indicates that she doesn't want her donations to be a focus of the campaign.

"I hope people do get to know me, not necessarily as a philanthropist and someone who writes checks, but actually more about what I do, whether it's mentoring or leadership in



MIKE DeVRIES — The Capital Times

Mary Burke at Sector67 in March.

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nonprofits," she says.

"We were always able to have an honest and open conversation"

Not all of Burke's colleagues on the Madison School Board were happy to see her get elected two years ago after she spent a record a \$128,000 of her own money on the campaign.

Madison teachers union chief John Matthews, for instance, referred to Burke derisively as a "one percenter." Radio host John "Sly" Sylvester went further, calling her a "checkbook liberal" whose wealth was derived from the outsourcing of Trek manufacturing jobs to China.

Much of the hostility came from Burke's support for a controversial proposal by the Urban League of Greater Madison to set up a charter school, dubbed "Madison Prep," geared towards African-American boys. Originally, the proposal called for a boys-only school that would operate outside of the district with non-union teachers, although Burke later said she would only support the charter if it was operated by the district with unionized district staff.

Her opponent, Michael Flores, a firefighter, received the support of Madison Teachers, Inc., the Democratic Party of Dane County and Progressive Dane.

Nevertheless, Burke's involvement in education, particularly through AVID/TOPS, gained her a great deal of support from the educational establishment and many city leaders supported her candidacy.

Although the race was generally cordial, Burke sent out a mailer comparing her experience to Flores', which some felt was unfair and dismissive.

She easily bested Flores, 60 percent to 39 percent, and, since winning, has encountered very little controversy as a member of the board.

Current board president Ed Hughes says he recruited Burke to run because of her demonstrated dedication to education.

"I said to her, 'If you want to serve your community and you're interested in education, this is where

you can have the most impact," he recalls. "That's what resonated with her."

Like others, Hughes emphasizes Burke's attention to detail and preparation, saying that she has devoted a lot of time to examining the district budget and finding ways to save it money.

"I realized if you really want to have an impact on kids' lives and their futures, it has to be happening in the schools," Burke says. "Nonprofits are really important, but really we have to have change within our schools as well."

Shortly after declaring her candidacy for governor, Burke cast the lone vote against a district budget that raised property taxes. And recently, she abstained from a unanimous board vote to overhaul the district's discipline policy, saying the district hadn't spelled out the spending necessary for the new policy.

Naturally, many assume the votes were strategic, intended to avoid Republican attacks.

But even some board members who have not always been Burke allies give her the benefit of the doubt. T.J. Mertz, a progressive activist and strong opponent of Madison Prep, supported efforts to get state Sen. Kathleen Vinehout, D-Alma, to challenge Burke in the Democratic primary for governor, arguing that a competitive primary would yield a stronger nominee.

But Mertz avoids criticizing Burke specifically. When asked about his relationship with her on the board, he says he respects her dedication and competence.

"It's clear that she does care," Mertz says. "We have some differences over how to implement our desires but she does put in the work, that I can say."

Marj Passman, a retiring School Board member closely aligned with the teachers' union, says she will "definitely" be voting for Burke for governor.

"Mary and I have disagreed on some educational policies but we were always able to have an honest and open conversation with each other," she says. "I will always be grateful to her for her generous support of programs for our students."

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