

Big Sister to the State of Maryland

What's it like to be booed by 140 delegates? For unflappable Kathleen Dumais, it's all in a day's work.

One recent Friday in Annapolis, Maryland Delegate Kathleen Dumais (D) stood up in front of the House of Delegates for Maryland's General Assembly. It was one of the first days in that session that the delegates had met as a group, and she had an announcement to make.

Just a reminder, Dumais told the milling crowd. When it's time to vote, people, don't forget Rule 96(g). You need to do

taken an active role, sponsoring bills, speaking up in floor debates, and occasionally chiding legislative colleagues for what she sees as unenlightened attitudes. The Maryland Bar Association named her "Rookie of the Year" after her first session in 2003.

Her personality traits—she is steady, responsible, detail-oriented—have served her well as both a lawyer and a legislator. Although Dumais is not the sort of character you might see at the front of the conga line at the office holiday party, she's the one everyone turns to when something needs to get done. She's the behind-the-scenes leader, comfortable letting the others take the glory and the spotlight while she makes sure the printer has paper and the faxes have been sent. She's skilled at bringing together warring parties in collaborative settings, whether they happen to be a kitchen table, a classroom, or the State House in Annapolis.

Balancing Act

Debra Bruno

the voting yourself—you can't have someone vote for you, even if you're busy.

There was a brief pause, and then 140 delegates let out a loud "Booooo!"

So it goes for the big sister to the state.

It wasn't the last time Dumais would be booed that day. "Kathleen says you can't do that," the rest of the delegates sang out as Dumais officially stepped into her role as House parliamentarian.

Despite the friendly needling, Dumais is taking to her new job. Although she's been a delegate for four years, she just became parliamentarian this session. It's the kind of post that seems to have been created for someone like her: A parliamentarian is someone always ready to remind the younger kids in a family when they're getting out of line. Instead of reciting family rules about snacking before dinner, though, Dumais turns to Mason's *Manual of Legislative Procedure*—the written rules of parliamentary procedure used by most states—to make sure that the lawmakers of Maryland know what they need to do to stay in line.

For Dumais, 48, a lawyer, former high school teacher, and oldest of a family of eight siblings, the unruly House—made up of as many "citizen legislators" as professional politicians—allows her to tap into some of her skills with people. First elected as a delegate (from Montgomery County's District 15) four years ago, Dumais has quickly

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Take her private-practice work as a divorce lawyer. When the 90-day, January-to-April session of the legislature ends, she's a family-law attorney with Paley, Rothman, Goldstein, Rosenberg, Eig & Cooper in Bethesda, Md. It's a 36-attorney firm with a hand in a range of practice areas: trusts and estates, bankruptcy, real estate, and so on.

Dumais handles quite a few divorce and custody battles. But to call them battles belies what frequently happens when Dumais steps in. Even though she has no children, Dumais often tells clients, "You can pay for your children's college, or you can pay for mine." She seeks creative ways to protect children and divide up the assets of divided lives. She seems less interested in getting her clients to court, where she might be able to rack up enormous bills, than in getting them through a difficult period of their lives. "I try to do it in a gracious, practical, and competent manner," she says. Some 85 percent of her clients settle rather than go to court.

One of her new interests is a procedure called collaborative law, which sets a number of ground rules for couples who are, at least initially, committed to avoiding litigation. In collaborative law, each party brings an attorney to the table in a series of four-way meetings. If the parties can't reach an agreement and opt to litigate instead, they are forced to drop the original attorneys and start the process all over again. The process not only gives the lawyers the obvious

incentive to avoid court, its proponents say, but it also alleviates the trauma of divorce by limiting the amount of vindictive behaviors, such as hiding assets, that divorcing couples sometimes use.

Collaborative law fits neatly into Dumais' big-sister take on life. Glenn Cooper, head of litigation at Paley Rothman and the man who hired her for her current job, says he's never seen her lose her cool. She's certainly effective, but she's not the type of litigator to be overly aggressive or bombastic, Cooper notes. And like the classic big sister, Cooper says, "she does the things I wish I could remember to do, in terms of being a thoughtful, considerate person," such as making appropriate phone calls or sending flowers.

RADAR O'REILLY

Her first law-firm employer, Jack Quinn of Rockville-based Ethridge, Quinn, McAuliffe, Rowan & Hartinger, says, with a touch of courtroom-style hyperbole, "She was probably the hardest worker we've ever had in a group that's characterized by hard workers. Every positive character trait that you'd want to see in a lawyer she possessed: She has a big heart, a strong compulsion to want to do the right thing, and she's unfailingly honest." Quinn likens her to the ever-helpful Radar O'Reilly of the 1970s TV show "M.A.S.H." Before he even knew to ask her, he says, she'd tell him, "It's done; it's in your briefcase; I've already called them; they'll be here at 11."

In fact, Quinn says, when Dumais left the firm in 1996 to work for Paley Rothman, it was almost a personal blow. "I understood. But I was personally very upset that our little family was going through this separation," Quinn says.

There's that reference to "family" again. The word seems to trail Dumais, especially in her literal role as big sister in the extended Dumais clan. Although she's not married and has no children, Dumais considers herself the family's "favorite aunt" to 20 nieces and nephews. Even when she was just out of college, it seems that she put family before almost everything else. Her uncle, Robert Ward, owner of a home and lighting center in Laurel, Md., learned that his wife, her mother's only sister, was diagnosed with liver cancer. "They had three kids—the youngest was about 10," Dumais says. Dumais worked for her uncle for two years, keeping the books straight. "He really needed some help," she says.

Through a few teaching and administrative posts, Dumais was the family point person during her own mother's illness and other family emergencies. "She was always a kind of natural leader, a team builder," says her sister Colleen Konstanzer, a stay-at-home mother who lives in Howard County.

When Dumais decided to run for office, Konstanzer says, the five siblings in the area—along with their children—were thrilled to pitch in on her campaign. "She didn't have to ask any of us," she says. "It was time to support Kathy."

Another family asset to her campaign was the reputation of her late father, Dick Dumais, who had taught and been a

principal in the Montgomery County school system for 30 years. "I was convinced he was looking over my shoulder during the campaign," says Dumais, noting that she kept meeting people who knew him from his school work.

Her parents taught all eight of their children that their role in life was to somehow make a difference to others. Dumais runs through a list of siblings and their professions—teaching, law, and law enforcement, mainly. One brother is in the Marines, like her father was. All are involved in various charity organizations, such as the Special Olympics and coaching kids' sports.

TIME WARP

In the legislature, Dumais sometimes runs up against legislators who don't seem to share her vision of right and wrong. A small note of irritation creeps into her voice when she talks about the colleagues who she thinks resist change. "Sometimes when I walk into the Judiciary Committee, I feel like I'm walking into a time warp," she says. "It's still very male-dominated." Her fellow members of the Judiciary Committee, for instance, haven't completely bought into one of her initiatives: a bill to limit a father's rights when a child is conceived as a result of rape but there has been no conviction for the rape.

Another bill involving the cost of health insurance in child support has been more successful. In 1989, when child-support rules were last updated, health insurance was not nearly as expensive as it is today, says Dumais. The bill, passed by both the House and Senate, deducts the cost of health insurance from a parent's income to better balance both parents' share.

Although a good number of the bills she sponsored this session are family-law issues, she admits that up until now, she had never really seen herself as a "women's issues" person. "I am now!" she says, laughing. In fact, on April 12, Dumais will receive an award from the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault for "demonstrating leadership in public policy," says Lisae Jordan, legislative counsel for the group.

One possible downside to her legislative work is that Dumais seems to have left her colleagues at Paley Rothman feeling a bit abandoned. Cooper says that although the legislative work is "wonderful for her, frankly, it's not so great for us. We miss having her available."

Even Dumais admits that her time outside the office has meant a whole lot of juggling and the occasional client who decides to take his business elsewhere. "It's hard to say that I've had to make any particular sacrifice," Dumais says in an e-mail. "Perhaps I'm just too much of a 'Pollyanna,' but the balance in my life is just juggling what needs to be done by focusing on the big picture."

Balancing Act, a column exploring the lives of women in the law, appears in Legal Times each month. Debra Bruno can be contacted at dbruno@alm.com.