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The Washington Post

February 8, 1985, Friday, Final Edition

SECTION: Metro; D1

LENGTH: 1729 words

HEADLINE: Quest for Md.'s No. 2 Job;
Sheehan Hopes Hard Work Gives Her the Edge

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DATELINE: ANNAPOLIS

BODY:

In Prince George's political lore, there exists a funny story about almost everyone, but even the most avid tale-tellers will admit there aren't many good jokes about Lorraine Sheehan, Maryland's secretary of state. Mostly there are prosaic tales about hard work, door knocking, vote counting -- and winning.

What some people do not know is how difficult life has been for the single mother of four in her political career, one she hopes will make her Maryland's next lieutenant governor. And what still others don't know is that the stories of hard work are mostly true.

There's the time she knocked on so many doors and passed out so many newsletters for her state senator, Steny Hoyer, that he was virtually compelled to put her on his Democratic slate as a candidate for the House of Delegates. She won.

There's the time she had to steer through one of the House of Delegates' most conservative committees a bill making rape convictions easier to obtain. It passed.

And then there was the time she was kicked off another ticket organized by Hoyer, now a U.S. congressman, because he objected to what he considered the divisive tone of her lobbying for a Metrorail line that would best serve her legislative district. That was the same week she learned she had breast cancer.

Yet, she organized her own reelection campaign, and won. And she beat back the cancer. ("Easy on the chemotherapy," she said she told her doctor. "I'm running for office and I can't lose my hair.") Later, the Metro board decided to build a subway line to Branch Avenue, the line Sheehan supported.

Such straightforward, almost personal successes have propelled the 47-year-old Sheehan to become Maryland's highest ranking female state official.

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In her current job, which she has held since leaving her elected position in the General Assembly in 1983, she is responsible for affixing the state seal to official documents, registering notaries public and keeping track of myriad documents such as proclamations and disclosure forms. But Sheehan hopes to parlay the job into something more.

State politicians, including two of the leading contenders for the governorship, Attorney General Stephen Sachs and House Speaker Benjamin Cardin, have said she is someone who obviously would be considered for the state's number-two job.

She would not be the first woman to run for the lieutenant governorship. But if elected, she would be the first woman to serve in that job in Maryland.

In Maryland, unlike Virginia, candidates for lieutenant governor are selected by the gubernatorial candidates to run on a ticket, not elected in their own right. Sheehan has begun what might be the state's first campaign for the number two spot.

She starts with the advantage of living in Prince George's, where Baltimore-based gubernatorial candidates often look for running mates to provide geographical balance. She has maintained a fund-raising committee from her days as a delegate, is traveling widely around the state and recently was feted by an overflow crowd of 400 at the Andrews Air Force Base officers' club at a \$25-per-plate dinner in her honor.

"I'm making myself available," she said.

Her reasons: "To affect policy, to influence what I think is the right thing to do on a number of issues. I think it would be a fun job. I like people. I think I've had some influence on the way politicians and people think about women."

In the wake of Geraldine Ferraro's bid for the vice presidency last fall, the gender issue is important. That issue and the novelty of Sheehan's campaign to carve out a slot on the ticket have stirred much discussion among political insiders, not all of it complimentary.

Sachs said he considers her "one of the ablest public officials in Maryland and she has to know that she is someone I or anybody else running for governor would want to consider for lieutenant governor."

At the same time he added, "I think it's very difficult to run for the office . . . It puts the gubernatorial candidate in the position of appearing to have been pressured. Not an attractive position to be in."

But others see it differently. Said Gerard McDonough, a former Prince George's council member, "I think it's a pretty smart move. In the past when candidates for governor were casting around for a running mate, they'd say, 'Who've they got in Prince George's?' And that could lead to anybody. By doing this, when that time comes, I think the answer will be automatic."

She does not, however, enjoy universal admiration. Some colleagues, even supporters, call her overly ambitious, manipulative, and say they do not trust her. "She's very shrewd. She's very savvy; she's generally out to get what she wants," said one politician in her legislative district who claims that he generally likes her. "I'm comfortable with her, but I'm always looking over my shoulder."

Almost no one doubts the sincerity of Sheehan's efforts on behalf of Metro, however. Most also believe she is equally sincere about her desire for the number two job in the state, despite the conventional wisdom that the only way to get that job is to pretend to want to be governor. But Sheehan maintains, "I don't think that's the only way to become lieutenant governor."

"I don't lie because I never remember what it is I said," she said. "So it's just not my style to try to hide my intentions . . . People say they're running for governor and they're out seven nights a week. And if they're not raising

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lots of money, how can they be taken seriously? It's not the right time in my life, with the kids and all, to be doing that."

For Sheehan, as for many in public life, the personal and the political have often merged. Her marriage broke up soon after her first election to the House in 1974.

Some said the pressures of supporting the family on her own helped her make the decision to leave the part-time legislature for the full-time \$45,000-a-year secretary of state's job.

Born Lorraine Cantin in Manchester, N.H., she was active in Catholic groups in her teen years, passing over college to work in a church-sponsored community organizing group called the Young Christian Workers. But her first political forays were family-related too. Married at 22 to labor organizer Peter Sheehan, she followed him around the country to different assignments, joining him outside department stores urging shoppers to look for the union label. He could not be reached for this story.

"I was very much into the teachings of the church on women," she said. "Getting married, having children, supporting your husband, making things nice. It didn't work. It's not reality."

"I think I came along with every other woman through the years. The late '60s and '70s, I started thinking about things. So by the time we got to Maryland we were politically active." Politics began to take the place that church once occupied in her life.

"Politics is just the job I wanted to get," she said. "When other women get separated, they get a job, and this is the job I wanted. Peter had run for a delegate seat in 1972, he didn't win . . . He was going to go out and change the world and it was very important and I should be very happy to stay home and take care of his kids and wait for 10 minutes of his time."

If this sounds like Sheehan is resentful and bitter, her children said it isn't so. "It's her life and she loves it," said her daughter Laura, 20.

For one thing, some obstacles have become the foundation for her biggest victories. One of Sheehan's children, John, 18, is retarded. One result of her realization that she will not always be there to care for him was her House Bill 1496, which in 1982 added \$2.5 million for community-based homes for mentally retarded adults and put the state on record in support of such facilities. The following year she pushed a second bill, doubling the program, through the fiscally conservative House Ways and Means Committee.

"That money was not in the governor's budget and the bill passed and it was funded. That was just not done," said former state Del. Craig Knoll. "It was really masterful."

Equally successful was her leadership in persuading Maryland's legislature to retain Medicaid funding for abortions after passage of the Hyde amendment cutting off federal funding.

She gained the respect of legislators advocating abortion rights for taking the lead on the controversial issue in an election year. She said she has never had an abortion and probably would not, and that she was ambivalent about her own feelings on abortion until she reached the legislature, where she was appalled by the attitude of some male legislators toward a problem they would never face.

It paralleled her bout with cancer. "I went to a doctor who refused to do the reconstructive surgery at the same time as the mastectomy. He said he wanted women to know what it was like to live without a breast so they would appreciate the reconstructed one when they got it. I said goodbye."

What clinched her reputation as a leader, if not always an agreeable or likable one, was her work on behalf of the Branch Avenue subway alignment. Sheehan supported a route that would serve an existing population center; the other

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side wanted a route geared to future growth.

Critics take note of her willingness to target specific opponents on the Metro issue, once in an advertisement in the Washington Star that they felt unfairly impugned the opposition; once by covering the district of a council member who had abstained on a crucial vote with leaflets saying if the subway were lost, the council member was to blame. It included the council member's home number.

"I think she went a little bit beyond the boundaries," said state Del. Gerard Devlin (D-Prince George's). "I think she made it seem like the opposition was a bunch of crooks, when there were economic interests on both sides."

Still, Devlin agrees with state Del. Mary Boergers (D-Montgomery), who said Sheehan was in her two terms in the House "probably the most effective woman delegate. She understands the political system very well and knows how to work with a group of politicians to get things done."

What Sheehan will be able to get done next is unclear. "My whole life has been a matter of waiting for the next chapter, see what happens next," she said.

"I'm a survivor. I think I'm a winner."

GRAPHIC: Pictures 1 through 3, Lorraine Sheehan, Maryland's secretary of state, has designs on higher office.
PHOTOS BY RAY LUSTIG -- The Washington Post