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Compassionate Side Finally Revealed

First impressions of Coun. Linda Sloan masked a profound concern for others

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My first impression of city councillor Linda Sloan? In a word, wonk.

It came last fall at a civic election forum where Sloan came across as prepared and informed to the point of bookishness.

That evening, Sloan rattled off obscure civic details like the pencil-necked bureaucrat of lore. For pity sake, she'd put to memory the numerical designation of the fire halls in Ward 1.

Second impression? In a word, fiery. During budget deliberations last year, Sloan demonstrated a decidedly Un-nerd-like potential for wrath. During one particular meeting, Sloan was so vexed with Mayor Stephen Mandel — not to mention her Ward 1 colleague Coun. Karen Leibovici—that she could barely speak after the meeting.

Third impression? Here I am today in Sloan's office watching tears form in her eyes as she tells me about her time as a palliative nurse. Sloan shrugs, saying she has a reputation in her family as a bit of a weeper.

But I'm completely cool with it. I subscribe to the belief that being human is a nice trait for any human being, particularly those with authority over my life: newspaper owners, editors, politicians. Ask Sloan for an impression of her self and she sums it up in one word—nursing. Twenty-plus years as a nurse is crucial to understanding her and her politics, says Sloan.

"I think that compassionate side is why I became a nurse," she says. "I care about people and want to do something that helps make a difference." Sloan was a member of the provincial opposition as a Liberal MLA from 1997 to 2001. She didn't seek re-election, she says, because she missed her family and because she wanted to finally complete her nursing degree.

A couple of years later, when Stephen Mandel vacated his Ward 1 council seat to run for mayor, politics pulled Sloan back in. Aside from a couple of fiery moments, she's mostly been, well, bookish as a city councillor.

"Those first few months, I needed to get my legs under me," says Sloan. "I haven't been intentionally flying under the radar. I wanted to do my homework.

"I think that comes from my nursing background. I worked in emerg for 10 years, and you are responsible for doing a first assessment. The more thorough you do that first assessment, the better able the physician is to act."

After completing her degree and before running for council, Sloan worked at the Pilgrim's Hospice, where she'd once volunteered.

“It was good,” says Sloan. “Most people think palliative nursing would be really sad. But I found joy in it. When people are confronting their own mortality they don’t put on airs. They are who they are. I met some great people.

“It doesn’t mean you don’t cry” adds Sloan, now beginning to cry “You also feel like you make an impact.”

Sloan now hopes to make an impact here, at city hall. She certainly made one during council’s budget deliberations. “Am I passionate? Absolutely,” she says.

“If I think something is being violated or a principle is being breached, will go after it? Absolutely.”

Councillor views job much like nursing society

Back then, she felt Mandel and Leibovici breached the spirit of the budget process by at tempting last-ditch and indiscriminate cuts.

Recently, Sloan went after the police commission. She was furious with the hasty firing of one chief, Fred Rayner, followed by the hasty attempt to hire another, Dave Cassels.

“I was incensed by the disregard for the public’s interest and how decisions were made without the evidence to justify them,” she says.

“I really believe when you decide to serve in public office — and I see the police commission as a public office — you have to aspire to the highest star of integrity.”

For Sloan, such standards means putting the good of the community above political differences, such as the ones she’s had with Leibovici.

“At the end of the day, there is a dance of sorts that ward councillors have to the steps to,” says Sloan. “We both have our own views; we respect that. We’ll support each other on projects, and if we can team up on some, great.”

Sloan’s passion includes the seniors’ portfolio she was given by the mayor. She’s busy now comparing the World Health Organization’s determinants of health against civic services to determine where Edmonton fails its elders.

“In some ways, this is just a different application of nursing,” says Sloan. “I like to think of it that way, that I’m still nursing.”

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