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Learning the ropes:

Stennett filling husband's Senate seat as he recovers from brain cancer

BOISE — In years past, Michelle Stennett would come to the Capitol and watch her husband, Clint, and other legislators debate issues on the Senate floor. These days, Sen. Michelle Stennett, D-Ketchum, is in her husband's seat for this session as a temporary replacement while he focuses on his recovery from brain cancer. "I'm not an insider," she said. "I'm the most rookie person here."

Though she's the most junior senator in Idaho, Stennett has the benefit of a daily mentor in her husband, now in his eighth term in the Senate. "We've been doing this as a team," she said. As a senator, Stennett said she has 34 friends and colleagues who are all helpful, regardless of party affiliation. "It doesn't matter who," she said. "Any senator I've walked up to has been so polite."

She said that Idaho's Senate has a collegial atmosphere, despite debates about issues. "You can disagree about something and walk out and still be friends," she said. As a member of the Senate Resources and Environment Committee, Stennett voted this week in favor of new state grazing rules, after talking with George Bacon, head of the Department of Lands, and becoming convinced that the rule changes could help resolve conflicts that have ended up in the courts.

While not sponsoring personal bills on her own, Stennett is co-sponsoring legislation such as the Democratic-backed Idaho Jobs and Opportunity Blueprint (IJOBS) plan, a package of bills aimed at boosting economic growth by bringing various benefits for small-business development, and tax incentives for job creation and capital for small businesses.

As an appointed replacement, Stennett said she considers it important to get feedback from constituents in her district. Stennett said her husband has been off radiation for more than a year and is taking medication and working on getting his immune system built back up. "It's a very slow process," she said. "It's going in the right direction."

Clint Stennett had to sit out the 2009 session because of his illness and also briefly missed part of the 2008 session. He was replaced both times by former Sun Valley mayor Jon Thorson. Other senators said Michelle Stennett has provided a professional presence in the Senate. "She's a very bright lady and a great colleague to work with," said Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert. "She doesn't come in with preconceived notions and agendas."

Senate Minority Leader Kate Kelly, D-Boise, echoed that. "She hit the ground running," Kelly said. Stennett said she hasn't run into any surprises so far. "I sort of knew what to expect from watching Clint all these years," she said.