

Fort Morgan Times

Musgrave smack in middle of heated times

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Imagine stepping off Main Street in Fort Morgan and landing near Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., virtually overnight.

That's exactly what Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., did at the beginning of January after being elected to the 108th United States Congress.

"I was told once that someone from rural Colorado could never win," Musgrave said. "Well, here I am."

The longtime stay-at-home mom -- who said she wants to be an inspiration to women -- went from dining in rural Colorado nearly all her life to eating lunch with President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney Monday afternoon.

"Freshmen got to have lunch with them. (Cheney) called me by name -- Marilyn," she said. "We sat and talked. It was a very relaxed and enjoyable conversation. Being a woman, I have to comment on the fine china."

It is, however, a very stressful time in United States' history. With a war on Iraq looming on the horizon and with the death of seven astronauts over Texas Sunday, Musgrave said that a majority of conversation over lunch dealt with NASA's Columbia tragedy. She also said that the president shared inspiring words with everyone at the table.

"It was an emotional lunch today. Being in D.C., you're right in the heart of what's going on. The degree of importance of what's going on makes it a very sobering time. There are moments of danger." In fact, she said, she's had police escorts to and from White House functions, but just for precautionary measures.

She witnessed firsthand the same type of security measures at the president's State of the Union address, too. "It was just awesome," she said. "Laura Bush was sitting in the gallery next to me to my right. I think our nation needed the encouragement (President Bush) gave us."

Even though the U.S. is facing tough times, Musgrave seemed optimistic. "It's a wonderful time to be serving our country," she said. "It's very humbling. When I walk to the Capitol Building and climb the steps, I reflect on how fortunate I am to be doing this."

It is difficult, however, leaving her husband, Steve, behind in Fort Morgan. "I'm traveling back and forth pretty much every weekend. My heart is in Colorado. It's hard being away from my husband," she said. "When we are together, we make the most of our time."

Her husband, in fact, was there with her in Washington for freshman orientation in early January. "It was a whirlwind. We were just out of our campaign. I was given so much information at once that I'm still trying to sort that out. Then I had to pick an office, staff and an apartment," she said.

"Steve walked all over Capitol Hill looking for an apartment for me. I was told that certain blocks you want to be careful of," Musgrave continued. She said that because some blocks had several restaurants, rats were a big problem.

Finally, however, the couple found an apartment in a safe neighborhood just on the other side of the Potomac River, in Alexandria, Va.

"I had to buy all new furniture. People aren't as friendly out here as they are in Colorado," she said, describing grumpy furniture salesmen. One salesman, however, was excited to sell her some items. "He said he had sold furniture in the past to (Sen.) Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and was happy to sell to me."

After moving the new furniture into her apartment amid a rainy downpour -- still needing some pieces -- the couple spent their first night in the new apartment sleeping on an air mattress. Although after spending eight years in the Colorado Legislature, she said she's used to toughing things out. "Congress is the same thing, multiplied several times over."

Furniture wasn't the only new purchase on her list, though. "The concerns of wardrobe are huge out here. You have to dress nicely wherever you go," she said, adding that because she spends a lot of time walking on stiff, marble floors, her shoes needed some extra cushion. "Shoes are important. I had to find comfortable shoes that look nice. It wasn't a problem; I'm a bargain shopper."

Traveling as much as she does in the city -- like looking for shops that sell shoes and clothes -- Musgrave said she's finally learning how to get around the large metropolis. "A lot of it was trial and error; I'm learning. It is very hard to find your way around. I have to get help from my staff. The traffic is unbelievable. It takes me 15 minutes to get to my office when there's no traffic -- 45 to 55 minutes with traffic."

Now that things have settled down a little for the newly elected representative, however, Musgrave said her transition has been relatively smooth. "I've taken some of Congressman (Bob) Schaffer's staff," she said, adding that she has already hired people from Snyder and Lamar. "I'm very proud of my staff; they're going to do great things."

With a total staff of 12 thus far -- seven in D.C., three in the Loveland district office and two in Sterling -- Musgrave added that her current goals are the same as she expressed in her campaign: "To make tax cuts permanent, to help benefit farmers, ranchers and small business owners, national security -- do everything I can on the war on terror; Iraq can't be separated from that -- and stand up for rural Colorado."

Two days before Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered his evidence of Iraq's failure to disarm to the United Nations Security Council, Musgrave said the idea of a war "is very sobering to me. We are, it seems, heading closer and closer to war. I've been given special briefings -- top secret information -- from Secretary Powell and (Secretary of Defense) Donald Rumsfeld."

She said that Saddam Hussein "is not disarming and is not allowing inspectors to do their job," adding that she felt confident Powell would push the U.N. Security Council toward supporting the U.S.