

Moseley-Braun facing future with strengths as weaknesses

By Jennifer Loven

CHICAGO (AP) — The liberal Democrats from Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood were looking for a candidate to fill an empty state representative seat. The young federal prosecutor, a political unknown, was looking for a new challenge.

More than 20 years have passed since the day they met, but the impression of 30-year-old Carol Braun's intellect and dazzling smile remains vivid.

"We said instantly, 'This is it,'" recalled Sue Purrington, who helped steer Braun to victory and worked as her aide in Springfield for three years.

It's been a common reaction to the person who became the first black woman in the U.S. Senate. Moseley-Braun's intellect, oratory, warmth, feisty spirit, wit and idealism — along with her race and gender — have made her a magnet for others' hopes and affections, most powerfully demonstrated during her 1992 Senate campaign.

"She smiles so nice, and talks so well, and then there would be so much substance behind it," said Timuel Black, a 79-year-old urban anthropology professor and Hyde Park activist who has known Moseley-Braun since she was a girl.

But along with the famous charm and extraordinary gifts, people close to her describe a person who is also fragile, insecure, fascinated by fame and fortune, and indulgent of a less-disciplined side.

"It's like when you teach a child that every action has a consequence. She never learned that," said Olga Corey, an old friend from Hyde Park who departed bitterly disappointed in 1995 after serving as Moseley-Braun's chief of staff for about a year.

For six years, Carol Moseley-Braun has been a senator, a demanding job in itself, and a symbol, a role that generated expectations well above those faced by other politicians. Now, at age 51, she faces the most daunting fight of her political career, running not only against a Republican opponent but also against the blemishes that six years of persistent controversy have left on her image.

Growing up on Chicago's South Side, she moved between worlds: middle-class comfort and poverty, white family members as well as black, civil rights marches with Martin Luther King and

smoky Miles Davis jam sessions, attendance at a Catholic school and eye-opening forays with her father to mosques, temples and Baptist churches.

The exposure to so many different ways of life, she said, left an indelible imprint: "a love of learning, and an appreciation for and excitement in doing new things."

At a recent party at the home of longtime friend Billie Paige, Moseley-Braun sat down at her father's Wurlitzer grand piano, given to Paige after it sat unused in Moseley-Braun's house. She recalled spending hours underneath it as a child while her father, Joseph Moseley, played with jazz giants like Theolonius Monk and John Coltrane.

Music was a salve to the Chicago policeman's disappointment that he hadn't achieved more in life. Moseley-Braun's father also sometimes worked out his anger by hitting his oldest

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— Tony Podesta

Washington consultant to her re-election campaign.

School had not always been so easy.

While a 15-year-old Parker High School student, her parents' divorce sent the family to her grandmother's house, in a neighborhood so bad it was nicknamed "Bucket of Blood."

Moseley-Braun worked at a grocery store after school, and her mother had long since given her primary responsibility for raising her younger sister and two younger brothers. It's one reason Moseley-Braun says her relationship with her mother, who died in 1993, has been even more difficult to resolve than with her father.

At school her athleticism got her onto the cheerleading

Matthew, was 8.

That was a tough year.

Her beloved brother, Johnny, a manic depressive, died of complications from drug and alcohol abuse. Her mother suffered a stroke and had a leg amputated. And after nearly a decade as a state representative who rose to become legislative leader for Chicago's first black mayor, Harold Washington, she was refused Democratic slating for lieutenant governor.

But Moseley-Braun, as in the past, found a way to bounce back. "Her inner strength is very, very strong," Black said.

Two years later she was persuaded to run for Cook County recorder of deeds. From that obscure post, she turned anger over Sen. Alan Dixon's vote to confirm Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court into a stunning upset of the powerful fellow Democrat.

Moseley-Braun became a

national media darling, a star attraction at the 1992 Democratic convention and the toast of Hollywood.

She also became the subject of scathing editorials over campaign missteps.

She was pilloried for an inheritance from her mother that should have gone to reimburse Medicaid, for sexual harassment allegations against campaign manager and then-fiancé Kgosie Matthews, for a month-long, post-election trip to Africa with Matthews and her son, and accusations that campaign funds were used for jewelry and fancy clothes.

The attention — good and bad — was uncomfortable for the sometimes-shy Moseley-Braun, who would just as soon be reading, cooking, listening to music or riding a motorcycle.

Eventually, she began to settle into her new job. She spoke eloquently against Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., over his effort to renew a design

patent for United Daughters of Confederacy's emblem, which includes the Confederate flag.

She also shrewdly maneuvered her way onto the Senate Finance Committee in 1995; after she cast the deciding vote that made South Dakota Sen. Tom Daschle the new Senate minority leader, he ceded his seat on the panel to her. She's used the position to fight for tax breaks important in Illinois: on airline tickets, ethanol and commuter transportation, for instance.

She developed a reputation for persistence and knowledge of the legislative process, but became just as well-known for tardiness and missed appearances.

In 1996 she visited Nigeria with Matthews and met with dictator Gen. Sani Abacha, reviled by human rights advocates as a cruel tyrant. News stories about the trip recounted the litany of Moseley-Braun controversies.

Last month, Moseley-Braun's temper flared when she lashed out at conservative columnist George Will for a critical column, making a thinly veiled reference to the (See Moseley-Braun, Pg. 17)



CAROL MOSELEY-BRAUN

daughter. She doesn't like to talk about it, saying only that she came to terms with her father before he died.

Moseley-Braun believes her father's unrealized dreams inspired her to get a law degree. And it was his community activism and involvement in the labor movement that propelled her toward public service. As an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Chicago, she became a civil rights activist and made her first run for public office — secretary of the student body.

"She was very well-regarded, very popular. She was always more articulate than practically everyone else," says Tony Podesta, who was elected president on the same ticket and has been a friend since. He is now a

squad, but Moseley-Braun mostly recalls being "a little nerd" who played hooky a lot and wasn't very engaged in her studies.

She went to the University of Illinois at Champaign, majoring in pre-med, but hated the whole experience. She quickly returned home and eventually gave college another try at the university's Chicago campus.

Moseley-Braun went on to graduate from the prestigious University of Chicago law school and became an assistant U.S. attorney. Law school also introduced her to her future husband, Michael Braun. Their marriage lasted 13 years, until problems, including the stresses of an interracial marriage, led to divorce in 1986. Their son,

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