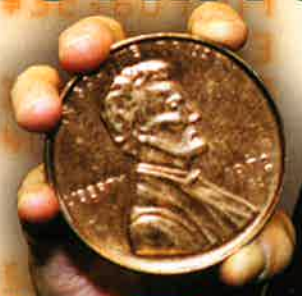


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Judy Barr Topinka

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Romantic
Getaways



A Candid Conversation with Illinois Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka

BY STEFANY HENSON



Photos: Steve Hinrichs, 11 Acre Studio

There are many ways to describe the first woman elected to the state treasurer's office: outspoken, down-to-earth, aggressive, thrifty, a great hugger and proud single parent. The official investor of the state's money recently talked with *Illinois Magazine* (IM) associate editor Stefany Henson about her heritage, her future political aspirations and why her job makes her a dangerous woman. Also present, despite heightened security at the State Capitol, were her two dogs, Molly McDoo, a black cocker spaniel and frequent Statehouse visitor, and Raggedy Andy, a mixed breed recently adopted from an animal shelter.

IM: Following such a successful career in journalism and public relations, why did you decide to go into politics?

TOPINKA: Journalism always involved a certain amount of advocacy. You're involved in people's lives, you're involved in issues, and I'd always have to beg politicians to make the right things happen. More often than not, they were not very willing. Finally, someone said to me, 'You know, you're doing it anyway, why don't you just run for office?' I figured I could make things better, and I think I have.

IM: Was it difficult being a single mother and a politician when your son was younger?

TOPINKA: Yes, I think life's difficult for all single moms. Trying to juggle a career with raising kids is always hard. It's also hard in two-income families because women always end up doing more work.

IM: What advice would you have for single mothers out there who are struggling with family responsibilities and careers?

TOPINKA: Basically, a good daycare is very important. You have to find one early and you have to understand that you're going to be tired a lot. All moms are tired. Political moms are very tired.

IM: Tell us a little about your personal life, your son and your home in Riverside.

TOPINKA: I was born in Riverside and I'm an only child. My mother and dad had a real estate business. Both my parents and my grandparents raised me. My mother and father were very involved in the business and community activism. My grandparents were immigrants from

Czechoslovakia. Czech is my first language. I spoke that before I spoke English, and still speak it. Then my mother was injured and I needed to take care of her. A drunk driver hit my mother. She died within the year. I'm not real fond of drunk drivers.

IM: You are the first woman elected to the office of Illinois treasurer, the first woman to be re-elected to a statewide office and the first woman to serve on the Legislative Audit Commission. What would you like to be the next "first" attributed to you?

held to a different standard than men. It's not just in politics; it's in business as well. We still have things like *Playboy*, which trivializes women. Things are changing though. Ceilings are being broken—and why should they not be? You've got 50 percent of your population with a lot of brains. That's why I could never understand the Taliban in Afghanistan denying their women rights. You have all this brainpower you're just letting go to waste.

IM: What do you most enjoy about your job as treasurer?

TOPINKA: In firsts, some of those things just happen or not. We'll see where destiny takes me.

IM: As a woman in politics, some have labeled you as "very aggressive." That label is rarely applied to men in politics. How do you feel about that label?

TOPINKA: I am aggressive. I have no problem with that label; it doesn't bother me at all. That's the way you get things done. Ultimately, politics and government is not a game of beanbag. In Illinois, it's a blood sport. So, if you want to play, you'd better be aggressive and you'd better be able to stand on your own two feet—and no whining.

IM: Do you think you're held to a different standard than men?

TOPINKA: I think women in general are

Helping people. Making sure we get businesses up, creating jobs, putting up daycare centers and battered women shelters. Basically, what we do here answers many of the problems that I had in the legislature, or actually carries out bills that I started in the legislature. We were recently in Pinckneyville for the opening of a fish farm co-op, which is now processing fish. In 1989, I sponsored the legislation which started fish farms in Illinois. Seeing that cause and effect makes me feel good. I'm very mission-oriented—very driven by the mission. You have a job, you see it, you focus in on it and you get it done. You don't just talk about it.

IM: What's your least favorite part of being treasurer?

TOPINKA: Sometimes I think it's just the problem of getting everything done that

has to get done. But I've always tried to do more than I have time for. I need 28-hour days.

IM: You are the only constitutional officer in Illinois who generally refuses to travel with a security escort. Why do you feel you don't need security? Have the events of September 11th changed your thinking about security?

TOPINKA: The comptroller doesn't either. Previously, I believe Lt. Gov. Bob Kustra didn't travel with security either. So, I'm not the first. I enjoy the freedom to be

able to come and go. I don't think anybody wants to pick off the treasurer, but if somebody does, it would probably be a very personal thing. As a senator, I had threats. If I receive a threat or have a problem, I have no qualms about calling the state police who are very, very good. I don't particularly like to travel with an entourage. It's just not me; I'm pretty ordinary.

IM: What's being done with the money from the 1999 court settlement between tobacco companies and 46 states? How much money will Illinois receive from that settlement?

TOPINKA: The money is gone. The money was sent back in tax refunds. We did propose a game plan where we would keep a percentage of that money and we could invest it. You had a little golden egg here, laid by the golden



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goose, that you could always come back to and it would still be generating money today. But it was expended in tax refunds, which I don't think anybody appreciated anyway. The maximum was upwards of \$300, which many people did not qualify for anyway. So you've upset people who didn't get it. You didn't impact the people who did get it. But you did impact the state from a standpoint of giving away money that was never appropriated through tax dollars, but could have made a difference, especially now in this economic downturn that we're having.

IM: *Weren't you supposed to get \$35 million a year?*

TOPINKA: We're supposed to get more money from the settlement as it comes in, over a period of 25 years. I don't think we'll ever see this over 25 years. It will decrease as people stop smoking. Tobacco companies themselves may choose to go belly up. That could have a tremendous impact on what we get or don't get. All the more reason why it was important to take what we did get and tighten it up, get rid of the risk factor and put it into investments that could have been generating money. Now, it's all on the come. I don't like money on the come; I like it in the bank.

IM: *Out of all the programs you've implemented or seen through to completion, of what are you proudest?*

TOPINKA: The program that will probably have the longest legacy, that years from now people will still be using, is our Bright Start college savings program. That never existed. We started it, and now it has somewhere around \$153 million dollars in it. At a little over a year old, it's probably one of the most effective ways for people to use their own money to save for college, with tax advantages. Years from now, when I'm in my rocking chair, I'll see these kids go off to college, they won't have debt when they get out and people will not have had to mortgage their homes.

IM: *What personal strength makes you a good treasurer?*

TOPINKA: I think honesty and a respect for money. Money is not something people should trivialize. I didn't like it when I was in the legislature and would see programs being put forward that I knew we couldn't pay for. They used to laugh at me and say I was boring. My mantra was "Who's going to pay for this?" You can have as many programs as you want, as long as you can pay for them. I like being able to plan for the future. I don't like crisis management. We should not be in the financial situation we're in now. Yes, there was the World Trade Center bombing. Yes, there is terrorism. There's been a national softening of the economy. At such a time, you tuck away money; you don't spend yourself into a hole. Nobody should be doing that and we did.

IM: *Is your time evenly divided between Chicago and Springfield?*

TOPINKA: I spend a lot of time in Springfield, back and forth, and in other

counties of the state. Life does not begin and end in Chicago or Springfield. There's a whole half of the state south of us. It's such a beautiful part of the state too. We spend a lot of time on the road talking to people, trying to help people. I think we don't do enough with agriculture. This is major business here. We have the biggest loan program in the United States for agriculture and it's very effective. There are more than 10,000 farmers participating in it now. Alternative agriculture projects are important because farmers just can't make it anymore on corn and soybeans alone. That's where the fish farming comes in. We're trying to create a wine industry in southern Illinois. There's a lot of unemployment there. Hydroponics is in our future. It bugs me to no end that I can't get southern Illinois peaches marketed in Chicago. They're marvelous. We have the resources here; we need to put more time and effort into marketing and distribution.

IM: *What are your future political plans?*

TOPINKA: I don't know. I don't have a crystal ball. I certainly will spend time with my family. I have a son who's now in the army. He's a captain stationed at Fort Lewis, Wa. He married a really neat gal from Alaska and I'm hoping that they will ultimately settle in Illinois.

IM: *Do you have future plans to run for governor?*

TOPINKA: A lot of what is the future in politics is how things break—luck, health, family. There are a lot of variables to consider before you make a decision. You don't decide to be governor just on the basis of blind ambition. That's the single biggest mistake politicians make. If I run for governor, it will be because I know what I'm doing.

IM: *Are you excited about the things you may be able to accomplish in your next four-year term, if you win?*

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Treasurer Topinka and her two pampered pets.

TOPINKA: Oh sure. Everybody looks at other offices, but I think the treasurer's office is probably one of the most undervalued and under-appreciated offices. However, I've got the money. That makes me a very dangerous woman. We help start businesses, we take care of servicemen, we help farmers. We can do things that you couldn't do if you were peddling license plates or just backing up the governor. We've made over two billion dollars in profit for the state. The treasurer's office is a major profit center. Investment earnings go right back into the state. We have no spending authority here. With taking over unclaimed assets two years ago, we've been able to put over \$83 million back into people's pockets that they thought was either lost forever or didn't even know about. Using our Illinois Funds, which we use with taxing bodies, we're able to use their money in a pooled money market concept to get more money than they could make individually. We make a lot of money for a lot of people here. ■

Stefany Henson is associate editor of Illinois Magazine.

Photos: Steve Hinrichs, 11 Acre Studio

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