



October 10, 2009

## Adversity Helped Shape Snowe's Health Care View

By [MARK LEIBOVICH](#)

WASHINGTON — Senator [Olympia J. Snowe](#) has become adept at avoiding the scrums of reporters, sycophants and camera jockeys who seem to materialize wherever she goes these days. They are all trying to determine how she will vote on the health care overhaul.

“Did they get in my brain yet?” Ms. Snowe said of the guessers as she spoke to a cluster of reporters while trying to slip through the back door of the Republican caucus's weekly luncheon on Tuesday.

As the drama over health care legislation builds, the uncertain intentions of Ms. Snowe, Maine's senior senator, have made her one of the foremost Scrum Queens on Capitol Hill. A vote by the Senate Finance Committee next Tuesday on its version of the health overhaul has set off a particularly intensive round of “What Will Olympia Do?” It will not end then, either: Ms. Snowe has said her committee vote will not necessarily foreshadow her final vote on the floor.

“It's really, truly a quandary,” she said in an interview in her Senate office this week. “I'm trying to focus on the practical mechanics and real-life things. This is not a parlor game for me.”

For months, the White House and Democratic lawmakers, eagerly seeking at least one Republican vote for the bill, have tried to accommodate Ms. Snowe's concerns about health care costs, affordability of insurance plans and the feasibility of a [public option](#). Though her positions are much guided by those issues, people who know her well say her own difficult life experiences have also shaped her thinking.

“To a searing degree, and more than most people I've known in politics, Olympia's personal story is at the core of how she goes about her work and her decisions,” said a close friend, former Senator Warren B. Rudman, Republican of New Hampshire.

Ms. Snowe was orphaned at 9 when she lost her father, a short-order cook, to a [heart attack](#) barely a year after

her mother had died of [breast cancer](#). She was separated from her older brother and raised by her aunt, a textile worker, and uncle, a barber, both of whom struggled to support six children on meager earnings.

She became a widow at 26 when her first husband was killed in a car crash, and later lost a 20-year-old stepson to a heart ailment.

“Especially when you lose your parents at a young age, you definitely learn to pick yourself up and dust yourself off,” said Ms. Snowe, 62. “You just have to keep working and moving and living. And, in my position, you learn to translate that empathy of your experience into legislation.”

Ms. Snowe, who served 16 years in the House before her election to the Senate in 1994, has long devoted herself to women's health issues like breast and [ovarian cancer](#) and [osteoporosis](#). She attributes this interest in part to the experience of her mother, whose fatal battle with [cancer](#) provided Ms. Snowe an early window into the health care system, albeit one that has grown foggy over time.

“It was pretty much a horrible struggle,” said Ms. Snowe, recalling that her mother was in and out of a hospital in Lewiston, Me., in her last months. She said that she did not even know whether her mother had had [health insurance](#), but that money had been extremely tight. “We didn't have anything,” she said.

Later, she said, when her first husband, Peter Snowe, was killed in a car accident, she kept thinking about what happens to children who lose a parent. “We didn't have children, but I kept thinking: ‘What would happen if we did? What do people do?’ That launched my efforts on women and working families.”

Even by the workaholic standards of many legislators, Ms. Snowe is known as especially tenacious. She attributes that in part to her Greek immigrant father, George John Bouchles, whom she recalls sending her back to school when she came home at lunchtime. She kept trying to explain to him that kindergarten lasted only a few hours.

“Fine,” he told her, “if you don't want to amount to anything, don't go back to school.” Five-year-old Olympia Bouchles finally had to ask her teacher to write a note to her father explaining the half-day concept.

Ms. Snowe, who in 1989 married John R. McKernan Jr., then governor of Maine, now finds herself at what she calls “the forefront” of the health care debate.

It places the burden of a momentous decision on her, and makes her the envy of many attention-craving colleagues. There have been rumblings, too, that she has come under pressure from fellow Senate Republicans, all of whom seem inclined to vote against any health care bill.

“They bring the hammer down on her, and I’m not going to say how,” Senator [John D. Rockefeller IV](#), Democrat of West Virginia, told The Washington Post this week.

For her part, Ms. Snowe said that other than for some kidding, she had felt no strain with her Republican colleagues. It is unlikely that she would be susceptible to pressure anyway.

“It is a terrible mistake to underestimate her toughness,” said Anthony W. Buxton, former chairman of the Maine [Democratic Party](#). “She has seen a great deal of personal adversity that has educated her, and it makes her less likely to be affected by partisan considerations.”

Ms. Snowe has the luxury of indecision. Not only is she popular at home — her approval ratings run above 70 percent, and she was easily re-elected in 2006 — but Maine tends to teem with independent voters.

“She, more than many others, is in a position to really vote her conscience,” said Representative Chellie Pingree, Democrat of Maine.

Ms. Snowe said she was genuinely conflicted on how she would vote. But that does nothing to dissuade people from trying to guess. Indeed, one way to pay for the health care overhaul would be to charge a quarter of anyone trying to peer into her mind these days.

“I’m even trying to read my own mind,” she said.