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## Capitol ideas: Walstrum steps up for Georgia's tourism industry

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## CAPITOL IDEAS: WALSTRUM STEPS UP FOR GEORGIA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY

In a world that's been the domain of white men from rural Georgia for more than a century, Joy Spears Walstrum has shown that a woman can hold her own in the game of politics — and even stand up to one of the titans of Georgia's political history.

One of Walstrum's duties as managing director of the Tourism Development Alliance of Georgia is to lobby the state legislature and the governor's office on behalf of golf resorts, hotels and chambers of commerce. Even though Georgia's General Assembly meets only about three months each year, hers is a year-round job that requires travel to every corner of the state. She does everything from meeting with mayors in the towns along the route of the Tour De Georgia bicycle race to co-hosting a meeting of the Senate Republican Caucus at Element, a new restaurant on the main street of the south Georgia town of Lyons.

The most challenging aspect of her job, however, is being the sole lobbyist at the State Capitol for tourism interests. As such, her work requires a diverse range of skills.

Walstrum must understand complex policy ideas, such as a proposal to simplify the law that allows local governments to charge an excise tax on hotel rooms. She has to possess loads of personal charm, for the times when she asks a lawmaker to sponsor a bill. She has to understand how to play the game of politics and how to cut back-room deals.

And she must walk a fine line between being an information resource to lawmakers and being a nuisance. Georgia's legislators typically don't have their own staffs, so they rely heavily on lobbyists to provide information. Sometimes lawmakers want a brief explanation of a complicated topic, rather than aggressive advocacy. At least one legislator thinks nobody in Atlanta handles that aspect of the lobbyist's role better than Walstrum.

"Whenever she talks to you, she'll always suggest someone you should talk to who's opposing her, so you can get the other side of the story. That's very unusual for a lobbyist," says Ron Stephens of Savannah, who chairs the legislative committee that oversees the tourism industry.

This wasn't the career path Walstrum had planned for herself at Furman. The 1995 graduate initially intended to go to law school, but eventually majored

in sociology. She cites former sociology professor Bart Dredge's "poverty tour" of Greenville neighborhoods as helping her develop an interest in becoming an advocate.

Her father's business interests also helped steer her professional life. In 1991 David Spears acquired the Sky Valley ski resort in northeast Georgia. After graduating from Furman, Joy went to work for her father, handling the daily operations of the resort, including marketing and promotions.

Her entry into politics came when Walstrum and her father realized the state legislature needed to revise the laws concerning a ski resort's liability for the safety of skiers. Getting such a law passed would be tricky, however, because Sky Valley is the lone ski resort in Georgia and it would mean passing a law for the benefit of only one company.

Walstrum approached the longtime representative from her northeastern Georgia district, the late Ralph Twiggs, and, somewhat fearfully, asked him to sponsor a bill to change the law. Twiggs enthusiastically agreed, even though it meant going against the most powerful man in the State Capitol: former House Speaker Tom Murphy.

As the bill made its way through the legislative process, it became clear that Murphy was going to draw a line in the sand. Murphy withdrew the skiing bill from the agenda of a legislative committee about five minutes before the committee's meeting was to begin.

"Murphy said that if Sky Valley got this bill passed for them, then every other tourist attraction in the state would be at his door next year wanting the same treatment," Walstrum says.



Joy Walstrum works with legislators like Glenn Richardson, Speaker of the Georgia House.

But Twiggs, who was on good terms with Murphy, a fellow Democrat, secured a meeting between Murphy and Walstrum later that morning. Walstrum was able to persuade Murphy to put the bill back on the agenda. It later passed unanimously and eventually became law.

Not long after, the state's tourism interest groups decided they wanted to inject new life into the Tourism Development Alliance, which had become somewhat inactive over the years. In no small part because of her success with Murphy, the groups picked Walstrum to lead their effort.

Walstrum thanks Twiggs for helping her realize that in politics, it's important not to wear your feelings on your sleeve. "He taught me to not take things personally," she says. "But, he said, if it's really important and you really believe in it, then stand up for it."

— ANDY PETERS '92

*The author is a reporter for the Fulton County (Ga.) Daily Report.*