

Rookie cards: Four freshmen from Collier, Lee join team in Legislature POLL

By RYAN MILLS

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TALLAHASSEE — A new city, new buildings, new people and lots of reading material.

There's a lot to learn for Southwest Florida's four freshman state legislators – Sen. Lizbeth Benaquisto, Rep. Matt Caldwell, Rep. Jeanette Nuñez and Rep. Kathleen Passidomo – and they've had to learn it fast.

It's kind of like freshman year of college, except the parties aren't that wild, and if they oversleep and miss a vote, there's an aggressive Tallahassee press corps ready to break the news.

They get offices high up in the Capitol tower. They get assigned to committees to which they have little expertise. Occasionally they get caught off guard by deadlines.

"There's not like there's a book that you sit down and read, here's A, B, C how you do it," Caldwell, 29, R-Lehigh Acres, said of being an elected official.

The newly elected legislators hit the ground running after the November election.

Fourteen days after the general election, the Florida Constitution requires the Legislature to hold an organizational session, which serves as both an orientation for the rookies as well as an opportunity to adopt rules and elect leadership.

This year's orientation process was particularly important because there are so many new faces; nearly 40 true freshmen in the 120-member House of Representatives alone.

"We were pretty much up here every other week from the election until the end of the year," said Passidomo, 57, R-Naples.

During those visits they toured the Capitol building, and learned their way around Tallahassee.

They also had to find somewhere to live.

Many, like Caldwell and Nuñez, are renting homes – Caldwell is sharing a house with two of his colleagues. Others live out of extended-stay hotels.

Some, like Passidomo, purchase a place of their own. With the market depressed, she found a small apartment at a good price.

"I figure, if I'm lucky enough to be re-elected and I'm here for eight years, in eight years I can sell it," she said.

For the past few months, the freshmen legislators have engaged in a crash course in the functions of Tallahassee government – big things like getting assigned to committees and filing bills to the nuts-and-bolts of how and when they get paid and how the computer system works.

Before he was elected, Caldwell said he used to watch House proceedings on television to get a better idea of how things worked.

"You don't want to learn when you're on the floor of the House how to use the computer system, because you'd be sitting there pushing buttons and not listening," Passidomo said.

It's a lot to grasp in a short time, but it also has been fun.

"I've enjoyed it immensely," said Benaquisto, 43, R-Wellington, whose district extends into south Lee County. "I think I've hit my stride."

The learning curve hasn't been as great for Nuñez, 38, R-Miami, whose district extends into eastern Collier. Prior to working as a hospital executive, she worked as a legislative aide in Tallahassee for nearly a decade.

That experience gave her a relatively deep understanding of the legislative process, she said. Still, even she said the transition has been a challenge.

"I think you never anticipate the level of work that you have, the volume of e-mail you receive on any given issue, the volumes of people wanting to talk to you," Nuñez said.

Traveling to and from Tallahassee is also a challenge, especially for the Southwest Florida delegates. It's a nearly seven-hour drive from Naples, and there aren't any direct flights to Tallahassee from Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers.

Round-trip plane tickets from Fort Myers to Tallahassee via Atlanta can cost upward of a couple of grand, although Passidomo said she's gotten tickets for under \$500.

"I couldn't bring myself to charge (the state) 1,200 bucks every week for me to come back and forth," Caldwell said.

Instead, Caldwell said he and some of his colleagues negotiated a "fair rate" with the owner of a small airplane in the Sarasota area to fly them back and forth.

"We are flying in a double-prop; no cabin pressure," he said. "You're going up, and you're going down, and it's basically a glorified flying bus."

The 10-, 12-, 14-hour days make it tough to find room for other activities.

Caldwell, a professional real estate appraiser, thought he would have time in the evenings to work on appraisals. Think again.

The job also can be tough on families, especially for legislators with young children.

Nuñez said she calls her three children – 12, 10 and 4 years old – every morning before school, in the afternoon when they get home, and before they go to bed.

She also gets the occasional call requesting help with homework.

“I’m fortunate that I have both sets of grandparents that live close by and are very helpful, and fill in when I’m not there,” Nuñez said. “I hope at the end of the day they’ll recognize that the sacrifice was worth it.”

The sacrifice is worth it every time they step onto the House or Senate floor, the Southwest Florida delegates said.

“It’s been very, very — there’s no other word to describe it but — cool,” Caldwell said.

Passidomo used the word pride.

“When you walk into the chamber, you just have this overwhelming feeling of ‘This is my state,’” she said. “The history just comes right out – it comes out of the walls – and you’re really doing the people’s business.

“Everybody feels that way.”

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