

## In the Public Eye: Representative Mary Jo Kilroy of Ohio

by Martha King



There is a legislator in Washington with a unique perspective on chronic illness. She is living with MS.

Mary Jo Kilroy got into public service 16 years ago because she had kids in public school. She soon found herself in the middle of a group of other parents concerned about those schools. They went over everything from lunch to sports to teaching standards. Then Kilroy did more. Characteristically, the Columbus, Ohio, mom ran for the school board.

“It was rough-and-tumble politics from day one,” she told **Momentum**, “because everyone is passionate about schools.” She flourished and by 2000 had been elected a county commissioner. Then, in 2003, weird

symptoms appeared out of nowhere. The day she found she couldn’t move her left arm, she rushed to the emergency room.

“I was relieved to learn I didn’t have brain cancer,” she said about her diagnosis. After bouts of midnight worries and “a good dose of denial,” she settled in and became accustomed to taking her MS injections and much more attentive to her general health. Along with conventional medicine, she’s found benefits in the Swank Diet, acupuncture treatments and general work on body mechanics. “In the crazy political life I lead, I might have needed those changes anyway,” she said.

### Disclosure?

Kilroy told her constituents about her MS right away.

“I wanted to be open,” she said. “That’s who I am, and the MS has never been a big issue to my supporters.”

On her second run for national office, she won. The freshman Representative for Ohio’s 15th District arrived in Washington in January 2009, just as health-care reform discussions were everywhere. Last fall Kilroy took an unusual step. She sent a letter to her colleagues in the House to tell her personal story.

“I am lucky to have insurance

that pays for most of the cost of the expensive drugs ...” she wrote. But, her letter continued, “If I were to lose this job ... it would be extremely expensive if not impossible for me to get health insurance in this country.”

### Legislative goals

Many of her legislative goals mirror those of the Society: To make health care affordable and accessible, to end discrimination against those with pre-existing conditions and to help people with chronic illness live independently for as long as they can. She is also promoting research funding for MS and other chronic diseases.

“Research will get us to the causes, the cures and better treatments,” she affirmed.

### Meanwhile, in Columbus

There is life away from the public eye, occasionally. A weekend at home means time to go to church, curl up on Sunday afternoon with the newspapers, play with the family’s two dogs—and savor a dinner cooked by her husband. “When my left arm wasn’t working, my husband had to cook,” she told **Momentum**. “Now he likes it—and he’s become really good.” ■

Martha King is the editor of **Momentum**.