

Becky Lourey needs someone to open the door. The 62-year-old state senator and gubernatorial candidate is crouched on her haunches, readying herself to propel her cancerous, three-legged dog Buster into the front porch of her farmhouse in Kerrick, a town of 71 people located about 100 miles north of the Twin Cities. "I got him just after our son Nando died in a swimming pool accident five years ago, and he was such a comfort to me. I used to hold him on my lap and just hug him," Lourey says, gasping and grunting. Her own small body is now practically submerged beneath Buster, a huge beast—170 pounds back when he had four legs— of indeterminate breed whom she found at the Almost Home dog pound in Mora after he'd knocked down too many of the miniature horses that his former owners raised.

BECKY LOUREY WANTS YOU

CAN A GUN-TOTING GOLD STAR MOM AND STATE SENATOR TOPPLE TIM PAWLENTY?

BY BRITT ROBSON



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"Then, when Matt died last year, I went to Buster again, and I'd try and bring him back up on my lap. But he pushed away from me. He'd just been diagnosed with cancer and had had his leg amputated." By now, Lourey has succeeded in hauling the dog through the door, and it is sprawled across her lap, staring up at her with enormous, loving eyes. "I was trying to get comfort from Buster. But he was showing me that *he* was the one who needed to be comforted," Lourey says. "That's real, isn't it?"

It's certainly the right question. Because the more voters know of the real, unpackaged Becky Lourey, the better chance she has of surmounting the formidable odds against her becoming the next governor of Minnesota. The man Lourey hopes to unseat, Tim Pawlenty, frequently mentions that he is the son of a milk truck driver from South St. Paul, the kind of grassroots bona fide meant to connote "authenticity" out on the campaign trail. But politicians tend not to compare life stories when Lourey is their opponent. You don't match bios with someone who seems to have cribbed hers from Mother Teresa, Annie Oakley, and Job, touching all the bedrock themes of politics—God, country, family, perseverance through extraordinary adversity—along the way.

The colorful personal history is a distinct asset to a candidate who starts with only marginal name recognition outside her legislative district. Over the past 32 years, Lourey has been a farmer, a health care administrator, and a co-owner of small businesses with her husband Gene, the most recent of which is Nemadji Research Corporation, a data management firm that culls and collates computerized medical records from different levels of government so that public hospitals can be reimbursed for services rendered. (The company now employs 70 people in Minnesota and California and provides workers with full medical, dental, and disability insurance, plus an onsite childcare center in Minnesota.) She was elected in 1990 to the Minnesota House and in 1996 to her current position in the Senate, where she is chair of the Senate Health and Family Security Committee. Four years ago she ran for governor, dropping out after losing the DFL endorsement to Roger Moe at the party convention.

But before embarking on her second race for governor, Lourey was probably best known to Minnesotans at large as the state legislator whose son was killed in Iraq in 2005. Last May, her second-born, Matthew, died during his second tour of duty when the helicopter he was piloting was shot down. In March 2003, as the U.S. prepared to invade Iraq, Lourey authored an antiwar resolution signed by 18 of her legislative colleagues. But she did not oppose her son's choice to go to Iraq. "Sometimes I've read stories that haven't been accurate about Matt," she says. "Matt believed it was his duty to go back a second time. He didn't have to go back. He had a pretty cushy job flying dignitaries around Washington. But he just felt he had to go back because he said, 'Mom, we are occupiers around there. We are just keeping each other alive, and I have more experience than anybody else.' Gene and his brothers tried to talk him out of it, but his wife and I said, 'Matt, this is what you have to do. You won't be happy anywhere else.'"

Later in the summer, when Cindy Sheehan was getting blasted in media for the protest camp she'd set up near the Crawford, Texas, ranch where George W. Bush was vacationing, Lourey traveled there (with former FBI whistleblower Coleen Rowley) in a show of support—a rare gesture among the ranks of Democratic party pols with aspirations to higher office, most of whom avoided Sheehan entirely. Later still, Lourey alienated some of her compatriots when she <http://citypages.com/databank/27/1329/article14374.asp>

became the sole state legislator to vote against a bill restricting the right of demonstrators to protest near military funerals. The bill was directed not at antiwar elements, but at anti-gay protesters under the direction of the notorious Rev. Fred Phelps, who had a habit of showing up at soldiers' funerals to proclaim that Iraq war deaths were God's judgment on a permissive nation. By Lourey's reckoning, any abridgement of free speech rights would insult the values her son meant to protect, and that was all there was to it.

Just inside the porch of Lourey's Kerrick home, an impressive conclave of mule deer heads is mounted on the wall over the basement stairwell. One, sporting magnificent antlers, came from a 372-pound buck shot by Becky's father, Everett "E.A." Savage, in 1955—the fifth-largest mule deer ever recorded on the North American continent at the time. Near that is the head of a smaller buck, mounted with a plaque from *Field & Stream* magazine in 1960. It commemorates the marksmanship of 17-year-old Becky Savage, who felled the animal with a shot from one mountain ridge to another, 650 yards away, with her 30.06 rifle.

"I was my dad's only son," Lourey says with genuine enthusiasm, though she must have used that line a thousand times by now. "It was just my older sister and me. She became a concert pianist. But it turned out that I was just a really good shot." For the bulk of three summers as a teenager, she joined her father hunting and roping calves at a ranch in southwestern Montana that belonged to a former county sheriff who'd befriended E.A. after rescuing him from a nasty riding accident in the mountains. Frequently categorized as a doctrinaire liberal, Lourey voted for the 2005 conceal-and-carry gun legislation in the State Senate, a position reflecting not only her familiarity with firearms but her status as the lone rural candidate in the governor's race.

Just a few months after her *Field & Stream* citation, Becky met Gene Lourey, the older brother of her new friend Terry, and was immediately smitten. More than 44 years later, Terry remembers how it didn't matter to Becky—whose father was an executive at the local utility company in Little Falls—that the Loureys had just moved into a mobile home "on the other side of the tracks." The two girls had already developed a fast friendship when Gene came home from college at the U.

"I wanted to date him right away, but he had a lot of rules: 'girls shouldn't wear a lot of makeup,' and 'girls shouldn't be late,' and another one was 'don't date girls who are my sister's friends,'" Becky says, needling her husband as they sit together on the back porch of the farmhouse in Kerrick. "And you can see how well that went," Gene deadpans.

"One night, he was trying to talk Terry and I out of their family's good car because he and Howie wanted to go cruise chicks up in St. Cloud," Becky continues gleefully. "And he suddenly mentioned that he felt like playing cribbage. And I said, 'I challenge you to a cribbage tournament at my house on Friday night!' And he accepted. I immediately ran home and told my father, 'Dad! You've got to teach me how to play cribbage!'"



At 17, Lourey received an award from 'Field & Stream' for killing a deer 650 yards away with a rifle

Everett Savage

Growing up, Becky sometimes heard her mother, Alice, talk with Becky's aunts and uncles about the sense of abandonment they felt after their mother died from a ruptured gall bladder and their father traveled away from home looking for work. Lourey remembers running to her room to cry and pound her pillow at the unfairness of children not having a place they always knew they could call home. She was proud of her "13-year pin" for perfect attendance in Sunday school and says she chose Asbury, a small liberal arts college in Kentucky that "emphasizes Christian orthodoxy in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition," for the express purpose of becoming a Methodist missionary.

That didn't work out. "After attending chapel three times a day and listening to people, what I learned was that I couldn't tell everybody that there was just one way to God," she says. "We all worship in different ways. And there are agnostics and atheists who have every right to be that." A year later, she married Gene and transferred to the University of Minnesota while he finished up the degree program that would soon land him with the National Security Agency in Washington, D.C., as one of the first American cryptographers using computers to break enemy codes. "He was really good at it. He got security clearance after security clearance," Becky says. "Then Vietnam was getting started and I left in protest," Gene says pointedly. He turned down other positions, including the vice presidency at one fast-growing firm, for political reasons. "One day he came home and said, 'I'm making all this money for people who don't need any more money.' And he took another job that was how many thousands less?" Lourey asks. "It was

about a 40 percent cut in pay," Gene says. "I think that's so admirable," Becky says. "Some could see it as pretty self-indulgent," Gene replies.

By 1969, Becky had given birth to three sons. The family moved to Minneapolis's Wedge neighborhood that year after Gene was hired to automate the biomedical library at the U. "Back then, the Wedge was changing from a high-crime neighborhood to a place filled with hippie communes and gays, and our house became the place for a lot of meetings because we helped start the Wedge Neighborhood Association," she says, grinning at the thought.

The Loureys never disagreed on anything more strenuously than the question of moving away from Minneapolis to the country. Becky cherished the bustle of the city. Gene craved solitude and yearned for a small farm. What ultimately swung the argument in his favor was the couple's plan to adopt many children, a mutual desire that dated to the days before they were married. But when one of their adoption applications landed Gene, a then-pregnant Becky, and their three sons in a waiting room filled with childless couples, they could see their adoption plans needed revising. "We realized we couldn't compete with those people," Gene says. "So we just told the agency that we'd take the ones that everyone else turns down." That meant children who were older and likely to be saddled with medical, emotional, and developmental problems. Thrusting them into a city neighborhood didn't seem like a great idea. So in 1974 they bought a farm on about 240 acres of land in Kerrick.

The farmhouse was in shambles, with tarpaper on the front door, a leaky roof, and three unheated rooms. "You could tell how cold it was by the amount of frost on the walls," Lourey says. With help from her husband's father and brother, they put on a new roof, gutted the second floor, and made the place habitable. It took a long time: For years, the sinks in the kitchen and bathroom were propped up with 2x4s that would buckle and cause the pipes to spray if you hit them too hard with your hip. When the sinks were finally secured, Becky went out and burned the 2x4s as she danced in a circle around them.

The Loureys had five children when they moved to Kerrick. Over the next seven years, they would adopt a half-dozen more. "They just kept sending us cute pictures," Gene jokes. "No, it didn't take long. You hear that it takes three years to adopt. Well, tell them you'll take whatever they've got and they'll be back to you in a month."

"It can be very, very hard," says Becky, in a rare somber voice. "There can be a lot of fighting, because not only is the new child new, but it affects all the others, who are now in a different spot. And part of it of course is these kids had so much grief to go through. One of my daughters was 13 when she came to us. Another was 10. They'd lost over and over and over, suffered horrible abuse they didn't even dare tell me for a long time. Where a lot of adoptions fail is when you have that first bonding and the parent goes to bed just thrilled and the child goes to bed thinking, 'I'm going to be left again.' They get up the next morning and the parents are ready to go forward and the child is testing, testing even worse than before. And I maintain that that happens at least three times before the child really sees that they can trust and start to believe in you."

Monday through Friday, Gene was typically away on business, leaving Becky to run the household *and* the farm. Along with parenting anywhere from 5 to 11 children, she tended to 75 cows and 70 ewes; put up 5,000 bales of hay in the barn each year; planted, harvested and canned literally tons of fruits and vegetables; and did rudimentary carpentry work in her spare time.

Lourey hastens to add that she wasn't in it alone. Her in-laws had relocated just a few miles away; her oldest son, Tim, loved to farm; and there was a lovably gruff neighbor she could always call for advice on how to birth a calf or fix a piece of machinery. But when the alarm clock went off at four in the morning, she was the one who got out of bed and did the chores before coming back in to get the kids ready for school, monitoring shower usage because, for a discount rate, the rural electrical association only heated the water from eleven at night until seven in the morning. And when the adoption agency called about the possibility of them taking another child, she was the one who told them they had to wait, because it was haying season and she'd be on the tractor too much to monitor the new family dynamics going on in the house.



Lourey and her husband Gene on their farm in Kerrick: After eight years of raising cows and sheep, they put the equipment and animals up for auction in 1982

Jim Robins

The Loureys never had one of their eight adoptions fail. The farm operation didn't fare as well. In the early 1980s, theirs became one of the hundreds of family farms forced to auction off its animals and equipment to pay outstanding debts, although the Loureys were able to hold on to the land and the house. Becky, who spent eight years of her thirties devoting her heart and soul to farming, says that it was "devastating" to watch so many prized possessions get wheeled or led down the farm's quarter-mile of dirt driveway to the road, where the auctioneer had set up.

But what Lourey tends to recall from that day—July 17, 1982—are the saving graces. Their shrewd purchases and diligent maintenance enabled them to sell their equipment at auction for more than they'd originally paid. And when the auctioneer saw that she was heartbroken about losing the family's young colt, he abruptly announced it wouldn't fetch enough of a price to be worth taking down the driveway for bids. Today that colt is her beloved Simsek (the word means lightning in Turkish), who she still rides on a regular basis.

The auction fell on the one-year anniversary of the Loureys' most recent adoption, and left them without cash on hand to celebrate the event. So Becky and the kids baked brownies and doughnuts, cooked hot dogs and made sandwiches, and sold enough of them out of the back of a neighbor's cattle trailer at the auction to bankroll a proper anniversary celebration that night.

That kind of indomitable spunk is essential to Lourey's personal and political appeal. No one would question her right to grieve. In one of the most intimate spots in her Kerrick home, beside the mirror in the master bathroom, are framed pencil drawings of a plane dumping hearts from the sky. They were drawn by her five-year-old son Jay, their first adopted child, the night before he died from complications arising from open-heart surgery back in August 1971. At other places inside and outside the house are sculptures, groupings of photographs, and other makeshift shrines honoring two other sons: "Nando," adopted after he suffered a traumatic brain injury in an earthquake that killed his birth family in Guatemala, who died in a swimming pool accident in Maplewood five summers ago; and Matt, the Lourey's second-born, who died in Iraq last May.

But when facing the voting public, Lourey is terse about her losses: "I've buried three sons, lost two businesses, and gone through a farm auction," she says. Dwelling on the details would merely typecast her as a martyr, a trap that has already ensnared Patty Wetterling. The cliché is that everyone loves an underdog, but that's only true if the underdog is feisty enough to keep getting up off the mat.

Lourey says she isn't surprised that people are downplaying her chances to become governor: Few thought much of her chances against the popular incumbents she beat to win her House and Senate seats, either. In fact, there is a fairly plausible scenario by which she could become governor. The first step is to capture the DFL endorsement at the party's statewide convention in Rochester June 9-11, where the presumptive front-runner will be Attorney General Mike Hatch. But Hatch's notoriously abrasive style has alienated party stalwarts in the past, both during his tenure as statewide DFL chair in the early '80s and again when he set about pruning the bloated staff left by his popular predecessor in the AG's office, Skip Humphrey. In lieu of an early, all-out push for the endorsement, Hatch chose to hoard his political capital in anticipation of an expensive challenge from moderate businessman Kelly Dornan in the September primary, a strategy later confounded by Dornan's surprise withdrawal from the race. The other serious challenger for the endorsement, Sen. Steve Kelley (DFL-Hopkins), is an amiable moderate from the suburbs; the influential, longstanding chair of the Senate Education Committee; and the only one among the three main candidates who has said he'll drop out of the race if he isn't endorsed at the convention. But Kelley's role as chief Senate author of the highly controversial stadium bill at the Capitol this session will almost certainly hurt him among the DFL rank and file, despite his efforts to portray the bill as a Trojan horse for significant new investments in transportation.

"Any one of the three could win the endorsement, but if I had to guess I'd say it will be Becky," says a political analyst who has helped run numerous statewide campaigns but has no client in the governor's race. "She is the best-liked by the delegates. Stadiums kill Kelley. The super-delegates and people who only think about beating Pawlenty will go to Hatch, but he's not a big party guy. Lourey will get most of the Peace First-ers and the liberal base. In the primary she needs to run as a populist, and she'll be helped by the fact that women usually poll well among DFL primary voters."

"Absolutely Becky Lourey could get the endorsement, which is very much up for grabs," says Blois Olson, co-publisher of the Politics in Minnesota newsletter. "She is a populist at her core, she is from outstate Minnesota, she is a business owner, and she is a lefty on key lefty issues like health care and peace. If she makes it to the primary and the general [election], she has to talk about health care as a business owner, about education, about the suburban-rural fight over money. I've long argued that Democrats cannot shy away from talking about values in races against Republicans, and I don't think anybody can argue about values with Becky Lourey. There's no one in this race who can

hold a candle to her family history. However, I don't think there are enough people statewide who know who she is, and even if she gets the endorsement, I don't think she is going to generate a lot of money to educate them."

Others argue that Lourey's low name recognition is symptomatic of a deeper problem—a willingness to defer the spotlight born of equal parts modesty and consensus-building instincts. Case in point: She has considered health care her number-one issue ever since going to work for the Northern Lakes Health Care Consortium in Duluth after the farm auction in 1982. She subsequently served on numerous task forces and advisory committees, helped formulate the groundbreaking MinnesotaCare legislation while in the private sector, and then got elected to the House in time to co-author the bill that passed the program into law in the early '90s. She is the longtime chair of the Senate Health Committee. Yet the person widely regarded as the most influential and knowledgeable legislator on health care matters is not Lourey, but Sen. Linda Berglin (DFL-Minneapolis). Meanwhile, in his aggressive enforcement of nonprofit HMOs as attorney general, her rival Hatch has arguably done more to influence the state of health care in Minnesota than Lourey.



At the Legislature, Lourey is "not a heavyweight," says a lobbyist of the 16-year veteran and chair of the Senate health committee

Jim Robins

"We know we can always count on Becky to carry our bills in the Senate," says a lobbyist at the Capitol. "But she's not a particularly effective legislator, or a heavyweight. And as a candidate [for governor], she's John Marty"—the bright, boyish state senator and ethics watchdog who won the DFL endorsement and the DFL primary over Mike Hatch in 1994 only to be trounced by incumbent Republican Gov. Arne Carlson in the general election.

Some aspects of that comparison don't hold up. While Marty represents solidly liberal, upper-middle-class neighborhoods in Roseville and St. Paul, Lourey points out that she had to beat a popular 18-year Republican incumbent to get elected to the House in her rural, conservative district, and later toppled a conservative DFL incumbent with 24 years of seniority to win her Senate seat. But invoking Marty strikes a chord in the sense that he was an exceedingly nice and decent man who got steamrolled by an opposition party that played hardball relentlessly. Lourey exudes that same sort of guileless amiability, a quality that Blois Olson describes as "a childish enthusiasm for being loved." During a gimmicky, round-robin meet-and-greet with 5th District DFL delegates at the Hennepin County Courthouse in late April, a woman told Lourey that she definitely had her support at the convention. Becky's response was to literally jump up and down and clap her hands while beaming from ear to ear.

"It is not uncommon for women candidates to get these kinds of questions," responds Lourey campaign communications director John Blackshaw, who was Paul Wellstone's first chief of staff. "People say, 'I love Becky,' but then they have that variation on the question: 'Can she govern?' 'Can she lead?' 'Is she courageous enough?' Or whatever. It is an unfair characterization that women candidates across the country receive. But it is the job of the people in the campaign to help answer those questions, because Becky has all those qualities. And if we answer them, she will win.

"I think voters are looking for someone who is authentic, somebody they can trust," Blackshaw says. "By trust, I don't just mean that you can believe what they are saying—and that *they* believe what they are saying—but that they understand what the voters' lives are like, what they are going through."

The essence of Lourey's campaign was neatly laid out back in April when she appeared as a guest on a staunchly conservative Patriot Radio (1280 AM) talk show hosted by former Pioneer Press editorial writer Mark Yost. Perusing Lourey's campaign website, beckylourey.org, Yost or one of his on-air cohorts complained that Lourey advocated making health care a right for all citizens. "Free speech is a right. The right to bear arms is a right. I just think when people elevate things like health care to a right, it demeans rights," he said.

"Listen, let me tell you something," Lourey replied. "We adopted eight kids and they all had medical and emotional and development problems. My youngest son, Nick, was in the middle of his 24 surgeries. My son Fernando was in the middle of his 12 surgeries. And we lost our income. We lost our health care. I mean, I didn't let the kids bring the mail in from the mailbox. I had to wait until the third week of the month, when I'd go get that mail and lay out the 21 medical bills I couldn't pay and start calling. One provider would say, 'Oh Mrs. Lourey, I'm so glad you called. Would

you send five dollars in the mail and we won't send you to collection.' Another would say, 'As long as you call and you have a plan to pay, we won't send you to collection.' But always one provider would send us to collection. I know what it is like not to have health care. And here is the thing in Minnesota—the people in Minnesota who don't have health care are employed, they are working. And when you look at my plan, it is integrated; businesses are going to thrive here. Businesses are going to come to this state because they are going to be able to afford health care."

"One quick question: Who would you have liked to have paid those 21 bills for you?" Patriot Radio wanted to know.

"I would have liked to have been able to have solid, healthy care that was—"

"Would you have liked to have had the taxpayers of Minnesota and the businesses of Minnesota pay those bills?"

"No, this is all a partnership. Wal-Mart is sending their employees to subsidized state health coverage. We've got to get together on this."

"Saying it is a partnership just means you want to spread out the burden on all the taxpayers who can afford health insurance in Minnesota."

"No, I am not raising any more money," Lourey said patiently, then repeated, "I am not raising any more money for this plan. This plan is a partnership between the subsidy that is already there with the provider tax and businesses paying their share."

Through it all, Lourey never snarled, never asked how Patriot Radio proposed to provide health care for un-aborted but abandoned children, never pointed out that her taxpaying business was also paying private sector health insurance for its 70 employees, and never queried Mark Yost on how many jobs he had created lately. Instead, she noted at the end of the segment that she and the Patriot Radio moderators always seemed to find large areas of agreement.

Whatever one thinks about her political creed or her gubernatorial prospects, Lourey's life story is the sort that's liable to make any reasonable person wonder how she's managed without wearing down or turning cynical. Asked what has kept her grounded in life through dying sons and failed businesses and alarm clocks set to ring at 4:00 a.m., Lourey pauses. "I always knew that my sister had much more talent than me," she says at last, "and that was troubling to me as a girl. She was a child prodigy as a pianist. People drove up from the Twin Cities to watch her play when she was seven and I was four. At first a gentleman was playing with me, then everybody ran and saw my sister play, and I filled up my squirt gun with mud and ran in and shot it all over the gentleman's shirt. And I yelled, 'Everybody always wants to be with Judy!'"

Not long after that, Lourey says she heard the Parable of the Talents (from the Book of Matthew) in Sunday school. One servant was given 10 talents and turned them into 20; another was given 5 talents and turned them into 10. Both were told that they were good and faithful and would live in paradise. "But then the servant who was given one talent said, 'I was so afraid I'd lose it that I hid it under a rock,' and he was told that he was banished forever. And I said, 'What!!'" Lourey recalls with a laugh. "I remember lying awake at night a lot after that, thinking, 'I don't like that.' But then it came to me, and I said, wait. My sister has 10 talents and is turning them into 20. I have one and I have the responsibility to turn it into two. And that is why I believe every single person in this world has talents to double.

"Four years ago, I don't think Minnesota was ready for me," she adds a little later. "I think they are ready for me now."



Suffragette City! Lourey campaigns in period costume during the May Day parade in Minneapolis

Nick Vlcek for City Pages