

In Loretta Weinberg, Corzine taps an outspoken, progressive and sometimes stubborn running mate

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TRENTON -- As a Wall Street tycoon wading into the swamp of New Jersey politics in the summer of 1999, Jon Corzine paid a visit to [Loretta Weinberg](#) at her office in Teaneck -- "one of those obligatory, 'I have to go see the elected officials' calls," as she remembers it.

The then-U.S. Senate candidate and Bergen County assemblywoman went to a diner across the street to chat. They struck up a political alliance and friendship that grew deep enough that she lost sleep with worry when Corzine was in a near-fatal car crash several years later.



Amanda Brown/The Star-Ledger
State Sen. Loretta Weinberg at an Aug. 8 campaign event in Verona with Gov. Jon Corzine.

Now, fighting to keep his governorship alive, Corzine has turned to Weinberg, tapping the self-described "feisty Jewish grandmother" as his Democratic running mate in the state's first campaign to feature a lieutenant governor.

"He just gravitated towards her," said Scott Kisch, one of Corzine's closest aides during the 2000 campaign. "With the choice of Loretta now, he went back inside his heart and his gut -- where he thought he should be -- and wanted to be with somebody he had the utmost trust and respect for."

An outspoken, progressive and sometimes stubborn legislator, Weinberg -- now a state senator -- says she relishes her new role in the Corzine campaign. From the day she was chosen three weeks ago, she has taken the lead in attacking Republican Chris Christie, who is ahead of Corzine in the polls.

She has tried to reinforce Corzine's message on ethics, gun control, and women's health care. And, friends and associates say, she has helped remind the embattled governor why politics beckoned in the first place.

"You know what, come right down to it, he could be out enjoying life someplace, and he's got a passion and a commitment to this, and so do I," Weinberg, 74, said in an interview last week, sitting on a Verona park bench on a sweltering day. "If you become too cynical, then you sort of give up, and he has not become cynical through this process ... as I think I have not, over the many years I've been involved. He still has the ability to see that there are ways we can improve it and that the fight is worth fighting."



Mike Derer/APNew Jersey Gov. Jon

Corzine waves to supporters at his primary election night victory rally in West Orange on June 2. Few would argue that Weinberg hasn't seen her share of combat.

She bucked the powerful Democratic machine in her county and fought in court to win her Senate seat. She questioned some of Christie's decisions when he still had the prestige -- and subpoena power -- of U.S. attorney, and has ruffled his feathers as a candidate. She took back control of her finances after losing her life savings -- about \$1.3 million -- last year in the multibillion-dollar Ponzi scheme masterminded by Bernie Madoff.

And she has broken with Corzine in the past, criticizing his donations to party power brokers, something the Christie campaign has thrown back at the Democratic ticket.

Underlying it all, those close to Weinberg say, is a lively blend of idealism and realism that has sustained her through a lengthy and sometimes trying career in the public spotlight.

"Another 70-something-year-old person would say, 'You know what, it's more important for me to spend time with my grandchildren,'" said her daughter, Francine Weinberg-Graff. "For her, this is her choice, this is what she wants, this is what she loves. My mother just has a real belief that she's always right, and when it comes to political things, she is."



Born Loretta Isaacs in New York in 1935, she moved to California for high school and college before returning to the city, where she met her late husband, Irwin Weinberg. They married in 1961 and moved to New Jersey.

Irwin ran a store design business out of their home, and Loretta helped build it, even posing as a secretary.

"Some potential client would call, and she's answering the phone with her maiden name, 'Mr. Weinberg will be right with you, he's on the other line,'" said Jamie Fox, a Democratic strategist who has been friends with Weinberg since the 1970s. "It was a very strong relationship."

Her passion for politics took root in the 1960s and '70s, when Weinberg was a young mother in Teaneck.

She likes to say it all started when she was pushing her two children in a baby carriage, realized Teaneck had no shade trees on its main street, and went to a council meeting to voice her concerns. The growing civil rights and women's movements also stirred her, and she drew other mothers to the cause.

"We'd sit in the backyard with all our kids, and we would help the Democratic Party," Weinberg said. "We would fill out forms, do cards, and one thing led to another."

She made her way into Bergen County politics, working for a Democratic assemblyman, the county Democratic Committee and as the assistant county administrator. That schooled her in the nuts and bolts of government, Fox said.

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Another job, at Bergen Pines County Hospital in the 1980s, turned controversial when she was fired after an uproar over the disappearance of eight tons of canned tuna. Claiming political motivations, Weinberg sued and the hospital suspended her termination, but later reaffirmed it.

During that ordeal -- "like the Salem witch trials," her daughter said -- and others, Weinberg showed a knack for steeling herself against criticism.

"She kind of clicks in, and she is razor-sharp focused, she is razor-sharp intelligent, she knows how to fight fairly," Francine Weinberg-Graff said.

Her work and political obligations led Weinberg to sacrifice family time during an era when mothers stayed at home, her daughter said, but "she would always take our phone calls," even to tell her kids where the mustard was in the fridge.

It also worked the other way around.

"Whenever I'd call her, she'd say, 'I'm at the playground, I've got the kids on the swing, but what's new?'" Fox said. "She'd be pushing the kid, and we'd be talking about how many votes we have."

Weinberg was elected to the Assembly in 1992 and worked her way up to majority leader. In 2005, she won a vacant Senate seat after a protracted battle that split the Bergen Democratic party, with then-gubernatorial nominee Corzine supporting Weinberg and then-Bergen County Democratic chairman Joseph Ferriero backing Hackensack Police Chief Charles "Ken" Zisa.

Ferriero became a bitter adversary, and he tried to challenge Weinberg in the 2007 primary before Corzine and other Democrats made it clear they'd take her side. Weinberg's clashes with the Ferriero -- who now faces federal corruption charges -- and what she calls the "old boys network" burnished her reform credentials. Even Republicans give her credit.

"She has shown some wide-eyed independence when it comes to dealing with the worst elements of her county political organization," said state Sen. Joseph Kyrillos (R-Monmouth), Christie's campaign chairman. But he and other Christie allies argue Weinberg's independent streak did not stop her from voting for Democratic-backed tax increases. As for her self-professed ability to get under Christie's skin, Kyrillos said, "She flatters herself too much."

Her wry critiques also frustrate some powerful Democrats, who tried to convince Corzine not to select her. Some in the party believed Republicans would use the Madoff losses to undermine her credibility on financial issues.

That hasn't happened yet, but Weinberg says she's ready for anything thrown her way. She chalks up the Madoff debacle as another life experience, along with raising children and caring for her husband before he died of cancer in 1999.

"There is not much -- sometimes I've said fortunately or unfortunately -- that I haven't sort of experienced," Weinberg said. "I'm a realist."

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