

## Making Georgia history, Jones still answers to Mom

By SHANNON McCAFFREY

Jan Jones this month became the most powerful woman in the history of the Georgia Legislature.

But the newly-elected speaker pro tem of the Georgia House said there's another title she's far more accustomed to: Mom.

"My kids think it's sort of funny," the mother of four - ages 14 to 22 - said in an interview with The Associated Press. "They bring you right back down to earth."

Jones, 51, may have shattered the glass ceiling at the Georgia Capitol, where slightly more than 80 percent of the Legislature is still male. But she said she's been somewhat surprised by all the attention her gender has brought.

"It's one piece of me," the Republican from Milton said. "An important piece of me, but one piece."

Still, it may prove to be an enormous asset for a Republican Party still recovering from the sex scandal that brought down the state's powerful House Speaker Glenn Richardson. The Hiram Republican stepped down Jan. 1 after allegations of an affair with a female lobbyist. Richardson's fall led to charges that Georgia's Capitol had become a "good old boys" club under GOP rule.

Jones' election on Jan. 11 to the second highest position in the House seems sure to blunt at least some of that criticism.

The ascent of a female power broker in the Georgia legislature also may touch up its image. The Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University ranked Georgia 38th out of 50 states when it came to the percentage of women legislators. Just 45 of the state's 236 legislators are women.

"It's refreshing to see a woman in a place that's been dominated by males," said state Rep. Brooks Coleman, a Duluth Republican who's worked with Jones on education issues.

"And she is exactly the kind of woman you would want: intelligent, compassionate, hardworking. She knows how to keep all the balls in the air."

Jones was born in Warner Robins. Her father was in the U.S. Air Force and the family bounced around from California to Alaska to Canada. But their roots were in Dublin, Ga., and the state always felt like home.

Jones received a journalism degree at the University of Georgia and, for a time, harbored dreams of being an investigative reporter. Instead, she went on to receive a master's degree in finances from Georgia State University and married her husband, Kalin, a lawyer. She was a stay-at-home mom for about a decade but also worked as a marketing executive for HBO and ran a childcare placement business. But it was her work as a community activist that set her on the path to politics.

When Jones and her family moved to the fast-growing suburbs in north Fulton County more than a decade ago, she became immersed in a plan that would have annexed the sprawling unincorporated areas of the county into Alpharetta.

"All of a sudden people started to ask me, 'when are you going to run for office?'" she said.

"I wasn't the kid who ran for class president," she said. "I didn't know I was preparing for this but I realized really I had."

She ran for a House seat in 2002 and has been on the rise ever since. She was elected GOP majority whip in 2008, another first for a woman.

At the state Capitol, she's been particularly active on education issues, including charter schools. Jones has a clear philosophy when it comes to schools: the closer the decision-making is to the parent and the local community the better.

She's also been pushing a divisive proposal that would split Fulton County in two, cutting off the more affluent and predominantly white suburbs to the north from the poorer, black neighborhoods to the south.

Jones said the proposal has nothing to do with race and is aimed instead at making Fulton County - with about 1 million residents - more responsive by making it smaller. The plan would re-create Milton County to the north.

At her new state Capitol office, glass Republican elephants line the shelves. So does a Wonder Woman lunch box, a gift from her election as whip.

But Jones describes herself as rather boring.

"I don't play tennis, I don't play golf. I wish I was more fun," she laughs. "Fun to me is sitting down and writing an analysis of the education budget so others can understand it."

Jones' rapid rise has stirred the inevitable rumor that she may run for governor down the road.

She said the idea has never occurred to her.

"I like the legislative process. It's messy. It's complicated," Jones said. "I love being in the House and that is honestly where I see myself."

And as much as she downplays her gender, she knows she's now a symbol.

"It is visible affirmation that women are at the table," she said.

"And it does mean something to my daughters."