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Duckworth working to win

By **Will Hoover**
Advertiser Staff Writer

Illinois Army National Guard Maj. L. Tammy Duckworth sat in a wheelchair at the paper-strewn kitchen table in her suburban Chicago home doing what she seems to do better than most mortals: focusing totally on the task at hand.

She worked the phones for hours Wednesday as part of her effort to get herself elected to Congress — reaching out to dozens of mayors, union officials and everyday voters.

Somehow, she's able to stay focused and find humor simultaneously. She has a knack for instantly putting people at ease with what some call her disability — the fact that she lost both her legs in Iraq 418 days before.

Pausing between calls, Duckworth noted that her high-tech artificial legs were in the closet "charging up." What she called her "left stump" was propped up on the table.

"That's my way of kicking back," she said with an infectious laugh. "I know, the politically correct term is residual limb. But that's just way too many syllables, and I figure it's mine. I can call it what I want."

Duckworth's Iraq experience already is the stuff of American military lore.

On Nov. 12, 2004, her entire focus was on not losing consciousness while trying to safely land a Black Hawk helicopter. It had been blasted by a rocket-propelled grenade that exploded where Duckworth was seated. The maneuver was an impossible feat with two missing legs, a shattered right arm, and a multitude of other serious injuries.

Another pilot landed the helicopter. But Duckworth, not realizing how seriously she'd been hurt, kept her attention on the mission, passing out only when the Black Hawk was on the ground. Initially presumed dead, Duckworth remained unconscious for the next 10 days.

Her focus for the better part of 2005 included staying alive, undergoing intense therapy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and painstakingly learning to walk again on artificial legs.

She is on record as saying she's determined to fly helicopters again.

Duckworth knows that political pundits are focused on her. As a Democratic candidate in a historically Republican district trying to win the House seat being vacated by retiring Republican icon Henry Hyde, her 6th District race is becoming a Democratic Party priority and a talking point among political heavyweights.

"Very rarely have I met a more impressive person than Tammy Duckworth," said Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., in an article the day before she announced her candidacy Dec. 18. "She just has the poise and exudes the type of character that I think would make her an astounding public servant."



Congressional candidate Tammy Duckworth works the phones at her campaign headquarters in Lombard, Ill. Since she announced her candidacy last month, the 1985 McKinley High School graduate has shown herself willing to work hard and speak her mind.

Peter Thompson



Tammy Duckworth, shown at a news conference at the Helen M. Plum Memorial Library in Lombard, Ill., is focused on her new goal: winning the 6th District U.S. House seat in Illinois as a Democrat. Democrats are targeting the seat, long held by Republican Harry Hyde.

Peter Thompson



Tammy Duckworth, shown speaking with campaign workers at her campaign headquarters in Lombard, Ill., brings an intense focus blended with a keen sense of humor to her latest mission: running for Congress.

Peter Thompson



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Duckworth is happy to point out that she and Hawai'i-raised Punahou graduate Obama have "a kama'aina connection."

Both were born outside the country — Obama in Indonesia, Duckworth in Thailand — and graduated from high school in Honolulu — Punahou and McKinley, respectively.

"The big thing for me is that I'm a McKinley High grad," said Duckworth. "That gives you a lot of street creds. I wasn't a rich kid."

Born in Bangkok on March 12, 1968, when her father was there working with a United Nations refugee program, Duckworth spent much of her childhood in Southeast Asian countries. Along with her parents, Franklin and Lamia Duckworth, and her younger brother, Tommy Duckworth, she arrived in Hawai'i at age 16. An honors student, she skipped ninth grade and graduated in 1985.

Richard Sakamoto, Duckworth's high school principal, remembers her as the sort of student any educator would hope to find in the classroom — multitalented, determined and bound for success.

"She was one of the best students, because of her determination," said Sakamoto, who had breakfast with Duckworth when she returned to Hawai'i in September to attend a wedding and to speak at a women's leadership conference.

"She was something else, very intelligent, very goal-oriented. She was an athlete. She participated in basketball, volleyball and track."

And according to Duckworth, she was and still is a girly girl. A photo of her looking stylish and feminine in a short satin dress appears in the 1985 McKinley High yearbook, for which Duckworth wrote the epilogue.

Another yearbook picture of her throwing a discus offers a different perspective. The accompanying caption reads: "Tammy Duckworth proves that females are more than equal to the task."

Duckworth, who holds a master's degree in international affairs from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., received a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Hawai'i in 1989.

UH political science professor Ira Rohter said she was a noticeable presence even then.

"Here was somebody who stood out and was asking questions," said Rohter, who recalls having Duckworth in one of his courses.

"She was inquisitive. There was a critical analysis. She was one of those people who read the material and then would talk and argue with you about it."

Rohter said he's not surprised now to find Duckworth on the national stage.

"I think she has a sophisticated understanding of what's going on," he said. "I'm intrigued with what it is that she wants to accomplish."

On the local level in Illinois, Duckworth wants to accomplish the sorts of things that matter to the people in the 6th District — better education, higher-paying jobs for young graduates, and affordable healthcare.

And she isn't shy about speaking her mind on controversial subjects. Duckworth talks about what she sees as a lack of leadership in Washington, D.C., record federal debt and bad fiscal policies that benefit the rich.

"Invading Iraq was a mistake," she says on her Tammy Duckworth for Congress Web site. "We should have focused our military resources instead on pursuing the terrorists who attacked our country and on capturing Osama Bin Laden."

Once she was discharged from active duty in late December, Duckworth was no longer restricted from making political statements. She remains in the Illinois National Guard on a Continuation On Active Reserve status — one of two severely injured soldiers given that special status, she said.

Out of uniform, she'll say what's on her mind, taking her cues largely from those who know firsthand what she's been through.

"I have a lot of respect for that World War II generation who came back from the war and changed this country," said Duckworth, whose husband, Bryan Bowsbey, is a captain in the Army National Guard.

"Sen. Daniel Inouye was in that generation. Bob Dole and John F. Kennedy were in that generation."

Duckworth's dad, a Marine who received a Purple Heart for wounds received in Okinawa and the driving influence of her life, was of that generation. He died of heart failure on Jan. 28, 2005.

His daughter has nothing but praise for her fellow soldiers in the Middle East who she says risk their lives daily, watch their buddies get killed, and then keep going the next day.

"What's happened is they've done their duty, but the politicians have failed them," she said.

Too many legislators don't have a personal stake in the decision process — their sons aren't serving, Duckworth said. And that's why she remains in the military.

"Because if I get into Congress, the next time they decide whether or not to send troops into battle, I want to be there to make that decision.

"At least my butt will be on the line. I'm not just going to send somebody else. I'm going to be sending myself."

As for those who might criticize her views as somehow unpatriotic, Duckworth said bring it on.

"I've already had an RPG blow up in my lap," she said. "After that, take your best shot. I'm going to get up and fight for what I think is right."

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