

NINA MOINI: As Minnesotans were waking up to the news of the attacks on June 14 last year, some of the state's political leaders were also learning they may have been targeted. Authorities say they found writings by the gunman that included the names of dozens of politicians. They also say that between the attacks on the Hoffmans and Hortmans, he went to the homes of two other DFL lawmakers. One of them is Maple Grove and Osseo Representative Kristin Bahner.

Like Senator John Hoffman, she's decided to run for re-election despite the terrifying events of last summer. I talked with her in studio this week, and she told me she never really doubted whether to run again, in part because she wants to carry on the legacy of her late colleague.

KRISTIN BAHNER: I think Melissa was an incredible leader because she understood the humanity of the work. She understood what it was when we can't deliver something and you have folks who have to wait yet another year to get relief.

The one thing about Melissa that also, I think, stood out is that regardless of what side of the aisle you are on-- and after all of this, I talked to many of my colleagues. And they said, we trusted her. We trusted her to keep her word.

NINA MOINI: From what I've observed at the Capitol, Melissa Hortman is still very much a part of people's day to day. And people honor her in different ways. And everybody, to your point, seems to have really felt the loss.

You also, in addition to that, found out from authorities who told you that they said that Vance Boelter had actually been to your home. You were on the list. You and your family were not there. I read you were on a trip, and so you've also had to grapple with that. I'm so sorry. How has that been for you and your family?

KRISTIN BAHNER: Well, I actually found out-- Sorry.

NINA MOINI: It's OK.

KRISTIN BAHNER: The morning of the 14, when I woke up and my partner shared that the chief was on the phone. I had heard the phone pinging during the night, but it was on the other side of the room. And I woke up to the chief saying to me, I'm so sorry, Representative Bahner, but Speaker Hortman and her husband had died and that the Hoffmans were in critical condition.

And he wanted to know where I was, and was I safe, and all of the things. And he said he was sending people to my home to double check. I went to my phone and started looking through the camera footage, seeing the officers there. And in doing so, I paged up and realized there were more videos and came to face to face with what I now was Vance Boelter.

I will tell you that I generally do not say his name. I don't think he deserves that. He wasn't willing to see the humanity in Speaker Hortman or Mark, or the Hoffmans, or my family, for that matter. Now it's well known that my grandchildren were with me at the time. I think it's been really challenging to think about the fact that this job put my family and those children in harm's way.

I realize that I live a public life. And I'm happy to do that. I love serving my community. It's the best job I've ever had in my life, knowing that you can make a difference every day. But knowing that doing those small things can put your family in harm's way is a really difficult thing to grapple with, even a year later. And we know that female legislators do experience threats at a much larger rate than others.

My first threat in the legislature came to me before I ever stepped foot on the House floor. I hadn't written a bill. I hadn't introduced a bill, nothing of that sort. And I got a meme from a gentleman who had someone looking down the barrel of a gun, and it said, I'm coming for you. Not the best way to start your career in the legislature.

And I didn't know the guy. He didn't live in my district. He didn't know anything about me, obviously. But I think it is something we do need to be talking about more, what we should be doing to better protect public officials, our court officers, our police officers, people who do jobs that are in the public eye that could face greater scrutiny.

NINA MOINI: You've decided to run for re-election. Nobody wants people to be stuck in fear, right? But I do wonder how you manage fear and career-long threats that you're talking about and this terrible incident that happened. How do you manage that and continue to keep going?

KRISTIN BAHNER: Well, if it's just being stubborn or it's just sort of a feeling for me that I love going to the meetings, and the town halls, and the conversations and the people who come to visit me at the Capitol to talk about whatever is important to them, to fight for them, to be their champion. I love that role. And I think for me, it was an easy choice to run again.

I mean, I'm not saying that I'm not scared ever. But I was not about to let anyone, anyone, including a gunman stop me from doing that work. And so I never really contemplated not running, in all honesty. And I think you just learn to manage the fear.

We also need to honor the legacy of Speaker Hortman. I don't know when we have seen a better example of a leader who leads with humility and humanity and respect from the smallest detail. She would say things like, nothing good happens after midnight and push us to get our work done before midnight.

Also, considering the fact that staff at the front desk would have to be there for sometimes an hour or two after us, and she wanted everyone to get home safely, making sure that we had toys and things in the caucus room for young moms coming in with kids.

She was extremely thoughtful in that way, and I think that that is a leadership style that we don't often see in government. We get caught in the politics, and the back and forth, and the rhetoric, and we lose sight of the people.

NINA MOINI: What were some of the wins from your perspective this year legislatively that you feel are going to help keep people safe when they serve the public, and what remains to be done?

KRISTIN BAHNER: I mean, obviously, we made a dramatic step forward in security at the Capitol. We were one of only a handful of legislatures in the entire country that did not have metal detectors. You could walk in virtually any door at the Capitol instead of routing those through very specific security checkpoints. We have made those improvements.

The one thing that I think we didn't do at the Capitol that still remains is we need to not be carrying guns at the Capitol. We need to not have guns in the gallery above our heads. My personal opinion is that I think it would be a safer work environment. I certainly have nothing against balancing people's Second Amendment rights, but we don't allow them in courthouses. We don't allow them in schools.

I mean, there are very common sense places where we've established that it's just not a good idea. I'm grateful for passing the officer impersonation bill this year with myself and Representative Klevorn and Senator Hoffman.

And I think we're having a lot of conversations about data privacy, about what's public data versus private data, what should be only acceptable to give out to the public for transparency upon a request. Those sort of data pieces in government really have never been aligned with our digital age. As a technologist, I think about that a lot.

NINA MOINI: From our conversation, I've gathered that you look for ways every single day to honor Melissa Hortman and Mark. I do wonder if you wanted to share a little bit about anything that you're going to be doing this weekend or as we approach June 14 to just continue to honor their memory.

KRISTIN BAHNER: Yeah. There is something that I plan to do myself, and I'm going to share it for the first time. But Melissa, part of her legacy was all about planting trees. One of the things she really believed in was that the capital should be a place that people want to go to, that you can literally rest in the shade of trees you may never see grow to full fruition.

And to that end, we've planted a number of trees on the Capitol grounds. And last year, after all this happened, myself and Representative Klevorn were there to oversee some of the planting of those trees, and we helped plant one in particular.

I've come to feel that that is Melissa's tree. I go out of my way when I'm coming to and from the Capitol to go pass that tree. It's my way of grounding myself and reminding myself about Melissa, that her memory is there in those halls with us.

So I am hopeful that I can get a green ribbon to put on that tree, just as a personal thing. I think over this next weekend, we will be doing a number of things, both publicly and privately, to really honor her and keep her first and foremost in our minds and by extension, Minnesotans. That's why we do this work. It's why I need to stand up in the void when she can't and remind folks that she's still here.

And I'll do that in the courtroom. I will do that on the House floor. I will do that in public. I will do that everywhere. But I think we just need to remember the dignity and humanity of every Minnesotan and honor that legacy.

NINA MOINI: Representative Bahner, thank you for sharing, and thank you for your time. We really appreciate it.

KRISTIN BAHNER: Thank you.