

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Jimmy Panetta

**U.S. Congressman,
California 20th District**

In the Winter, 2015 *Carmel Magazine*, we posed this to then-Monterey County Deputy District Attorney Jimmy Panetta: "Here's the \$64,000 question: Are you considering or will you consider running for an elected office?" His answer: "We'll see. Basically, I want to continue to serve the public as best I can. If that means running for political office, then that's what I'll do when the time is right."

On November 8, 2016, Panetta garnered nearly 68 percent of votes cast for US Representative, District 20. He was sworn in as a member of the 115th Congress on January 3, 2017, accompanied by his father—and predecessor—Secretary Leon Panetta. "It's one of the proudest moments of my life," the younger Panetta told the *Salinas Californian*.

Carmel Magazine caught up with Congressman Panetta as he was wrapping up a roundtable meeting at the Monterey Bay Aquarium offices on climate change and sea level rise, ironically the day after President Trump announced his intent to pull the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement.

Q: What's your schedule like these days?

A: I leave either Sunday or Monday night, depending on legislative schedule. We have votes either Monday or Tuesday at 6:30. I like taking the red-eye, because I get to the office, have a staff meeting and I'm ready to go; I'm ahead of the game. Many of my colleagues take the day flight and go straight to the floor of the house for the vote. As a new member, I like to be more prepared for what I'm going into. I make sure that I know what I'm voting on and what is right for the district. That is my job.

The fact that my wife and daughters are here makes it easier to make that commute every week. But I knew that's what the job entailed. When I was a kid, I took those red eyes with my dad.

Q: So, you know your way around Washington well?

A: Yes. I spent a month with my father during his first summer there. I was in second grade. His Chief of Staff would have me take constituents over to the Capitol to find my father so they could say hello to him. I knew my way around the tunnels and the secret stairwells. Later, I roomed with him when I was an intern at the State Department.

Q: What advice did your father offer?

A: Basically the same advice he gave me when I left for Afghanistan: Keep your head down, do your job, do it well and get home.

Another piece of advice he gave me was, "You're going to deal with jerks, but you have to be able to deal with them to get things done."

Q: It appears that very little is being done in Congress. Is that the case?

A: I have pressed the voting button 284 times. Now, that's not all legisla-

tion. It's amendments to pieces of legislation, rules, resolutions, things of that nature. We still have to know what we're voting on, however. And it's a lot to take in. And some legislation has come out of the house, including the partisan health care revision...and you see what happens to partisan legislation because it's going to be difficult to get it through the Senate. I believe it's going to take negotiation with Democrats because for them to do something, it has to appease Democrats in Congress. I hope they reach across the table.

I believe there's a reason you have a Rose Garden ceremony for a bill that has not been passed. No one in Washington has ever seen anything like that. The White House wanted a big hit in its first 100 days and it's unfortunate that it had to be that and in that manner: I don't think we need to swing for the fences; we need to go for base hits, whether it be on infrastructure, the opioid epidemic, career technical education or immigration. The President also needs to concentrate on getting some base hits. But I don't know if he thinks that way. Especially with his decision [Paris agreement] yesterday, which I believe was solely driven by politics.

Q: What would you consider your top priority?

A: Representing the Central Coast, my top priority is immigration reform. That's why I supported the Blue Card Bill put forward by Senator Feinstein and a number of people in the house. It's not ideal, but it's a base hit within immigration. Some sort of legislation needs to happen. We are in this position because Congress has failed to pass any sort of reform since 1986.

It's not just an issue here now; it's an emergency. The work force is shrinking and aging. People aren't coming here anymore and it affects our two biggest industries: agriculture and hospitality. They're leaving fields of strawberries unpicked because they don't have the labor to do the work. That's millions of dollars of products going to waste. Before last year, we'd been in a drought. But talk to ag people and they'll tell you that wasn't the number one issue: it was the labor force and having enough people to do the work. We need reform to help our economy and our communities.

Q: Are you thinking about reelection?

A: The way I see it if, you do your job well, that takes care of itself. That's the way I saw it done growing up, and that's how I'm going to do it now. There are two great things you can tell me: First: "Hey, I called your office for help on an issue and it was resolved." The second is "Hey, man, I see you everywhere." I want people to know that's the job. I represent the entire Central Coast. That's a lot of ground and a lot of people.

—Michael Chatfield

