

By Kerry Trotter, Valley News

Sundays are sacred at the tidy white house on the hilltop for Margaret Cheney and Peter Welch.

Both known for their progressive and policy-oriented approach to politics – Cheney in the Vermont House, Welch in the U.S. House – Sunday is the one day of the week when the couple might head out on their cross country skis. It's the day spent relaxing in front of the fireplace. It's a day of cooking meals together.

It's also the last day of coupledness before Welch hops on a plane bound for Washington, D.C., his home for the bulk of most weeks.

"We decided to get married," Cheney joked, "and one day we may live together."

Such is the pattern of this political marriage, where one heads south (D.C.) and the other heads north (Montpelier) and the twain meet only on precious weekends. It is exhausting to think about, much less live. But it works for these newlyweds, and they have no interest in slowing down.

"We miss each other during the week, so that's hard," Welch said.

"It helps that we know each other's worlds so well," Cheney added.

Cheney, 57, and Welch, 62, recently celebrated their one-year anniversary, which was spent with family before they snuck away for a dinner-and-a-movie date night.

"Things that other people do all the time, we don't do as often," Cheney said.

Sitting down with the Valley News in their bright home on a recent Sunday, the couple chatted about politics, married life and the delicate dance of making it all work. Their secret is simple – they love the work, but they also love the simpler life their weekends together afford.

Cheney was elected to the Vermont House in 2006, and Welch was elected to his second term as a U.S. House member in 2008. She endures a sometimes-grueling commute from Norwich to Montpelier every day the Legislature is in session, while he grinds away in Washington, where he shares a Capitol Hill apartment with Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., during the week.

Welch describes his weekdays in Washington succinctly: "Get on a plane, land, blinders on, head down, working."

Then, when either Thursday evenings or Friday mornings roll around, he is on a plane again heading back for the Upper Valley. "I get home and that's where my emotional life is and where my heart is," he said. "And I feel like when I get home, I was never away."

The couple admits it isn't always easy, but both have their ways of adjusting. Cheney likes to know Welch's schedule so she can visualize where he is and what he is doing throughout the day. Welch likes to know what Cheney ate for dinner, or whether or not the driveway iced over. "I like the mundane stuff," he said.

But they do talk shop, too. Welch may weigh in on a pressing issue for Cheney, or Cheney may edit some of Welch's writing, a skill she picked up in an earlier career in journalism. "She shows no mercy," he smirked. He shot a playful look at Cheney. She laughed.

Both Cheney and Welch credit the other as being immensely helpful and supportive of each other's respective jobs. Competition? Nonexistent. Career jealousy? Doesn't happen. A schism in political opinion? Perhaps once or twice.

"We disagree all the time," Welch smiled, then clarified, "I think where there are differences are where our intensities attach." Cheney has a passion for environmental issues, as demonstrated by her role last year in passing an energy bill that she said fostered growth of green jobs, the first of its kind in the country, as well as her opinion that Welch should replace his old Subaru wagon logging 170,000 miles with an eco-friendly hybrid vehicle.

"There are times where you'll be critical of me," Welch jested as he glanced at a grinning Cheney. "You're usually right."

Welch said he is largely concerned with the economics of the middle class, as shown by his sponsorship of a Credit Cardholders' Bill of Rights aimed at protecting consumers from abusive practices, which was signed into law by President Obama last May.

Welch and Cheney have their work-life routine down pat, but they admit to being somewhat of an anomaly among friends and family.

"I think they're polite," Welch laughed of reactions to their schedules. " 'We don't know how you do it!' translates to 'Why in the world do you do it?' "

But curiosity has led to admiration.

"They're both engaged in what they really love doing," said Jimmy McNally, 24, the oldest of Cheney's three children from her previous marriage. "When I see them interacting together, they're both so energized."

"It's wonderful for their friends to see what fun they're having, and what a difference they're making," said Elliott Fisher, the couple's friend and the director for population health and policy at The Dartmouth Institute.

Margaret Cheney was born in the Upper Valley, but didn't stay long. The daughter of a State

Department employee, she has lived all over the world and became fluent in several languages in the process.

After settling stateside and attending Harvard University, Cheney pursued journalism, working as a reporter in California for several years, followed by 11 years as a managing editor at the Washingtonian magazine. She then got the itch to head back to New England. Cheney was married with two small children at the time, and her Norwich-based grandparents were the impetus to return to the Upper Valley.

Cheney put her language skills to good use as a Spanish teacher at The Sharon Academy, which got her involved in education issues and eventually politics. She served on the Norwich and Dresden school boards for nearly 10 years, and was poised to leverage what she learned into a career at the state level.

"I wanted to participate," she said.

Peter Welch and his five siblings grew up in Springfield, Mass. He attended College of the Holy Cross and then law school at the University of California, Berkley. He did community organizing in Chicago, traveled extensively through South America, worked on a freighter and then moved to White River Junction, where he practiced law as a public defender. His political career went from state Senate in the early '80s, an unsuccessful run for Congress in 1988, a lost gubernatorial race in 1990, and then a 2001 appointment by Howard Dean returned him to the state Senate. He ran for and was elected Vermont's lone U.S. representative in 2006. He was re-elected in 2008.

"I'd been gone for so long," Welch joked of his time in the state Senate, "people forgot they were mad at me."

Both had been previously married. Cheney was divorced, while Welch was lost his wife, Joan Smith, a University of Vermont dean, to cancer in 2004.

Cheney and Welch said they had known each other for years and had multiple friends in

common before any romance began. While geography may throw a wrench in some plans, they've shared one big priority.

"It's fun to participate in Vermont politics together," Cheney said. "Vermont government and politics is like a big family."

And it's home – if just for a couple of days at a time.