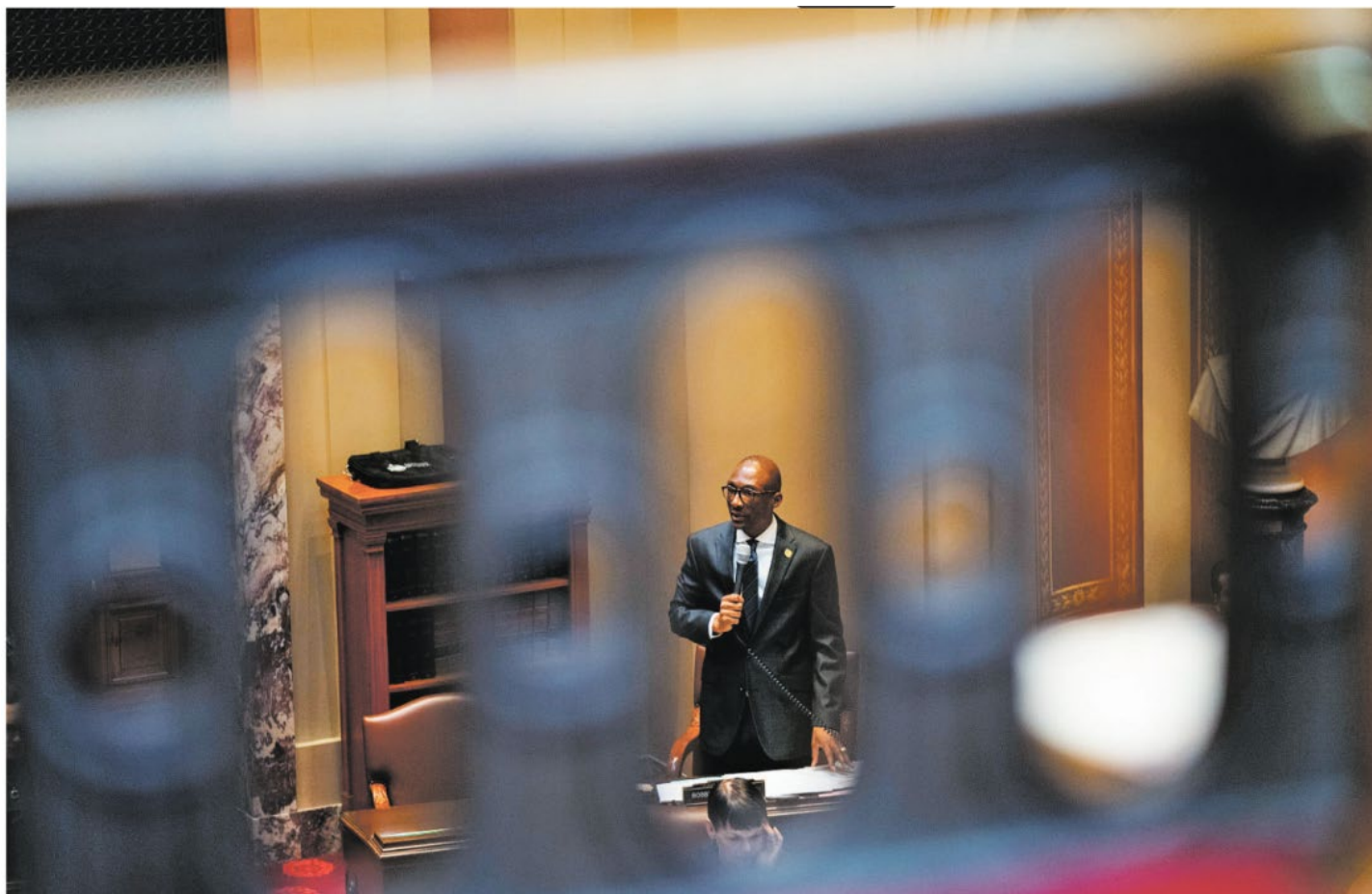


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Bobby Joe Champion, president of the Minnesota Senate, spoke Tuesday at the State Capitol in favor of legislation to restore the vote to felons on parole.

By ROCHELLE OLSON
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As the Minnesota Senate debated abortion access last month for 15 hours, President Bobby Joe Champion was front and center on the podium for a 13-hour stretch without a break or a sip of water.

The debate on the PRO Act, which protected abortion rights in state law, was the first extended Senate session this year. If it was a test of Champion's mettle, he passed, moving smoothly through a thick stack of amendments, calling on senators in sequence from a running list and firmly limiting diversions.

RAISING THE BAR IN SENATE

A skillful lawyer and musician,
Bobby Joe Champion turns
down the volume at Capitol.

"I was there to be a conduit — to make sure I kept everybody calm and to bring us through a very difficult situation but allow each person to be able to speak their piece so that they could represent their constituency," Champion said of his marathon effort.

Some 15 years into his tenure as a legislator from north Minneapolis, the 59-year-old has stepped into his highest-profile role, and he's stamped it with a unique flair: a lawyer's equanimity, a striver's energy and a musician's stage savvy.

Champion said he feels the significance of history — he is the first Black senator to serve as president — at the beginning of

See **CHAMPION** on A7 ►

SENATOR BLAZES A PATH

◀ **CHAMPION** from Al every floor session. He puts his hand on his heart, turns to the flag and leads the senators in the Pledge of Allegiance “even though my ancestors have not always had an easy time in this country,” he said.

The 34-member caucus elevated Champion to the leading role after the November election.

He gets good reviews from Republicans so far.

“I think his personality is very good for that role,” said Sen. Steve Drazkowski, R-Mazeppa. “We had great discussions already from the very first day of session.”

As a lawyer, Champion is drawn to rules, but his lyricism runs deeper, dating to his early teen years when he founded the award-winning Excelsior Ensemble Choir.

“Musically, I understand the importance of how you bring different people together and allow them to make beautiful music together,” he said.

His lifelong friend Jeff Hayden, a former DFL legislator from Minneapolis who is now a lobbyist at Fredrikson & Byron, noted Champion’s studiousness and commitment. Hayden said he called Champion shortly after the election for their daily phone chat and the senator put him off, saying he was halfway through reading Mason’s Manual of Legislative Procedure and wanted to finish.

“He’s a really remarkable guy who is easily overlooked

— often because of his style and often because of race,” Hayden said.

The ‘Black Perry Mason’

He wasn’t overlooked in north Minneapolis where his drive, smarts and talent stood out when he founded a gospel choir as a 13-year-old.

The fifth of six children, he was the first to go to college. Driven by his love of a popular TV show about a defense attorney, Champion said he wanted to become the “Black Perry Mason.”

He enrolled at Macalester College in St. Paul but couldn’t afford to live in the residence halls his freshman year, so he took three buses each way from north Minneapolis. He’d arrive on campus early, before the residential students were out, to avoid embarrassment. “I didn’t want others to know I couldn’t afford living on campus,” he said.

After he graduated from William Mitchell College of Law, he went into entertainment law, using music connections that included Jimmy Jam, Terry Lewis and Prince.

Champion was considering a job as legal counsel at Oprah’s Harpo Studios in Chicago. But he said his wife, Dr. Angela Champion, a pharmacist, reacted with, “Nope, I’m not going, and the kids aren’t going.” The couple has two sons, Jaylen and Myles, now 21 and 20.

So he stayed put and worked as an assistant attor-

ney general to Skip Humphrey and Mike Hatch and at the Legal Rights Center.

He still works part-time as a contract public defender in Ramsey County on cases involving children in need of protection.

“It’s not the easiest thing to do,” Hayden said of Champion’s defense work for families whose children have been removed from the home. “Bobby understands that a lot of this is just societal issues because people don’t have enough money to take care of their family.”

Champion is disciplined about managing stress. He goes to bed early and gets up at 3:30 a.m. for a workout in his home gym. He’s never had a drink of alcohol. “Everyone has the ability to persevere,” Champion said. “You just have to make a decision.”

Early Wednesday, he was on duty as a lawyer in Ramsey County the morning after shepherding two major bills to passage: One to restore the voting rights of felons after they’ve been released from custody and another to allow unauthorized immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses.

Hayden said Champion understands he stands on the shoulders of generations before him. “He wants to make sure that he is making them proud,” Hayden said. “He’s deeply loyal and very much rooted in, I’m a product of this community.”

Asked about his heroes,

Champion named the civil rights marchers in the crowd at Selma, Ala., those who didn’t become famous but chose to put themselves in harm’s way, not knowing if they’d make it back safely.

Champion is conscious of clearing the way for the next wave of leaders. For example, he allowed freshman Sen. Zaynab Mohamed, DFL-Minneapolis, to help lead on the driver’s license bill. “Someone has to be the trailblazer to create momentum,” Champion said.

His goal as president is to allow everyone to have a chance to be heard. “I want to demonstrate to you what grace I would hope you would demonstrate to me,” he said.

Republicans, especially the frequent speakers during debates, haven’t found much to criticize so far.

Sen. Eric Lucero, R-St. Michael, said he has different values and priorities than Champion but “what’s at issue is the legislation being debated. It’s not about personalities. It’s not personal.”

When Champion leads the pledge from the dais before every Senate session, he said he thinks about what’s possible in this country and how “it’s not where you start, it’s where you end up.”

Staff writer Ryan Faircloth contributed to this report.

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GLEN STUBBE, STAR TRIBUNE

DFL Sen. Bobby Joe Champion was sworn in by state Supreme Court Justice Natalie Hudson as the first Black Senate president.

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