

New members . . .

Biernat unites legal know-how, teaching, lawmaking

Rep. Len Biernat (DFL-Mpls) may be a legislator, but he's also a teacher. The first-term District 59A representative is on the faculty at Hamline University Law School, where he teaches property law, family law, and legal ethics. In fact, he said, his experience in the Capitol makes him a more effective instructor.

Take, for example, the revamped anti-stalking legislation that emerged from the House Judiciary Committee at the beginning of the session. Lawmakers were forced to revisit the issue after the Minnesota Supreme Court all but erased the version passed by the 1993 Legislature for being overly broad.

"I see that as a marvelous opportunity to show [students] the relationship between the courts and the Legislature—to illustrate the separation of powers," Biernat said, adding that the recent effort to recodify Minnesota's set of landlord/tenant laws also provided a measure of practical insight that he shared with his students.

Of course, the legislator/lawyer nexus works two ways. At virtually every turn, Biernat said, he draws on his legal background in some manner, particularly in his capacity as a member of the Judiciary Committee.

"It helps me enormously," he said, "especially in the family law aspect, for example,

with the right-to-privacy matters."

Privacy, he said, is something that has been in the forefront of much of the Judiciary Committee's work this session. The issues surrounding privacy tend to call into question the relationship between citizens and their government, he explained, drawing on another academic experience to illustrate the point.

"I used to bring groups of students over to Norway," Biernat said, "and they have something there called the Data Inspectorate, which is a government agency that makes sure all the citizens' records collected by business are complete."

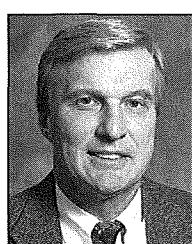
It is, he said, the Norwegian government's job to examine information on its citizenry.

"It's just the opposite here," he said. "We don't trust the government at all."

Yet, Biernat is more than just another lawyer turned lawmaker. It could be said that politics runs in the family, and that his role as a legislator is nothing less than a family legacy.

His father served in the House for eight years, from 1948 through 1956, and the young Biernat grew up working on campaigns. His brother, Joe, currently serves on the Minneapolis City Council, and Biernat himself sat on the Minneapolis School Board for seven years before throwing his hat into the legislative ring.

That background, Biernat said, gave him the opportunity to get right to work, rather than having to spend his first term learning the ins and outs of the legislative process.



Rep. Len Biernat

Indeed, for a first-term legislator, Biernat, who also sits on the Education Committee and its K-12 Education Finance Division, has been exceptionally busy. He has sponsored, or co-sponsored, more than 60 pieces of legislation — including one that drew national attention.

"It's interesting," Biernat said of HF446, his bill that linked students' grades to their eligibility for a driver's license. "I was getting calls on that from all over the place. It's just an example of what one legislator can do . . . in terms of getting a good policy discussion going."

Biernat hopes to get many more such policy discussions going, particularly on education, although his legislative priorities have shifted since he received his committee assignments. The committee is where the real work is done.

"It's real intense," he said. "But, I'm enjoying it a lot."

— F.J. Gallagher

District 59A

1996 population: 32,699
Largest city: Minneapolis
Counties: Hennepin
Location: northeast Minneapolis
Top concern: "I would rather see education dollars spent where they do the most good . . . improving student performance."

—Rep. Len Biernat

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