

Family comes first

Decision to no longer uproot his wife and children causes Clark to step aside

By DAVID MAEDA

Rep. James T. Clark's (R-New Ulm) daughters aren't old enough to understand what their father does for a living. When the two girls, ages 3 and 5, watch televised legislative proceedings they call the Speaker of the House "Mr. Sneakers."

"Every time they come to visit there's cake or dilly bars in the retiring room so they think daddy has it pretty good," Clark, 39, said.

Now due to family matters he has decided not to seek a third term in the House. Since his election in 1998, Clark's wife, Cara, and children accompanied him to live in St. Paul during the session.

"I just refuse to leave my home at 6 a.m. on Monday morning and show up again Thursday night at 10 p.m.," he said.



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

Rep. James Clark is stepping down after the 2002 session to spend more time with his family.

His eldest daughter will attend kindergarten in the fall. The Clarks discussed options, such as home schooling and having the girls attend school part of the year in St. Paul. But ultimately they decided it was time to return home year-round.

"I've been saying all along that when our daughters reached school age, that our family was going to come to a crossroads," he said. "Per-

haps I didn't necessarily want to face that, but I knew it was a decision we'd have to make sooner or later. I woke up one day and it was sooner."

Rep. Wes Skoglund (DFL-Mpls), who served with Clark on the House Civil Law Committee, said it is unfortunate that the demands of being a legislator are costing the House Clark's services.

"The funny thing about this place is the very people that should be here, that have their priorities right... cannot be here," Skoglund said.

Clark won a special election in January 1998 to fill a seat that was left vacant after the death of Rep. Barb Vickerman (R-Redwood Falls). Vickerman died of cancer.

The memory of his late father inspired him to run for the House. After discovering a letter his father, a World War II veteran, wrote to President Reagan asking how he could further

serve his country, Clark said becoming a public servant began appealing to him.

In a sense his father has continued to be with him every step of the way — he carries his father's military identification with him as a key chain.

"I'm reminded of my father when I walk over to the Capitol and I'm holding his dog tags and I know he'd be

very proud of what I've tried to accomplish over the last five years. But I know he'd be prouder of the decision I made to do what's right for my family," he said.

Clark said among his legislative accomplishments was sponsoring a law increasing the penalty for torture and cruelty to animals. He said studies have shown a clear link between those who are cruel to animals and those who

commit violence against humans.

He now plans to build his private law practice, as well as continue to serve as an assistant county attorney in Brown County.

Rep. Erik Paulsen (R-Eden Prairie), who sits next to Clark on the House floor, said his seatmate is "very bright and articulate."

"He's thoughtful and well-respected. He takes the position very seriously. In my opinion, if he was not leaving he would be future leadership material in the caucus," Paulsen said.

With daughters similar in age to Clark's, Paulsen said the two families have gotten to know each other outside the Capitol and will likely remain in touch.

Skoglund described Clark as a "thorough legislator" with a strength that may seem self-apparent: "He actually reads the bills."

He said Clark worked hard on complex issues like real estate laws that may seem boring but have a significant impact, and his preparation allows him to ask questions and suggest changes that ultimately improve the final product.

Upon his anticipated exit from St. Paul, Clark recalls his first speech on the House floor after being sworn in. He said three busloads of residents from his then hometown, Springfield, made the trip to witness the event.

"Part of what I said was the House of Representatives is a very important place. It's where we make laws that affect all of our lives. And I turned to my friends that were in the gallery and said, 'But please never let me forget that the most important house in my life is with my wife and children.' I've had a lot of people in the last couple of weeks, a lot of my friends, say 'Way to go, you were true to your word and you made the right decision.'"

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. James Clark
Republican
District 23A — New Ulm
Terms: 3

Career notes: Clark served as vice-chair of the House Transportation Policy Committee during 2001-2002 and also served on the transportation finance, civil law, and capital investment committees during his time in the House. Among his accomplishments, Clark noted laws that broaden the definition of child endangerment to include where drugs are manufactured and one that increases penalties for criminal sexual contact.