

Rep. Gil Gutknecht . . .

Gifted orator, optimist hopes to carry on in D.C.



Facing outward, it looks like any other generic name plate you'd see on any desk, in any office.

It reads simply, "Gil Gutknecht."

The other side, however, sheds more light on the personality of the man who sits behind that desk. From his side, the plate reads, "Property of the people of Dist. 33A."

An Independent-Republican from Rochester, Gutknecht represented District 33A for 10 years before new district lines were drawn, and District 30A for the past two years. Regardless of number, the plate has served as a constant reminder.

"I'm a temporary custodian," said Gutknecht. "This desk doesn't belong to me."

First elected in 1982, the six-term lawmaker is hoping to become caretaker of yet another desk. In November, he'll step down to run for Minnesota's First District U.S. Congressional seat, currently held by Democrat Rep. Tim Penny.

Different political philosophies aren't the only thing that distinguishes Gutknecht and Penny; while Penny is stepping down because of what he calls "frustration with the political system," Gutknecht said he wants the seat because of his passion for that same system.

Gutknecht is quick to add that another factor in his decision to step down is his staunch belief in term limits.

With an energy and excitement that doesn't seem to dwindle even in the late hours of marathon committee meetings, Gutknecht is known for his flair for public speaking, especially during House floor debates.

When Gutknecht, who is also the minority party floor leader, speaks, his zeal for politics is as evident as his conservative stand on the issues. He's known for quoting former President Ronald Reagan and chaired the Minne-



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Greatest accomplishment: Authoring the "whistle blower" legislation in 1987.

The law says employees who tell the truth about employers who might be breaking the law cannot be fired or otherwise punished. One provision also requires employers to give employees, upon request, written reasons for terminations.

Before that law passed, Gutknecht said, someone could be fired and never know why. "Being fired is one of the most devastating things that can ever happen to anybody," Gutknecht said. "You have the right to know why you were fired."

sota campaign for former presidential candidate Jack Kemp in 1988.

"I enjoy politics, I enjoy government. . . I'm one of the luckiest people you've ever met," he said. "I get to do the things I like to do; and not a lot of people can say that."

Gutknecht's sentiments may come as a surprise to those who know that life in the IR minority caucus has its fair share of setbacks. But the self-admitted incurable optimist doesn't focus on the disappointments.

"The victories far outweigh the defeats, despite being in the minority seat most of the time," Gutknecht says. "It's frustrating. . . but it's always fun, it's always interesting to me. There's a narcotic that goes with being involved [in making laws]."

And though the votes might not always be cast on his side of a bill, Gutknecht feels he can do his part by making his beliefs known.

"I can't control outcomes," he says. "I can only control inputs around here. Just by saying things and talking about ideas, you do make a difference."

Gutknecht is well-known for his opposition to the Minnesota State Lottery and other forms of gambling, as well as his support for workers' compensation reform.

Although he has been on the losing end of most of those debates, Gutknecht doesn't let legislative setbacks get him down. He says he

intends to carry his optimism and a basic set of principles to Washington.

If elected in November, he says he'll do all he can to help the country "get back to time-tested principles such as family, work, thrift, and individual responsibility."

An auctioneer, husband and father of three, Gutknecht is no stranger to the themes he intends to promote.

"I think Republicans will take control of the U.S. Congress within the next two election cycles," he added. "I think the spirit of the times is moving more conservative."

At his district convention May 14, Gutknecht will find out whether he gets his party's endorsement for the Congressional race. Regardless of the outcome, however, Gutknecht's optimism keeps him going.

"I may be out of elected office," he said, "But I will never be out of politics forever."

And just in case he doesn't return to elected office, Gutknecht made a plea to the people he represents: "If there's one message I could leave the voters in my district, it's that this is their government, these seats belong to them, and they need to pay attention, because the decisions we make here do affect their lives."

—Amber Brennan