

New members . . .

Leighton brings family's DFL tradition to House

In 1958, then 29-year-old Robert Leighton Sr. ran for a seat in the Minnesota Senate against longtime incumbent Sen. Peter Hol-



Rep. Robert Leighton

land. He almost pulled it off, his son says proudly.

In 1994, that son, Robert Leighton Jr., also 29, found himself in much the same position his father faced years before. But Leighton Jr. faced no incumbent in his run for a Minnesota House seat. Rep. Leo Reding (DFL-Austin) chose not to seek reelection after 16 years in the House. Though Leighton had never sought political office, he seemed a natural for the District 27B seat.

He comes from a family steeped in DFL tradition. In addition to his father's run for office, Leighton's brother, Scott, was the Mower County DFL Party chair until he gave up the office last year to manage Leighton's campaign. Scott Leighton should be given almost full credit for the first term legislator's appearance at the Capitol, Leighton said.

"When Leo Reding decided to retire, my brother decided I would run, and he would manage the campaign. He feels he's better at behind-the-scenes campaign work," Leighton said.

The campaign turned out to be a family affair. Not only did his father, brother, and mother help out, his girlfriend, Shawn, walked door-to-door with him.

"I was never really alone — I had fun doing it," Leighton said.

He's not new to campaign work. Leighton worked on Sen. Paul Wellstone's election campaign in 1990 and Rep. David Minge's

2nd District campaign for Congress in 1992.

While he attended law school in Berkeley, Calif., in 1990, he helped out with Sen. Dianne Feinstein's run for California governor.

"I was taught at an early age we have a responsibility to make society better. I knew I'd be active and interested in political issues, but I didn't know I'd ever run for an office," Leighton said.

After law school, Leighton came back to Minnesota, first to Minneapolis for a two-year stint as a lawyer with Dorsey and Whitney. He then returned home to Austin, Minn., to work at the law firm his father founded. His father, brother, and three other attorneys practice law at the firm.

Many of the issues he plans to pursue at the Capitol come about because of his ties to his hometown. Labor issues, for example.

"That's one thing that motivated me in my run," he said. "I lived through the 1985 Hormel strike in Austin. I saw how labor strife can impact an entire community."

He was a University of Minnesota undergraduate economics student at that time and his best friend's father was a striker. Leighton traveled to Austin on the weekends to see how the strike progressed. He first met Wellstone during one weekend at home.

Wellstone, then a political science professor at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., made a speech in support of the strikers. Leighton's father spoke directly before Wellstone.

Nine years later, Wellstone serves as a Minnesota senator and Leighton, in his first term as a state representative, serves as vice chair of the House Labor-Management Relations Committee.

He's pleased, also, by his appointment to the House committee involving economic development.

"Economic development is an important issue for rural Minnesota. I want to do everything I can to further economic development in Mower County," he said.

During his time in office, Leighton hopes to take inspiration from Democratic leaders. Three photos of himself shaking hands with Wellstone dot his office tables. On the walls hang photos of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy.

But perhaps the prize possession is a leaded plate his father's friend, Bill Thomsen, gave him after his victory in the November election. On the plate is a painting of Hubert Humphrey, his father's idol. Leighton promised Thomsen he would hang it in his office and look at it often. On the border is a quote from Humphrey that Leighton plans to take to heart during his time in office: "A fellow that doesn't have any tears doesn't have any hearts."

—Jean Thilmany

District 27B

Population: 32,285

Distribution: 67.86 percent urban; 32.14 percent rural

County: Mower

Largest city: Austin

Location: southeastern Minnesota

Unemployment rate: 4.38 percent

Residents living below poverty level: 10.17 percent

1992 presidential election results:

Bush/Quayle 23.99 percent

Clinton/Gore 50.03 percent

Perot/Stockdale 23.77 percent

Other: 2.21 percent

Legislators today, under law, must turn down free skiing trips, chicken dinners, and even calendars offered by lobbyists. Lawmakers at the turn of the century, however, encouraged perks.

Railroad company officials were notorious for giving gifts during the late 1800s and early 1900s but not always because they wanted to be generous. Everyone, it seemed, asked for freebies. There were free trips and special entertainment railroad cars for lawmakers and their wives as they traveled.

"The railroad companies regularly provided free transportation for politicians and wined and dined them," said Dr. W. Thomas White, curator of the James J. Hill Library in

Do you know?

St. Paul. Hill was Minnesota's most famous railroad baron and founder of what came to be called the Great Northern Railway.

In his book, *James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest*, author Albro Martin writes:

"Every stack of mail that was placed before Hill in his capacity as president of the Manitoba road contained requests for special favors of one kind or another. . . . Requests for free passes came in a flood, and each one posed special problems. It was a destructive system which made more enemies than friends for the railroads. Poli-

ticians, even those who had not been elected to any office, demanded passes as a matter of course. 'I shall try to render you some service in return,' one aspirant for public office told Hill during the campaign of 1884. Even the State of Minnesota took its pound of flesh: in 1880 the secretary of state sent Hill a list of twenty-one government officials, including the secretary of the historical society, blandly asking that they receive unlimited annual passes on the railroad. . . . The tendency is to abuse the pass privilege,' Hill grumbled in 1886, '(eventually) the firemen and porters will be looking for the same favors, and are, for all I know, as much entitled to them.'"