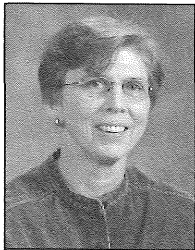


# Call her 'Maxine'

Former teacher continues her education as a new representative from Greater Minnesota in St. Paul

BY DAVID MAEDA

Behind Rep. Maxine Penas' (R-Badger) of office desk in the State Office Building, rests a picture of her 18-month-old grandchild sitting atop a big lustrous Victory motorcycle posed to rev it up and take off.



Rep. Maxine Penas

With the juxtaposition between family and adventure, and its prominent display spot in her office, the snapshot gives visitors a sense of the new lawmaker's priorities and a glimpse of her down-to-earth sense of humor.

Judging her by her mild-mannered grandmotherly appearance, you'd probably never guess that one of Penas' favorite hobbies is riding a motorcycle.

Penas and her husband Albert, an engineer at Polaris Industries, began riding the company's distinctive motorcycles a couple years back. But despite her enjoyment of the hobby, she said that last fall she had to learn to use the bike sparingly during her campaign.

"I got some pretty weird looks when I'd pull up at my age in a leather jacket," she said.

Now retired, Penas said her 31 years of teaching remain the single most inspirational part of her life.

"My students, to my dying day, will be the highlight of my life," Penas said. "Their enthusiasm. Their energy. They keep you on your toes. I enjoyed them immensely."

Indeed her former students provided much assistance with her campaign, ultimately not only with their votes but also through their encouragement. Penas said after she decided to run for the House she contacted more than 450 of her former students, many of whom supported her and helped with her campaign.

"My message to them was if they had me as a teacher in school and felt I was honest, treated them fairly and they learned something, then vote for me," she said.

Running against a popular incumbent, Rep.

Jim Tunheim (DFL-Kennedy) who served nine terms in the House, Penas said when she started off the campaign trail she didn't even realize that few gave her much of a chance to win.

But she said it was her hard work and diligence in covering at least every town once and just about every township in one of the state's largest geographic legislative districts that paid off in the end. The vast district covers much of northwestern Minnesota and Penas racked up more than 35,000 miles on her vehicle between June and October and 3,000 to 4,000 more on her husband's truck. But she said the

effort it took was one of the most rewarding lessons she learned.

"Win or lose, I won. I never would have expended the energy to meet people if I hadn't run," she said.

Penas was no stranger to the lawmaking process when House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) asked her to run last spring.

A member of several education groups, including serving seven years on the Minnesota Rural Education Board, including one as its president, Penas had come to the Capitol several times to work on issues with her legislators. Still she wasn't quite prepared for what would face her on the other side of the table.

"I don't think a person realizes the work involved in the whole legislative process until you've gotten into it," she said. "I understand it's designed to move slowly for a good reason, but it's like pumping water out of a well and not getting any water until May."

A few years ago, Penas said she and her husband decided to join the Republican Party because they felt it fit their long-held beliefs better than the DFL party did. She mentioned specifically that she is strongly supportive of

pro-life and land rights issues, and as an avid hunter she is a strong advocate for gun rights.

The switch to the other party didn't exactly please her parents, both very active Democrats, but she was reminded of a lesson her father told her when she was growing up.

While she was in college and home for the holidays, she took a job at the town's liquor store because it paid well for part-time seasonal work. She asked her father for approval and she remembers him telling her, "It's not where you work, it's how you act."

That is a lesson she'll keep in mind as a member of the Legislature where the key to being effective is to "be honest, work hard, research the issues, vote with a good conscience, and keep constituents informed."

Thus far into the session she has been able to fly home for the weekends where she, among other things, can enjoy her first time being a

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—Rep. Maxine Penas

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grandmother. She is glad the steady stream of emails and phone calls have kept her quite busy, even though she sometimes still has to reassure her constituents that she is the same person in St. Paul that she was back home.

"I still am not used to people calling me 'representative.' I'm no different than I was in my district. So calling me Maxine is wonderful," she said.

## DISTRICT 1A

**1998 population (estimate):** 31,766

**Largest city:** Roseau

**Counties:** Kittson, Lake of the Woods, Marshall, and Roseau

**Location:** northwestern Minnesota

**Top concern:** "Equity in education funding ensuring that the poor districts are equal to the rich districts. Decreasing taxes, reducing property taxes. It's an agricultural district and reducing property taxes would give some relief to farmers already distressed by bad prices on grain."

—Rep. Maxine Penas