

Rifenberg looking to address tax, family issues

Maybe it was predictable that Rep. Michelle Rifenberg (R-La Crescent) would one day wind up in the Legislature. As a child she was drawn to politics and the political process.



Rep. Michelle Rifenberg

Her choice of television program was often political in nature, and she remembers being glued to the national conventions when she was just 11 years old. Even today she can hardly get enough of politics.

"I'm a political junkie," she said. "I've always enjoyed intellectual debate and political discussions."

But just ingesting the world of politics wasn't enough for Rifenberg, especially when she would read something in the local papers that touched a nerve. "I used to be one of those people who would fire off letters to the editor."

She then decided to take her principles a step further and successfully won election to the District 32B seat, replacing 14-year veteran Virgil Johnson of Caledonia, Minn. Her overall outlook?

"I consider myself a mainstream conservative Republican. That means fiscally and socially conservative."

While she's political in nature, she also sees herself as a reflection of her constituency, which she feels may be one of her greatest qualifications for being a lawmaker. "I believe in a citizen Legislature," she said.

"It's important for people to know what they can do to serve community. I enjoy serving people."

For about 12 years before coming to the Legislature, Rifenberg also was active in the Republican party, serving as county party chair for three of those years.

She also campaigned for former state representative, now Congressman Gil Gutknecht. "I learned I enjoyed campaigning. I also learned it takes lots of physical energy. In my own campaign I never worked on anything harder," she said.

In the process, she learned a few things about her district, she said, which includes parts of Fillmore, Houston, and Winona counties. Part of her mission is to change how people are taxed.

"The people I talked with work hard for a living. They care very much about their families. They feel frustrated. The harder they work, the more the government takes," Rifenberg said. "My husband and I have set goals. We've worked hard to meet them. Taxes and government regulation make it difficult."

She promises to work for some form of family tax relief. "I particularly want to see some of that budget surplus returned to families," she said.

Second on her list of four legislative goals is improving the climate for small businesses in rural Minnesota. A third has already been completed: removing current statutory caps on K-12 school funding. Schools in rural

areas, she noted, are especially hard hit because of the smaller property tax base. Finally, Rifenberg wants to make Minnesota a better place to raise a family. She hopes these items will be her legislative legacy, she said.

Rifenberg's son, John, 14, "thinks it's pretty cool" to have mom in the House of Representatives, she said. When not preoccupied with the demands at the Capitol, the Rifenberg family, including husband, Robert, a laboratory supervisor at the Heileman division of the Stroh Brewery, enjoys taking family vacations and going to movies, she said.

Today, she said, she's learning to feel at home in the House, is happy with her committee assignments, and feels optimistic about the session ahead.

"The new members have had a good chance to settle in, learn the process, and feel like they belong," she said. Most of all, "it's exciting."

— Celeste Riley

District 32A

1996 population: 33,777

Largest city: La Crescent

County: Fillmore, Houston, Winona

Location: southeastern Minnesota

Top concern: "Family tax relief. That's based on feedback from going door to door. It's part of assuring a good quality of life. I also have a lot of small businesses in the district, who, along with agriculture, are feeling particularly burdened."

—Rep. Michelle Rifenberg

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