

New opportunities

Rifenberg opts against re-election after redistricting pairs her with another Republican House member

By **THERESA STAHL**

Listening to her colleagues, it is clear Rep. Michelle Rifenberg (R-La Crescent) will be missed.

"She is a very honorable person to work with, very straight forward," said Rep. Gene Pelowski (DFL-Winona).

"She's a great asset to this House, a great asset to her district," added Rep. Greg Davids (R-Preston).

But not even the distinction of being vice chair of the House Redistricting Committee could protect her from the consequences of the court-ordered district boundaries.

Due to new boundaries, Rifenberg and Davids would be paired in the upcoming election. New Senate lines pair two Republican senators, as well. Those factors helped Rifenberg, who is in her third term in the House, decide against seeking re-election.

"I've got a tremendous amount of respect for her," said Davids, who was with Rifenberg when she made the announcement not to run. "Even if we both would have decided to run, I think it would have been a good clean campaign — it would have been about issues."

Rifenberg said she is disappointed about the circumstances and hasn't decided what she's

going to do next. But she says she remains an optimist.

"I know that every day is a new opportunity," she said. "Just because you don't know what it is doesn't mean the opportunity's not going to be there."

The opportunity to run for state representative first presented itself to her in 1996. Rifenberg spent nine years at home with her son after working as a medical technologist in a hospital for seven years. She became involved in her son's school activities and was an active volunteer.

She taught Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes for eight years, served as president of the Council of Catholic Women, and was chair of the Houston County Republicans when she announced her candidacy for the Legislature.

Rifenberg said she ran on her own initiative. "I was inspired by the example of a few good, true Republicans that understood the principles of limited government and the impact an over-reaching government has on a family," she said.

She said one of the biggest issues that motivated her to run was Minnesota's "burdensome tax situation." She's now served on the House Taxes Committee for four years and has

sponsored several bills related to taxes.

She has also served on the House Regulated Industries and Agriculture Policy committees.

Rifenberg's philosophy on taxing is germane to her view of families.

"I want people to remember that I was a legislator that understood that families work hard for their money, and that they need to be able to keep more of their own

money, because they're the best decision-makers when it comes to caring for the needs of their family."

Although she's looking forward to spending more time with her own family, Rifenberg said she will miss the friends she's made in St. Paul.

"You form friendships that will last a lifetime" working in the Legislature, she said.

She also promises to keep a close eye on what continues to happen with tax policy.

"We've made a lot of progress and we still have a long way to go," she said. "I want to make sure we don't backtrack on the progress that we've made."

When Rifenberg looks at her life, she says, she sees progress and accomplishment.

"Women can be anything they want to be or do anything they want to do, but you just can't do it all at one time. So you have to segment your life."

Reflecting on her time at the Legislature, Rifenberg said a friend of hers reminds her of a saying from Mother Teresa about entering public service. "You're called to serve, not to succeed," Rifenberg quoted. "When I think about being motivated to run and wanting to do something about tax policy, there's a special sense of gratification and accomplishment to know that while I was fortunate enough to serve, I was lucky to succeed."

Davids wouldn't disagree.

"Michelle Rifenberg is one of the best legislators I've ever worked with ... she is great on all issues," he said. "She's smart, she's well-read, she's prepared. She really represents her district well."

The House is "much worse off" because she's not running again, Davids said.


"To serve the district as honorably as she has is really a tribute to her and her family," he said. "She'll be missed terribly." 



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHEID

Rep. Michelle Rifenberg will step down after this session. Part of her southeastern Minnesota district was combined with Rep. Greg Davids,' prompting her to not run for re-election.

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Michelle Rifenberg
Republican
District 32B — La Crescent
Terms: 3

Career Notes: Rifenberg sponsored a law for a loan forgiveness program for teachers to encourage more teachers to come to rural Minnesota. She has also sponsored a number of different tax proposals, including those dealing with income, property, and sales taxes.