

Preparation pays off

Varied background in business, management, and education leads Ruth to St. Paul

By MARY KAY WATSON

Until last year, Rep. Connie Ruth (R-Owatonna) had never considered running for public office. But she says she's not surprised to find herself at the Legislature.



Rep. Connie Ruth

"Everything I've ever done has prepared me for this," said Ruth who represents District 28A. "Sometimes I feel like my life has just been laid out for me."

Ruth's background looks like a Midwestern sampler: agriculture, health, communication, education, voluntarism, church, and family. She grew up on a farm, worked in radiology, stayed home to care for her young children, worked as general manager for a cable television firm, went back to school for a master's degree in organizational management, and now works as the distance learning coordinator for Southwest State University's Riverland campuses. All this, Ruth said, has been informed by her faith.

Last year, she received an unexpected phone call from House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon), who represents District 28B, asking her to consider running for the seat formerly held by Republican-turned-Independent Rep. Doug Reuter, who moved to Texas. Her first reaction was negative. But after meeting with legislators from the Republican Caucus, she came away saying "Yes."

"I was so impressed by their commitment, dedication, and enthusiasm," Ruth said. "Several of them shared their faith with me, and they didn't even know me. I felt called, I really did."

Ruth, a 32-year resident of Owatonna, said friends told her, "It's a perfect fit for you." She wore red throughout her campaign, and her red campaign signs read "Connie!" with a large exclamation point. After she won the election with 54 percent of the vote, her husband had a pin made for her in the shape of an exclamation point to "capture my personality, whatever that means," she said with a laugh.

Ruth's St. Paul office reflects her energy. The walls glow with close-up photos of vivid flowers, all taken by her husband Doug, who is a county attorney. A photo of her family includes the family dog along with daughter,

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Kirsten, sons, Jonathan and Greg, and Greg's wife Christine.

A plaque that defines integrity, a gift from the cable TV firm she worked for, represents her philosophy. She said she is an adherent of the idea of servant leadership and tries to treat all people with respect.

The importance of improving economic growth and development in her area is an overriding issue for Ruth. She wants to see new businesses move in and is concerned that businesses have already been lost due to high corporate taxes.

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The issues at the top of her list for this year are transportation and education. Her first

order of business is to get the U.S. Highway 14 expansion completed. The highway, which runs through downtown Waseca, carries more than 10,000 cars a day on two lanes and is both inadequate and dangerous, according to Ruth.

"When I was door-knocking at people's homes along the highway, I had to shout to be heard," she said.

The highway is important for farmers because they haul their grain on it and important to the area's economic growth, Ruth said. However, it is not included in the governor's budget. "We might have to reappropriate some dollars for it," Ruth said.

Education also has a role to play in economic growth, she said. She is concerned about declining enrollment in Waseca, and the district's inability to pass a bond issue.

"To have a quality workforce, we have to have quality education," she said.

Ruth is energized by the promise of her new

job. "I love a good challenge, I love to learn," she said. "I'm so honored and humbled by the response I've had. It has been overwhelming."

DISTRICT 28A

1998 population (estimate): 34,268

Largest city: Owatonna

Counties: Steele and Waseca

Location: southeastern Minnesota

Top concern: "I believe in an open flow of communication. I want to bring government to our community. I want people to feel a part of government."

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