

# Believing in herself

## After defeating a longtime incumbent, Soderstrom brings her trust, faith to the House of Representatives

By MIKE COOK

When you walk into the office of Rep. Judy Soderstrom (R-Mora), you see her district everywhere you look.



Rep. Judy Soderstrom

Adorning the walls are pictures and other items for the annual Mora Vasaloppet cross-country ski race, items from a fur trading shop in Pine City, and a pie tin from Braham, which in 1990 was officially recognized as the Home-made Pie Capital of Minnesota. On the tables are books about the city of Sandstone and Kanabec County, and the fire of 1894 that destroyed much of Hinckley, along with brochures from many communities she represents.

The one thing missing is a sign from the realty company she has owned for 13 years. Instead those signs are all around the district that she grew up in and to which she returned to raise her family after leaving for a few intervening years.

After seven years working in Minneapolis, Soderstrom returned to Mora in the late 1960s. She and her husband, Ronald, then started attending local Republican party meetings, which eventually led to her attendance at numerous state conventions.

Soderstrom ran for a House seat in late 1997 when former Rep. Leroy Koppendray was appointed to the Public Utilities Commission, but she was defeated by Rep. Sondra Erickson (R-Princeton) for the party endorsement. The two remain friends and are now seatmates on the House floor.

Undeterred, she continued her party involvement and when the redistricting boundaries were announced last year, Soderstrom said she knew right away that she would run.

"I saw that the district included all of Kanabec County," she said. "Being in real estate for 20 years I know all the roads and lots of people. Plus with my real estate company named Soderstrom Realty there was instant

name recognition."

She laughs a little when noting how that led to confusion for a few folks who thought their neighbors were moving when they saw the Soderstrom campaign sign in the yard thinking it was a realty sign.

"I knew I was going to do this and I thought it would be so exciting," she said of her decision to run. Her husband of 40 years is retired and was not as enthusiastic at first, but once she received the party endorsement she said he began saying things like "We could put signs here, and do this or that."

One of Soderstrom's two daughters, Bethany, said her dad calls himself "Mr. Judy Soderstrom."

Bethany is also in St. Paul, working as a leg-

islative assistant for the Education Policy Committee and for Erickson.

Policy, Judiciary Policy and Finance, and Local Government and Metropolitan Affairs committees.

"I asked for judiciary," she said. "The reason is that I have regularly gone into the Mora jail (Kanabec County Jail) and the Pine City jail (Pine County Jail) with Bible study, and I probably have about 30 people I correspond with in prisons around the state because I've met them (in jail)." She also recently organized a group of legislators for a tour of the Lino Lakes prison.

Soderstrom said she wishes more could be done at the local level possibly with groups, such as local churches, taking interest in the first-time offenders or offenders that have long been a part of the system, and are ready to make a change.

Being on three diverse committees could be considered a challenge, but she sees a connection between them. For example, "A lot of people that are in the prison system, their families are on welfare or they need to be cared for that way," she said.

Soderstrom said she knows that solving the

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islative assistant for the Education Policy Committee and for Erickson.

Soderstrom defeated former Rep. Loren Jennings, a nine-term DFL incumbent, by 7.2 percent in the general election. There were also two third-party candidates. "It was very satisfying because not many people thought I could beat him," she said.

Bethany wasn't one of skeptics. "I knew right away that she'd win," she said. "I didn't have any doubt."

Those who know her well say this has to do in large part with Soderstrom's personality.

"She's such a committed person, compassionate, and a woman of faith," Erickson said. "It's against her being to tell a lie," said Bethany, who added, "We have friends that are hardcore Democrats and they said they would vote for her because they trust her."

Soderstrom, who was born the same day and year as Rep. Jim Rhodes (R-St. Louis Park), sits on the House Health and Human Services

budget deficit will be difficult. She said she thinks the governor has a good proposal, yet she remains open to other ideas. She has heard from a number of people who will be affected. "I feel badly that they're going to feel the pain," she said. "Nobody wants to cut."

### DISTRICT 8B

**2002 population:** 36,998

**Largest city:** Mora

**Counties:** Isanti, Kanabec, Pine

**Location:** east-central Minnesota

**Top concern:** "I would like to help improve government efficiency by funding only what is essential. Also, I would like to encourage government to work more closely with nonprofit, private, and faith-based groups."

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