

Persistence pays off

After three failed tries at winning a seat in the House of Representatives, Urdahl fulfills another of his life goals

By MICHELLE KIBIGER

Rep. Dean Urdahl (R-Grove City) has had three major goals for his life: become a teacher, become a published writer, and become a legislator.



Rep. Dean Urdahl

Urdahl has been teaching in the New London-Spicer school district for 31 years. His first book was published in March 2001, with a second to follow a month later. And in November 2002, he realized his

third goal, though it took him four tries to make it happen.

He ran in 1992 and lost by 1,200 votes. He ran in 1994 and lost by 175 votes. He ran in 1996 and was defeated in the primary. When the new districts were drawn in 2002 and he ended up in a district where incumbent Bob Ness had decided not to run, he decided to give it one more try.

"This is my last shot," Urdahl said. "If I'm ever going to make it, it's got to be this time."

Urdahl said his family's support, particularly that of his wife, Karen, made his election to the Legislature possible. His three sons – one a history teacher, one a lobbyist, and one a newspaper editor, were also supportive, he said. "It was a long hard trip to get here, but we made it."

He said he's been interested in running for public office since high school. "I've always had a desire to work in public service," Urdahl said, "and this provides the best opportunity for the abilities that I have."

Since that time, he has been involved in a number of political capacities, including working on campaigns, working for late Congressman John Zwach, and serving in leadership positions in both the state and local Republican parties.

Urdahl also decided at a young age that he wanted to be a teacher. For all but one of his years, he has taught seventh-grade social

studies. He jokes that he's been stuck in the seventh grade for 30 years. He's also coached three state championship cross country teams at the high school level, including last year's team that earned the title three days before the general election.

"Even if I wasn't a teacher, I think it's natural to realize that our children are the future and we have to insure success in the future by doing right by kids today," Urdahl said.

Though education issues are important to Urdahl, it's his ties to the history of his district and his enthusiasm for all history that prompted him to become a history teacher. He says he hopes to transfer his desire to teach others about history and government to his role as a legislator in helping his constituents connect to government.

"When you're excited about something,

"Even if I wasn't a teacher, I think it's natural to realize that our children are the future and we have to insure success in the future by doing right by kids today."

— Rep. Dean Urdahl

sometimes you want to impart your excitement to others," Urdahl said.

Urdahl's family moved to Meeker County in 1856, just as conflicts with the American Indian tribes in the area were breaking out. He said his great-great-grandfather helped bury some of the initial casualties in the conflict.

His grandfather ran the first all-electric farm in the country. His father was a dairy farmer in the area until Dean was 3, and the family then moved into Litchfield. His father then ran a painting business, which Urdahl still operates, and his mother was a nurse.

He said he still runs into people in the towns in his district who knew his parents and grandparents.

Urdahl also remembers playing basketball

with House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) back in the 1970s.

"Dean didn't have a jump shot then and he still doesn't now," joked Sviggum. "Thirty years later he still can't get off the ground."

All joking aside, Sviggum described Urdahl as a hard worker who is truly concerned about the needs of constituents in his district. Sviggum said Urdahl's strengths include his ability to listen, respond, and care. He also said Urdahl appreciates the need for legislators to work together and desire the success of their colleagues.

These are attributes Sviggum said he observed many years ago when he and Urdahl first became friends.

"You develop a kind of neat relationship in athletics," Sviggum said. "And you develop a mutual respect that's important. Dean and I were able to do that many years ago before he even ran for office."

Urdahl said he's focusing on all aspects of rural economic development in his first term. Specifically, he's looking at park developments that can help stimulate the local economy, agricultural initiatives that may help the farmers in his district, and items to help create jobs.

DISTRICT 18B

2002 population: 36,654

Largest city: Litchfield

Counties: Meeker, Wright

Location: central Minnesota

Top concern: "Many of the things that I'm doing one way or another tie into economic development."

— Rep. Dean Urdahl