

Putting family first

Kriesel steps down after a brief but eventful first term

By Nick Busse

In just one term, Rep. John Kriesel (R-Cottage Grove), a decorated Iraq War veteran, made a name for himself as an outspoken, independent and popular young legislator. Kriesel knows he could probably have a future in politics if he wanted it — and he does.

But he also knows that some things are more important, namely his wife Katie, and his sons Broden and Elijah. It's for his family and he has decided not to seek re-election.

"I love this place, I love this job. But my family really needed me to be at home more — my kids especially," he said.

Kriesel certainly isn't the first lawmaker to step down for family reasons. But his decision might be better appreciated in the context of how much family time he's already sacrificed.

Kriesel missed two years of his kids' lives — first when his National Guard unit was deployed to Iraq, and then when he was

resigned to a hospital bed recovering from a roadside bomb attack that took both of his legs. His family would visit him in the hospital, but he said it wasn't the same.

"It really hit me, I think, within the last few months. I've been looking at pictures and videos my wife sent when I was deployed, like them singing songs to me. Nothing will ever get those years back; those are gone," he said.

The schedule of a "part time" lawmaker is often full. Kriesel has found that during session and even during the legislative interim, he's often unable to spend enough time with his family. Moreover, Kriesel said his wife basically put her career on hold to let him chase his dreams. He said it's time for him to step up and be there for her now.

"My wife has been so amazing throughout this, and just has put her life on hold," he said.

During his time in office, it was Kriesel's common-sense, "regular guy" approach to legislating that made him stand out.

A moderate Republican, Kriesel showed a willingness to break rank with his party when necessary to vote his conscience. He took populist stances on issues like fireworks sales, expanding gambling and the proposed new stadium for the Minnesota Vikings. He also made a now-famous speech on the House floor denouncing the proposed constitutional ban on gay marriage.

That speech got him in trouble with some of his own supporters, but Kriesel wasn't fazed. He thinks there's too much partisanship in the Legislature, and said legislators ought to focus on staying true to their personal beliefs and representing their constituents.

He offers this bit of advice to the person who takes his seat next session: "Don't be afraid to stand up for what you believe in. There's always going to be the temptation to go with the flow. And you know, if you vote with your heart, you're never wrong," he said.

Kriesel is proud of his service in the Legislature, and said he's loved every day of it. He thinks of himself as ordinary, and so feels privileged to have had a say in how the state is run. But he has found certain things frustrating too.

Kriesel said Republicans and Democrats don't spend enough time together on a personal basis, getting to know each other and establishing the kinds of relationships that would be helpful in passing difficult legislation. He said establishing the kind of trust that's needed at the Capitol could start with simple conversations.

"I wish that they had a bar in the basement. As crazy as that sounds, that would be the one thing that would foster a lot of bipartisanship," he said. "Have a beer with someone from the other side of the aisle. Talk. You learn about what you have in common, and that's where you need to start with everything, not just focus on differences."

Kriesel plans to keep his full-time job doing marketing for the Minnesota National Guard. But what's really "next" for Kriesel is helping his sons with their baseball teams, teaching them how to fish and doing "the stuff that dads are supposed to do." ❁



PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

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