

Year one: A freshman legislator's tale

by: WAYNE GREENE World Editorial Writer - Sunday, May 31, 2009

Sen. Gary Stanislawski is sworn in during a ceremony at the state Capitol on Nov. 18.



It was 9 a.m. of his first day in the Legislature and freshman Sen. Gary Stanislawski's top legislative priority was up for consideration by the Senate Education Committee.

Walking in the door of his first year of his first session in the Legislature, Stanislawski had a bright idea — Senate Bill 394.

Eight years on the Jenks school board had taught him about the frustration of having to tell first- and second-year teachers whether their contracts would be renewed for the next year by April 10, well before districts know how much money they will have to spend in the next year.

His simple solution: delay the notification date until the end of the school year when the budget picture is in clearer focus.

In that first committee hearing of his first bill, Stanislawski admits he was green. He watched as the only bill in front of his — legislation offered by veteran Sen. Kenneth Corn — was considered by the committee.

Corn explained his bill quickly, answered a few questions and the whole thing was wrapped up in about three minutes. The process seemed painless and simple.

Then it was Stanislawski's turn.

Suddenly, he was peppered with aggressive questions.

"Half the room had a question," Stanislawski said with a laugh.

Someone suggested the bill needed more work and tried to push it onto a legislative sidetrack — an interim study — meaning nothing would get done for a year.

There was a time when first-year legislators were treated like children in the old proverb, seen, not heard.

Their legislation often didn't get heard either.

Legislative term limits changed all that.

Gone are the career lawmakers who used to rule the state Capitol.

In are committed amateurs — some with great talent, others not so much — who have, at most, 12 years to make their mark. They have to be smart, aggressive and lucky to get what they want.

They also have to learn fast. There isn't a year to waste.

On that first day of his legislative life, Stanislawski stuck by his bright idea and he got his first vote. His bill passed the committee on a 7-6 vote. The Republican majority had backed a fellow member and teacher contract reform was still alive, if by the slimmest of margins.

"That was my initiation."

'An attitude of learning'

The most ominous three words in any legislator's life: "Got a minute?"

From the second they hit the door, lawmakers are constantly besieged by people trying to get a piece of their time.

Stanislawski said a typical day starts with a 7:30 a.m. breakfast meeting put on by some organization looking to get his attention for a pet cause — it might be a chamber of commerce on Monday and a labor union on Tuesday. Everyone wants a minute.

When the legislator gets to the Capitol building, someone will probably be waiting — a constituent or maybe a lobbyist, sometimes another lawmaker. There are phone calls to return, a stack of mail and bills to be read.

Then there are committee meetings before lunch with another advocacy group.

The afternoon brings more meetings, perhaps a legislative session, then a 5 p.m. reception and more lobbying from another interest group before a dinner meeting with yet another player.

"I gained 12 pounds in four months," said Stanislawski.

But despite all the calories that come with them, the meetings are an important part of the process.

A newly minted legislator — even a smart, educated, active member of the community — can't possibly come to the Capitol knowing everything needed to make the decisions over the course of a legislative session.

The real business of lawmaking, the convincing of members of the rightness of proposals, doesn't take place in legislative debates. It happens one-on-one with other legislators and citizens, Stanislawski said.

He tells the story of Angie Gallant, a Broken Arrow woman who had to fight General Motors for 10 months in 2004 to get a bum Malibu replaced.

She decided the state needed a Lemon Law to make the process fairer to consumers.

Rep. Rex Duncan, R-Sand Springs, sponsored her proposal for years, and for years it would hang up, usually in the Senate. It appeared headed to the same fate this year.

One day Gallant was one of the people wanting a minute of Stanislawski's time.

"I realized this was a common-sense bill," he said.

He added her language as an amendment to one of his own bills and, despite strong opposition from the auto industry, rescued the bill from death in a legislative conference committee.

Gov. Brad Henry signed the proposal into law the Friday before the Legislature adjourned for the year.

The Lemon Law wasn't on Stanislawski's to-do list when he went to Oklahoma City, but Gallant's advocacy persuaded him to take up the issue.

"A single person can make a difference," he said.

"I approach it with an attitude of learning," Stanislawski said. "I learned a great deal and I still have a great deal to learn."

'I'm excited'

Things change.

After his teacher contract bill passed the state Senate, someone pointed out that setting the deadline for the end of the school year meant different deadlines in different school districts.

He agreed to an amendment to make the deadline the same everywhere, the first Monday in June.

Still Stanislawski was up against committed and strong opposition. The Oklahoma Education Association opposed his idea because it would delay contract renewals for career teachers too.

Gone are the days when the OEA could shut down education legislation in the Legislature, but they still have the ear of the governor, and Stanislawski had to think of an end-game strategy.

What would be gained if his bright idea made it through both houses of the Legislature and got vetoed?

His bill needed more friends.

It turned out that backers of the Teach For America program — which would bring talented new college graduates into high-challenge classrooms — were looking for a legislative friend too.

A Teach For America bill passed earlier in the session, but after closer scrutiny state officials decided there were some missing pieces that had to be dealt with — clean-up legislation as it is called — before TFA could actually happen in Oklahoma.

TFA wasn't Stanislawski's bright idea. It was barely related to it, but in legislative parlance it was "germane," meaning it dealt with the same section of law, and that created an alliance.

It was a smart political move. Because he had already endorsed TFA, Gov. Henry might accept the teacher contract changes with it.

Stanislawski adopted the TFA amendment into his teacher contract legislation and Gov. Henry signed the whole package.

TFA teachers hit the classrooms next year.

Contract renewal days shift to June.

Stanislawski introduced nine bills this year. He killed one and another one died legislatively. One bill didn't die but got stuck in a House committee and another was put aside for further legislative study.

One passed both houses of the Legislature and is awaiting action by Henry. Stanislawski is optimistic about its chances.

The other four — including Stanislawski's bright idea about teachers' contracts — are now state law.

His freshman year over, Stanislawski says he plans to go on a diet and start working on his next bright idea.

"I feel great," Stanislawski said. "I'm excited for next year."

Wayne Greene 581-8308

wayne.greene@tulsaworld.com