

Law teacher

Biernat to retire from House, return full time to post at Hamline University law school

By MIRANDA BRYANT

Rep. Len Biernat will have plenty of real-life cases to offer when teaching legal ethics and professional responsibility to Hamline University law students — and more time in which to present them. The four-term legislator is not seeking re-election.

The DFL representative from northeast Minneapolis has always viewed his job as a legislator to be part-time and temporary. “I think I’ve made a good commitment to public service and it’s time to rotate out,” Biernat said.

The 57-year-old has been a Hamline law professor for 30 years, modifying his schedule annually to accommodate legislative sessions. Retiring from the House allows him to return to the classroom full time.

He leaves the Legislature with mixed feelings. Retiring would be more difficult, he said, if his party were in the majority. Biernat’s eight years at the Capitol have been spent with a Republican or Independence Party governor at the helm.

Biernat was seldom vocal during the 2004 session on the House Civil Law Committee, despite the fact that he was the DFL lead. This is largely because the Republicans had an 8-4 lead on issues when partisan politics were at play, he said.

“So there’s really not a lot of arguments you can make,” he said, adding that he did try to point out when proceedings and bill components were irrational.

Ironically, Biernat first sought election as a state representative due to a feeling of powerlessness in crafting true reform. While serving for seven years on the Minneapolis School Board, he realized that the real ability to initiate education reform rested at the State Capitol.

Biernat wanted to make a difference, inspired as he was by his father. Ted Biernat served as a state representative from 1949 through 1957. “I always looked to him as a youngster and I wanted to emulate that role,” Biernat said.

In his father’s day, the Legislature met at most for six weeks in a year, and members chose a label of either “conservative” or “liberal” instead of political parties. Ted Biernat was a liberal.

“As he became older, he became more conservative,” Biernat said. “As I become older, I

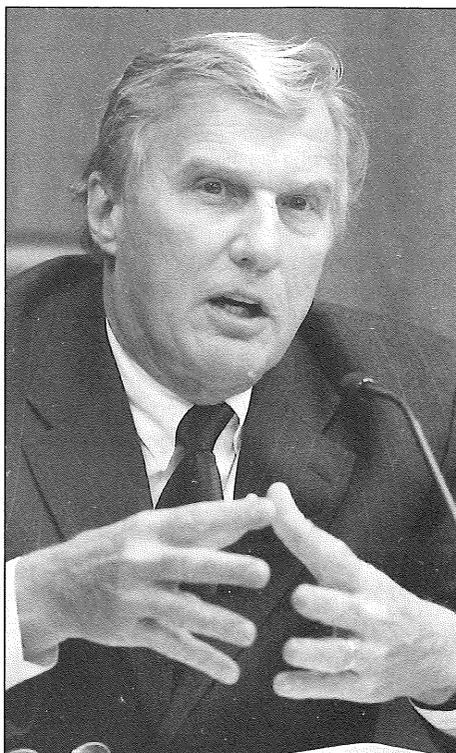


PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

After eight years in the House, Rep. Len Biernat plans to return to the classroom full time.

become more liberal.”

Biernat said his political leanings are a result of his career background, which began with teaching high school. He later taught English as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army, attended law school, and began teaching law. During this period he explored constitutional law and became committed to the idea of protecting the less fortunate and helping the downtrodden.

Now he inspires students at Hamline to get involved in politics, to run for office, and to craft good policy. He advises them to become active in community efforts and to keep the common good in mind.

“Politics is the art of compromising,” Biernat said. “You can’t get it all done in one step.”

In serving on the House Civil Law, Education Finance, and Education Policy committees, Biernat and his style have been respected by others. While he doesn’t enjoy the floor

sessions, in part because of the grandstanding that can occur, he likes the intensity and realism of committee debates.

“In committee I have always appreciated and admired Rep. Biernat’s analysis of the issues,” said Rep. Chris DeLaForest (R-Andover), vice chair of the House Civil Law Committee. “I always found him to be a cordial and fair-minded person.”

Mindful of his constituents’ interests, Biernat has focused his legislative career on policies related to education, property taxes, prescription drug pricing, and the quality of life for senior citizens.

“Recognizing that students need more time,” he lobbied to add three days to the traditional school year and to require summer school for those failing the basic skills test. And he proposed linking a teenager’s ability to get a driver’s license to school attendance.

Biernat, whose wife, Christine Jax, was the state education commissioner under Gov. Jesse Ventura, also worked to get school funding off the property tax rolls. But the effort has been rendered useless, he said, by the fact that most districts can now ask voters to approve adding operational levies to property tax calculations.

Realizing that this, among other efforts, has been repealed or undone by the changing political scene has been sobering, he indicated. “That’s been kind of a disappointment.”

But Biernat intends to stay tuned to legislative action, particularly family law matters, and to continue connecting the classroom experience with real-life situations at the Capitol.

“Hamline University is not that far away,” he said. 🌿

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. Len Biernat

DFL

District 59A - Minneapolis

Terms: 4

Career Notes: In keeping with his focus on education, Biernat supported efforts in 2004 to create all-day kindergartens throughout the state and to provide after-school enrichment programs. He was instrumental in securing committee approval of a \$6.4 million bond appropriation to construct the Colin Powell Youth Center in Hennepin County for the education, job training, and counseling of disadvantaged youth.

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