

Hoping to change chambers

Cassell pledges to seek another legislative term, but this time it will be in the Senate

By **Theresa Stahl**

As a young man serving in the United States Coast Guard in Greece, Rep. George Cassell (R-Alexandria) would stand on the quarterdeck of his ship, watching with anticipation the U.S. Navy Sixth Fleet moving toward the coast.

Seeing the American flags flying in the breeze, a knot would form in his stomach.

"It just makes me so proud," he said.

Cassell's patriotism is strong. The students in the many classrooms he has taught know it, and over the past two years of sponsoring Pledge of Allegiance legislation, much of the state has learned it too.

Soon to be departing the Minnesota House of Representatives to vie for a Minnesota Senate seat, Cassell will be remembered for his efforts to require students across the state to recite the pledge.

"He certainly has led the charge," said Rep. Paul Marquart (DFL-Dilworth).

Marquart, whose district is also located in northwestern Minnesota, noted the sincerity of Cassell's speeches about the bill on the House floor.

"You can tell when he talks that it is truly coming from his heart," Marquart said.

In 2001, the Pledge of Allegiance bill passed the House but not the Senate. This year, it passed the House again and awaits a full Senate vote.

Cassell said he debated whether to run for another term in the Legislature, and decided there is work yet to be done.

"I want to see a government that respects life, that respects family values, that wants

patriotism in its classrooms," he said.

He said that if he's elected he'll try to convince Senate members to help the bill become law. Or, as he put it, "I'd like to go over there and straighten 'em out!" he said, laughing.

But he is serious about teaching students the values he said this nation was founded upon.

"I think young people need to understand the underlying values that brought our country forward, the tremendous sacrifice of our founding fathers, and, more recently, the



PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

Rep. George Cassell, a leading proponent of requiring the Pledge of Allegiance in school, speaks on the House floor. Cassell is leaving the House after this term to run for the Senate.

people who have protected and have given their lives" for those values, he said.

Cassell's entire professional career has revolved around young people. After serving in the Coast Guard for four years, he earned a bachelor's degree in education from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

While teaching in a small, rural school he earned his master's degree at the University of Wyoming. Later, while serving as a school principal and special education director in Minnesota, he earned his doctorate in educational administration. He worked as a superintendent in Wyoming

and Idaho before spending his last 10 years in that position for the Alexandria school district until his retirement in 1997.

Shortly thereafter, Cassell was contacted about running for office when the state representative from his district decided not to seek re-election. He said that after 25 years of being in a public position as superintendent, he was looking forward to some anonymity.

"It was not a decision that was done very

lightly," he said, but "after a lot of consultation with my children, and a lot of prayer, and consultation with my wife," he decided to run.

Having worked in education, he said, "I've been on the receiving end of legislation that I've had to implement, and sometimes it didn't make a whole lot of sense. I thought maybe I can put a little rationale into some of that, particularly in terms of what schools have to deal with."

In March, new legislative boundaries put him in the same district as Rep. Torrey Westrom (R-Elbow Lake), whom Cassell said he won't run against.

"I'm humbled by his decision," Westrom said. "I take it as a high compliment."

The redistricting of Senate boundaries has paired Sen. Charles Berg (R-Chokio) against Sen. Dallas Sams (DFL-Staples). Berg will not seek re-election, and the new borders place Sams at the edge of the district and Cassell at the center.

"He's so well-rounded," Westrom said of Cassell's qualifications. "He's got a lot to offer the voters and a lot to offer the Senate."

But when the opportunity presented itself, Cassell had doubts about running.

"This was not an easy choice, either," he said.

Again, he turned to his children and his wife, Carol.

"I said to George, 'Look at this map,'" Carol said. "You are the right person, in the right place, at the right time and I know you'll run for the right reasons."

Cassell wants to stay in the Legislature because he feels he has more to offer to help make government more efficient.

"Thomas Jefferson said government and liberty are on a collision course," he said. "The more government grows, the more liberty goes down."

"I want to prevent government from infringing on liberties. ... We've got a lot of work to do." 

STEPPING DOWN

Rep. George Cassell
Republican
District 10B — Alexandria
Terms: 2

Career Notes: In his four years in the House, Cassell has served on a variety of committees, including education, agriculture, environment policy, and higher education finance. He sponsored legislation that would require public and charter school students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance at least once a week.