

Seifert brings humility, common sense to Capitol

After waving in 16 parades in four months and hand-shaking at a pork feed, chicken feed, beef feed, and even a smelt feed, Marty Seifert of Marshall, Minn., can call himself a newly elected member of the Minnesota House of Representatives.



Rep. Marty Seifert

The freshman who represents District 21A isn't complaining — those venues are among the best ways to meet voters in southwestern Minnesota.

Seifert, a 24-year-old high school social studies teacher, said he'll reserve complaints for the Legislature — particularly on issues such as the state's handling of schools.

Unlike a majority of House lawmakers who are educators (15 of 22 are DFLers), Seifert ran as a Republican and considers himself the voice of many rank-and-file teachers who choose not to get involved in the legislative process or a teachers' union. They spend their time working hard to reach their students and want St. Paul to relinquish some control over their classrooms, he said.

"Bureaucratic and messy," are the words he chooses to describe the state's new graduation standards for high school students. The standards call for passing basic skills tests in math, reading, and writing before a diploma is issued. They also call for success in what is called the "Profile of Learning," a broad analysis of each student's overall performance in a variety of other subjects such as geography and science.

The standards only serve to give state officials a "reason to run around the state and say they're doing good," Seifert said, adding that decision makers in St. Paul need to stop shoving mandates at local schools.

Although not the youngest member of the Minnesota Legislature, Seifert did hear comments about his age on the campaign trail. Some asked how a 24-year-old who hasn't had time to learn about life could be entrusted to know anything about running the state.

But Seifert, who replaces retiring eight-year veteran Jim Girard, had a ready response. Sure, other people may have "lots of big degrees, lots of important jobs, but that doesn't stand up to an ounce of common sense."

He said he plans to remain teaching at Marshall Senior High School when he is not in session at the Legislature. Although he refused to discuss his candidacy with his students during the campaign (to avoid any appearance of impropriety) and even imposed a "gag rule" in his classroom, he knows he had an impact. "Some kids who had never even picked up a newspaper were reading and paying more attention to news and current events," he said.

Seifert's students are still a little amazed that one of their teachers is a lawmaker. He said his successful campaign taught students a valuable lesson: "Hard work and integrity matter."

He learned that lesson from his parents, Norbert and Rita. "If everyone lived their

lives the way my parents do, we wouldn't have the problems we do."

His parents, he said, don't believe in tooting their own horn but in getting involved in the community, whether that means mowing the church lawn or sewing clothes for the needy. Seifert himself grew up on a farm.

"I was born into a family that . . . would [make people] think I should be a hillbilly," he said. One of six boys, his mother is a former school teacher; his father, a hog and grain farmer.

Seifert grew up reading discarded encyclopedias and almanacs from garage sales and later collected antique farm machinery and seed corn bags.

When his time in the Legislature is said and done, Seifert said he wants to be remembered as a promoter of southwestern Minnesota who stood up for the district rather than "feathering his own nest."

"I have to practice what I preach to my kids," he said.

— K. Darcy Hanzlik

District 21A

1996 population: 33,377

Largest city: Marshall

Counties: Lyon, Redwood, Yellow Medicine

Location: southwestern Minnesota

Top concern: "Getting our money's worth out of state government. We see a lot of money going to St. Paul but don't see much in return. People feel like the Twin Cities don't even know we exist out here."

— Rep. Marty Seifert



Opening day at the Legislature is reserved for pomp and ceremony, but good humor is often in large supply as well. In seconding the nomination of Edward Burdick for Chief Clerk of the House on Jan. 7, House Minority Leader Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) said he didn't want to draw undue attention to Burdick's age as he enters his 55th year in service to the Minnesota Legislature. Still,

Sviggum drew chuckles by pointing out that in 1941 Joe DiMaggio had not completed his record hitting streak, and Rep. Willard Munger (DFL-Duluth), the House's elder statesman, hadn't begun the first of his 21 non-consecutive terms in the House.

If legislators succeed in reforming Minnesota's complex property tax code, Rep. Andy Dawkins (DFL-St. Paul) could well be sporting a new look by the end of the session. At the Taxes Committee's initial meeting Jan. 9, representatives got a crash course on

Minnesota's taxation system and heard Dawkins, with his flowing locks tied back into a neat ponytail, reiterate his pledge to let his hair grow until the property tax is no longer the state's number one source of revenue.

"I think we can accomplish that this session," Dawkins said, grinning.

"But will you lose your strength if we do?" Rep. Dee Long (DFL-Mpls), who chairs the committee, asked.

"I hope not," Dawkins answered.