

New lawmaker overcomes hurdles and hardships

By David Maeda

Replacing a legislative institution like Rep. Willard Munger would be a daunting task for anybody. But for newly elected Rep. Dale Swapinski (DFL-Duluth), it is just the latest of many challenges he has faced in his life.

"Willard was a man of principle and character," Swapinski said, "I feel very honored and privileged that the people of District 7A thought I was a worthy successor to a legend."

The 45-year-old Swapinski, who worked on the Munger campaign in 1996, said the late representative returned the favor by helping him get elected to the Duluth city council in 1997.

"I did whatever he needed done," Swapinski said. "He was a classic individual."

Swapinski also gained valuable political experience by working on the 1996 re-election campaign of U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone.

Becoming a state representative has been a dream for Swapinski since he served as a House page in 1991 and 1992. Back then, merely working for the Legislature represented a major accomplishment for him.

Thirteen years ago, at the age of 32, Swapinski gave up drinking and started a new life. A high school dropout, his job prospects were slim. But he eventually worked his way through school, graduating from the College of St. Scholastica with highest honors.

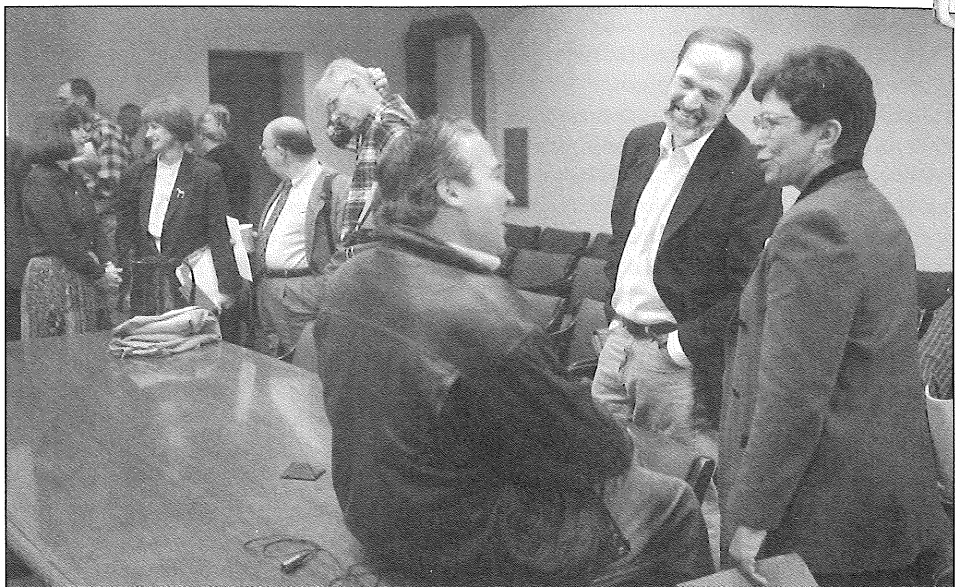
After serving as a House page and working with the Tourism Office of the Department of Trade and Economic Development, Swapinski returned to Duluth, where he helped found the Dropout Recovery Program in the Duluth Public Schools.

Swapinski said the program helps dropout students find the motivation to earn a diploma or GED. Since its inception in April 1993, he said, the program has helped over 400 Duluth students finish their schooling.

His work with some of the state's most challenging students has given Swapinski an appreciation for the importance of working on educational issues. He said he plans to devote much of his time and energy as a legislator to education issues including reducing class size, funding options, and pre-kindergarten child care.

"The biggest societal change I've seen over the years is that other people are now raising our children," he said, "We as a society have not addressed the critical impacts of that long term."

Swapinski understands the challenges of child care first hand as a single father to sons



Newly elected Rep. Dale Swapinski, second from right, shares a light moment with Reps. Michael Paymar and Alice Hausman during a DFL caucus Nov. 3, the day after he was elected to fill the late Rep. Willard Munger's place in the House. Swapinski was sworn in on Nov. 12 by Attorney General Mike Hatch.

Alek, 7, and Sam, 5. His wife, Jill, was killed in a well-publicized plane crash last year. The small plane in which she was a passenger disappeared over northern Wisconsin and was missing for weeks before the crash site was discovered in the Chequamegon National Forest.

Facing questions from the media and constituents about the loss and having to endure a public grieving process has been hard, he said, but he learned long ago the value of being open in dealing with people.

He said that it was also difficult facing the anniversary of his wife's death during the campaign. A self-proclaimed "tireless campaigner," he pressed on because he knew fulfilling his dream and getting elected to the House would require much work.

That hard work paid off when he defeated several other DFL candidates, including Munger's son, in the primary and went on to get 65 percent of the vote in the November special election. Still, there were bittersweet memories on election night, he said, after finally reaching the pinnacle of his political dreams only to come home to Jill's absence.


But through it all, Swapinski said, he has learned valuable lessons that will make him a better legislator. He's learned to be open about his past troubles and hardships. And those lessons have helped him gain a greater appreciation for the struggles many of his constituents face.

"We have a saying in the Dropout Recovery Program. 'I keep what I have by giving it

away,'" he said.

As a newly-elected member in the House minority caucus, Swapinski said he is not naive about the process and realizes that initially his role will be "adding his voice" to the debate.

Swapinski said he intends to continue Munger's well-established work with environmental issues. But he also said economic development is the most pressing concern in his district. He said he will seek a way to clean up and redevelop the site of the abandoned U.S. Steel plant that has lain dormant for three decades.

"I heard many residents say that they were concerned about the lack of job opportunities for their children," he said. 

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