

Finding common ground

Ruud wants to connect constituents to government

By RUTH DUNN

Vividly colored children's artwork brightens the stark white walls of Rep. Maria Ruud's office in the State Office Building.



Rep. Maria Ruud

It's a mini art gallery of original works created by children who live in her district.

After Ruud (DFL-Minnetonka) was elected, she invited schools to select artwork for display.

Not only do students feel good that their art was selected, but Ruud, a passionate supporter of the arts, gets a boost every time she enters her office. "How can you not smile when you look at these?" Ruud asks as she gestures to the walls.

It was "seeing the human costs of bad policy" that prompted Ruud to run for the House. She saw those human costs as a nurse practitioner working with people in poverty; as a mother

with children in the public schools; and as the spouse of a small business owner. She kept waiting for an adult to stand up and run for office and then realized, "I was the adult. If not me, then who?" Still she said the decision to seek office was "a huge step and scary."

Ruud (pronounced "rood") ran on a campaign theme of "finding common ground"—a phrase that resonated with constituents in her traditionally Republican suburban district of Minnetonka and Eden Prairie where many are social moderates.

Increased support for public education turned out to be the prime common ground. "My district contains three outstanding school districts but people are really worried about deterioration in light of budget cuts and resulting increases in class sizes and decreases in class offerings," she said. She serves on the House Education Policy and Reform and Regulated Industries committees.

The youngest of seven children, Ruud grew up in Bloomington, but has Iron Range

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connections through her father, a Croatian-American.

She's an avid runner who hits the pavement at least five days a week, often with her teenage son. "It's a good time for us to talk," she said.

Ruud sponsors regular coffee parties to keep in touch with people in her district. How will she judge her success? "If people in my district feel more connected to government and more engaged in the process and if I help facilitate that."

Turning a new page

Youngest lawmaker setting a path

By PATTY JANOVEC

At age 24, Rep. Andy Welti (DFL-Plainview) said he didn't expect to already be a legislator.

He says it's an advantage being the youngest lawmaker. "I have a lot of support," and with that comes increased attention and many legislators are offering to mentor him, he said.

Welti was a participant in the page program in high school. "I remember being up here for that week long program and thinking how, someday, I wanted to be here in a legislative seat because I really enjoyed the debate." He just thought it would be more like at age 28 or 29.

Serving as a page and participating in his local 4-H program, Welti said he "developed a strong appreciation for community service, which I

think translated well to public service."

Participating in 4-H also helped with his speaking and leadership skills, both extremely important as a legislator. "Your ability to know how to compromise and ... communicate well with others so you can achieve an end result," and finding common ground is important, he added.

He's using those skills in the House committees on which he serves: Agriculture and Rural Development, Environment and Natural Resources and Governmental Operations and Veterans Affairs.

He knows about the issues he faces on the agriculture committee because he grew up on dairy farm. "I can relate to the issues when we are discussing them."

What he enjoys most about the job so far is, "Being able to respond to the constituents and knowing that I have voted in a way that my constituents wanted me to vote. You're

DISTRICT 30B

2002 population: 37,084
Largest city: Rochester
Counties: Olmsted, Wabasha
Top concerns: Affordability of health care and education

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making a difference and making effective policy."

Welti says he has started something unique in his district to get his constituents more involved in the process. "I have an education think tank, and an agriculture think tank," he said. He invited two teachers from every school, and farmers from around the district to engage in discussions. He said he expects to sponsor legislation on key issues from the meetings.