

# Ohio Senate Minority Leader Kenny Yuko

‘Time of my life’: Work inside Capitol has proved to be ideal fit for former union organizer who enjoys bringing people together

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

Ohio Sen. Kenny Yuko didn’t know it at the time, but in his 25 years as a union organizer fighting for better contracts, benefits and wages for Ohio workers, he was getting just the right kind of training for the work he now does inside the state Capitol.

“Everything I fought for [then], I’m fighting for as a legislator,” he notes. “So I’ve got a lot of experience at this stuff, and I love people, so it makes it an easy job to do.”

So much so, in fact, that the Ohio native says “I’m having the time of my life” — words that carry special weight for him these days. Yuko had a bout with cancer two years ago (he has been free of the disease since last February), and his wife currently is being treated for cancer.

“That’s an eye-opening experience that puts a whole new perspective on life,” Yuko says.

But one thing that hasn’t changed is the community-minded focus that brought him to the Ohio legislature in the first place and that continues to drive the work he does — both in representing constituents from his diverse, northeast Ohio district and in serving as minority leader for Senate Democrats.

Years before running for public office himself, Yuko would travel to Columbus on behalf of Laborers’ International Union. There were both notable successes during that time (for example, passage of a law giving public employees a right to union representation) and reasons for concern (increased talk of “right-to-work” legislation and restrictions on collective bargaining).

“I realized that what we needed was to get one of our [union] guys to run for public office so we would have a voice for labor in the Statehouse.”

The first challenge was finding a candidate. After failed attempts to recruit one, Yuko decided to take on the job himself, and successfully ran in 2004 for a seat in the Ohio House, where he went on to champion various union-related issues as chair and ranking member of the Commerce and Labor Committee.

But seven years into his tenure, legislators passed SB 5, a measure that limited collective bargaining by public employees. Outnumbered in the Legislature by the bill’s supporters, Yuko and others turned to the voters themselves, asking them in a statewide referendum to overturn SB 5.

“I was active in all 88 counties to overturn that by significant numbers,” Yuko says. “[It was] a very clear message in Columbus to not mess with our sisters and brothers in labor.”

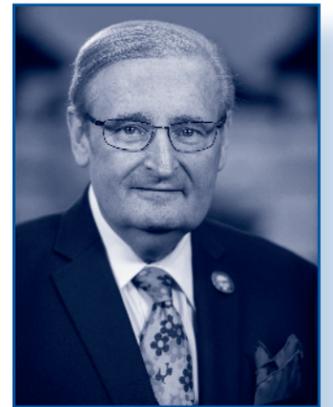
After being out of the General Assembly for two years, Yuko successfully ran for an open Senate seat in 2014. His election as Senate minority leader came last spring.

When the conversation turns to his legislative district, Yuko talks passionately about economic revitalization along the Lake Erie lakefront and a reimagining of how local school properties are being used.

“We are not designing them as school campus-

## Bio-sketch of Sen. Yuko

- ✓ elected Senate minority leader in 2017
- ✓ has served in both the Ohio House and Senate
- ✓ worked as union organizer for 25 years for Laborers’ Local 860 in Ohio’s Cuyahoga, Lake and Geauga counties
- ✓ lives in Richmond Heights with his wife, Pam; they have two grown children, Rocky and Angela, and three grandchildren



“We can get things done, and you don’t do it by making waves — you do it by making friends.”

es,” he says, “we are designing them as community campuses” that include schools, senior centers, coffee shops, sports complexes, and libraries.

As far as statewide issues, Yuko says, his priorities include changing the redistricting process, closing tax breaks for businesses, and investing more in mental health, education and opioid abuse programs.

During a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Yuko discussed these issues while also reflecting on his legislative accomplishments and his views on leadership. Here are excerpts.

**Q: Of all the issues you’ve worked on during 12 years in the General Assembly, what accomplishments are you most proud of?**

**A:** When I came to the General Assembly, I spoke about the need to get casinos in Ohio. My wife and I would go to casinos [in other states] and the parking lots would be jam-packed with Ohio cars. All that money from Ohio was going out to other states, and we had nothing to attract people from other states. So when I first got elected, I said that I was going to get casinos in Ohio. Everyone reminded me that the people had voted it down four times in Ohio.

So we devised a new plan, and we took it to the people and we passed it. The difference was that we gave the people the right choice. We were going to bring casinos into Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Toledo. We were going to create jobs and we were going to make sure that revenue from the four casinos goes to all 88 counties. ... In Cleveland, for example, we brought the casino down right on Public Square, and there was such a flourish of activity. It gave us an opportunity for tremendous economic development and made Cleveland a very desirable location for the Republican National Convention [in 2016].

**Q: You also worked for a long time on efforts to legalize medical marijuana, which is now a reality in Ohio. How did you work to get that measure passed?**

**A:** Democrats and Republicans all laughed when I started talking about it, but we never gave up. We kept persisting those two years I was out of the General Assembly. I said if I won my [Senate] election, I would introduce a medical marijuana bill. But at that time, a ballot initiative for recreational and medical marijuana failed miserably. I teamed up with a Republican senator, and we did a listening tour all over the state. We visited about 500 homes, mostly meeting with young couples with kids with epilepsy and other diseases that cause seizures. We put together a tremendous piece of legislation. It’s a game changer for kids with seizures, for veterans with PTSD, for seniors who are going through cancer treatment.

**Q: You are now serving as minority leader of a very small caucus (the Ohio Senate has 33 members, nine are Democrats). What is your approach to this leadership role?**

**A:** It’s up to me as the minority leader to ensure that our voice is being heard in the Ohio Senate at all times. And you do that by being careful about what fights you pick and with whom. You have to make sure you have that ability to reach across the aisle and have an understanding, and you have to show respect to get respect. That’s one thing I’ve always made a point of doing.

At the end of the day, I don’t see myself as a Democrat; I don’t see them as Republicans. I see us all as Ohioans. ... You have to have that ability to reach across the aisle and partner with the Republicans, just like I did on the medical marijuana bill. And, yes, we are going to have our share of disagreements because we are from opposite political parties. But we can get things done, and you don’t do it by making waves — you do it by making friends.