

House Speaker Ron Ryckman

After rare opportunity to serve alongside his father, lifelong Kansan now making his mark in top leadership position

by Laura Kliever (lkiever@csg.org)

Kansas House Speaker Ron Ryckman never had to look far to find inspiration for getting involved in his community and, ultimately, running for political office.

“My dad has been my role model my entire life, as far as someone who is dedicated to helping others,” Speaker Ryckman says.

In the small, rural town of Meade in southwest Kansas, his father, Ronald Ryckman, was well-known as a schoolteacher, coach and Sunday school teacher.

“He became a legislator later, after his retirement,” Speaker Ryckman says. “I was kind of watching what he was doing, and the opportunity arose for me to be there.”

He eventually found himself in the unique position of not only following in his father’s footsteps, but serving alongside him in the Kansas House of Representatives. His father left the Legislature at the end of 2016, while he stepped into one of the state’s top leadership positions — speaker of the House.

Though raised in southwest Kansas, Speaker Ryckman has lived in the northeast part of the state ever since attending MidAmerica Nazarene University on a basketball scholarship.

“I fell in love with the community, the schools there and the family values — it is just a great place to live,” Ryckman says of Olathe, the fourth-largest city in Kansas.

He and his wife, Kim, are raising their three children in Olathe, and in 2009, Ryckman deepened his community involvement by joining the City Council. (He remains on the council today.) Three years later, he ran unopposed for a seat in the Kansas House.

“Originally, it was to substantively spend more time with my father,” he says about running for a legislative seat, “and to help build a better Kansas and future for my kids.”

What followed was a quick rise in leadership, including as chair of the House Appropriations Committee. After only two terms in office, Ryckman was elected House speaker.

The influence of his father — particularly the collaborative style and the commitment to helping others — remains an important part of Speaker Ryckman’s approach to leadership and legislating.

But his own experience as a father and as a small-business owner (Ryckman is the CEO of a local roofing company) helps inform his work in Topeka as well: “Lots of times it is just a matter of sitting around a table and hearing each other, and it can go a long way to finding your common goals.”

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Speaker Ryckman reflected on his legislative career and priorities, as well as his leadership style. Here are excerpts.

Q: You became House speaker fairly soon after joining the Legislature. How do you explain that quick rise in leadership?

A: I had had the opportunity to be appropriations chair, where we looked at data and

Bio-sketch of Kansas Speaker Ron Ryckman

- ✓ Member of the House of Representatives since 2013 and elected House speaker in 2017; previously served as majority whip and as chair of the House Appropriations Committee
- ✓ Also serves as member of the Olathe City Council
- ✓ Lives in Olathe with wife, Kim, and three children
- ✓ Business owner with a degree in business administration from MidAmerica Nazarene University



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tried to make data-based decisions. And more people had buy-in because more people were part of the process; it was straightforward and honest. I believe that was what a lot of my colleagues were looking to when they elected me speaker. ... Being speaker also provided the opportunity to talk to a lot of folks and to find common ground, and to make our state a better place. It’s not only about problem-solving, but about creating opportunities for others.

Q: Is that how you would describe your legislative leadership style — straightforward and honest?

A: We are also very dedicated to process. If you trust the process, you trust the results. That doesn’t mean you always agree with the results. We understand that everyone takes away from family or business to be here, and they spend a lot of time talking to their voters back home. Everybody’s voice should be heard. That doesn’t mean we necessarily need to agree with each other, but you need to be able to represent your district — to be able to have the voices of Kansas heard and do it in safe environments where you can have a civil discussion.

Q: So when you talk about being “dedicated to the process,” are you referring to listening to constituents, and then coming back to Topeka and talking to fellow legislators and making sure everyone has a voice?

A: That, and the way committees are set up, making sure there is a balance of ideology and expertise.

Q: How have your legislative priorities deepened and expanded over your two-plus terms since joining the Legislature?

A: I think the state is in a different place from a fiscal standpoint than it was four years ago. The commitment I have now to be fiscally responsible and balance the books is greater. I have more responsibility for that to happen. It’s much more about being pragmatic. Finding coalitions and working with people to solve our fiscal issues is much heavier on my mind right now than it was four years ago.

Q: What have you enjoyed most about serving in the Kansas Legislature?

A: It’s having the opportunity to solve problems or create opportunities, and bringing people together to find political unifiers and build a voting bloc from there.

Q: What has been the biggest challenge, especially now as speaker?

A: Bringing people together to find consensus can be challenging. We try to remove emotions as much as we can and try to make our decisions based on data, and that is difficult to do. We encourage people not to make up their minds until they get all the information from both sides and get information back from their district.

Q: What are your legislative priorities for this year and beyond?

A: To stabilize our budget so we have a sound financial footing so we can fund core services and create a school finance formula that is data-driven and reasonably calculated. ★