BILLD turns 25, and alums mark the anniversary with special events at MLC Annual Meeting in Chicago

National expert on media relations leads workshop for state legislators

Seth Pendleton has prepped members of the U.S. Congress for debates and counseled countless political and business leaders on their media appearances. In July, he provided this expert training to the Midwest's state and provincial legislators.

His workshop on “Facing the Media” closed the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Legislative Conference and was sponsored by the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development, as part of BILLD’s ongoing mission to provide professional development to the Midwest’s state and provincial legislators. Here were three of Pendleton’s takeaway messages.

Be prepared, and refrain from ‘live thinking’

“No Live Thinking!” Pendleton calls this his “three-word bumper sticker” to keep media appearances from going wrong, sometimes horribly so. Be prepared for the appearance and the questions that will come, he told lawmakers, and avoid the temptation to improvise. His example of “live thinking” gone wrong: During an interview after a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, British Petroleum CEO Tony Hayward told the reporter, “I’d like my life back.” The backlash from these off-the-cuff remarks was immense.

Media pros are not born; they’re made through practice

In their debate performances or television appearances, some elected officials seem to have a natural gift for coming off as strong and warm (the two impressions that all leaders should want to leave). But that ease in front of the camera likely only came after a lot of practice and self-analysis. “If you work at it, you’ll get better at it,” Pendleton said. “If you don’t, you’ll get worse.” To improve media appearances, Pendleton suggested that legislators record themselves giving mock interviews or debates, and then scrutinize the results with staff and other trusted individuals.

Your words only tell part of the story for viewers

According to Pendleton, viewers’ impressions of an elected official are based not so much on party or policy, but rather on how they answer the following: “Does this person appear to be my kind of person?” This question begins being answered within seconds of a media appearance, and the response is largely based on how legislators appear visually (their posture, facial expressions, eye contact, use of space, etc.) and how they sound (tone, rate of speech, volume and pitch). That’s not to say the content of the message doesn’t matter, Pendleton said, and that message resonates much more when a legislator tells an impactful story.

At luncheon, legislators reconnect with colleagues, reflect on program’s success

More than 60 alumni, sponsors and staff of the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development gathered in Chicago for a celebratory luncheon on July 24 to mark BILLD’s 25th anniversary. Former Wisconsin Sen. Brian Rude reflected on creation of the program, its early years, and its continued success. Rude was the founding co-chair of the BILLD Steering Committee along with former Illinois Rep. Tom Ryder. More than 875 legislators have been trained through BILLD. Many graduates have moved into top legislative leadership positions and other state and federal offices.

ILLINOIS REP. SARAH FEINGENHOLZ WAS A FIRST-TERM LEGISLATOR WHEN SHE ATTENDED BILLD. TODAY, SHE IS CHAIR OF THE HOUSE ADOPTION AND CHILD WELFARE COMMITTEE AND A RECOGNIZED LEADER IN EFFORTS TO IMPROVE STATE ADOPTION PRACTICES. SHE ALSO SPONSORED GROUNDBREAKING LEGISLATION TO ALLOW ADULT ADOPTEES ACCESS TO THEIR ORIGINAL BIRTH CERTIFICATES.

INDIANA REP. BOB BEHNING WAS FIRST ELECTED TO THE STATE HOUSE IN 1992. TODAY, HE SERVES AS CHAIR OF THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE. HIS WORK ON EDUCATION-RELATED ISSUES HAS INCLUDED CREATING INDIANA'S SCHOOL-CHOICE VOUCHER PROGRAM; CHANGING THE STATE'S SYSTEM OF SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY AND STUDENT TESTING; AND EXPANDING PRESCHOOL ACCESS FOR AT-ROCK, LOW-INCOME 4-YEAR-OLDS.

WISCONSIN SEN. ALBERTA DARLING SPENT TWO YEARS IN THE STATE ASSEMBLY BEFORE BEING ELECTED TO THE SENATE IN 1992. TODAY, SHE SERVES AS CHAIR OF THE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE AND CO-CHAIR OF THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON FINANCE. SHE HELPED ESTABLISH WISCONSIN'S FIRST SCHOOL-CHOICE PROGRAM AND INDEPENDENT CHARTER SCHOOLS. ANOTHER PRIORITY OF DARLING'S HAS BEEN PUBLIC SAFETY, WITH LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS SUCH AS ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW SEX-OFFENDER REGISTRY AND GREATER PROTECTIONS AGAINST SEXUAL PREDATORS.

ILLINOIS REP. BOB BEHNING WAS FIRST ELECTED TO THE STATE HOUSE IN 1992. TODAY, HE SERVES AS CHAIR OF THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE. HIS WORK ON EDUCATION-RELATED ISSUES HAS INCLUDED CREATING INDIANA'S SCHOOL-CHOICE VOUCHER PROGRAM; CHANGING THE STATE'S SYSTEM OF SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY AND STUDENT TESTING; AND EXPANDING PRESCHOOL ACCESS FOR AT-ROCK, LOW-INCOME 4-YEAR-OLDS.

ILLINOIS REP. SARAH FEINGENHOLZ WAS A FIRST-TERM LEGISLATOR WHEN SHE ATTENDED BILLD. TODAY, SHE IS CHAIR OF THE HOUSE ADOPTION AND CHILD WELFARE COMMITTEE AND A RECOGNIZED LEADER IN EFFORTS TO IMPROVE STATE ADOPTION PRACTICES. SHE ALSO SPONSORED GROUNDBREAKING LEGISLATION TO ALLOW ADULT ADOPTEES ACCESS TO THEIR ORIGINAL BIRTH CERTIFICATES.