P hil GiaQuinta was raised in a family where he and his five older siblings were encouraged to find ways to give back to their community.

One way to do that, he learned from his father, Ben, was to enter the political arena.

Ben joined the Indiana House in 1990 and held the seat for most of the next decade and a half before retiring. Phil decided to carry on the family tradition, winning election in 2006 to his dad’s old legislative seat.

It’s proved to be a comfortable fit.

“You helping the people I represent is the most rewarding part of [the job],” he says. “I like getting legislation passed that will help change their lives for the better.”

GiaQuinta’s hometown of Fort Wayne is Indiana’s second-largest city, an area that has long relied on manufacturing (a General Motors plant still employs 4,500 people in the county) but has more recently needed to diversify its economy.

Early in his legislative career, GiaQuinta found a way to help — passage of a bill allowing for the creation and funding of a capital improvement board in his home county. That board, using a portion of revenue from a tax on food and beverages, is now able to invest up to $6 million a year in capital projects that spur development in Fort Wayne and its surrounding area.

“[The board] has been able to use this money to attract and retain jobs,” GiaQuinta says, “and make other improvements, including redevelopment of the [city’s] riverfront.”

He counts that law as one of his most important legislative accomplishments. Others include measures that have made it easier for homeowners to apply for the state’s homestead exemption (by allowing them to simply check a box on a sales-disclosure form required for home purchases) and that provide civil immunity to anyone who breaks into a car to rescue a child.

Legislative wins like these are invariably hard-earned. That’s because for most of his legislative career, GiaQuinta has been a member of the minority party, a Democrat in a state where Republicans enjoy full control of the legislature and governor’s office.

“It is not easy to get bills passed in the minority, and frankly, even if you are in the majority,” he says.

Starting this past session, the seven-term lawmaker took on a new legislative challenge — the role of minority leader in the Indiana House. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, GiaQuinta shared his perspective on this new leadership role and his policy priorities for the state. Here are excerpts.

Q: You became House minority leader in 2018. What do you think are the characteristics of an effective leader?

A: You need to be a good listener and take into account all sides. You need to be able to collaborate and understand that sometimes getting 70 percent of what you want is better than not getting anything at all. ... As a leader, you also want to inspire hope. You don’t ever want to give the impression that you are giving up, especially when we are in the minority and fighting to get our causes and issues out there. And you need to be able to work across the aisle and take a bipartisan approach when you can.

Q: Nine of the 33 members of your House Democratic caucus were new this year. What advice did you give to them?

A: I told them that I, like you, wanted to change the world when I came here. But you have to be patient; you won’t get everything done you want to during your first session. They can start the process by building good relationships, but also remember that half the job is constituent services. They need to pay close attention to constituents, so it is important to respond to emails and phone calls and continue with public outreach.

Q: What are the best ways for members of the minority party to get their own legislation considered and passed?

A: It is about putting in hard work, talking to the chair of the committee where your bill has been assigned, and finding a legislator from the majority to go on the bill as co-author. Work with the chair and co-author to get the bill passed, and be willing to make a few tweaks, if necessary, to win their support. But it is really about forming good relationships with the other side of the aisle.

Q: What are some of the policy priorities of your caucus for the coming session?

A: We want to focus on rising health care costs and health care access. We want to continue to address school safety and make pre-kindergarten and child care more accessible and affordable to working families. Pre-K had been a pilot program, and it has now gone statewide. But we didn’t increase funding enough to cover the expanded program. We are in the process of discussing these issues as a caucus.

Q: Taking a longer view, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges for Indiana over the next decade?

A: Education is both a challenge and opportunity. We have a K-12 education system that does not pay our public school teachers adequately. We underfund our traditional public schools and don’t hold our virtual charter schools accountable. College affordability will be a continuing concern, and college debt will continue to impact students’ future opportunities. We also have to reverse the brain drain in our state, and we can help do that by addressing quality-of-life issues. That means focusing on everything from health care, to roads, to parks.

Finally, we need to think ahead to what the economy is likely to be like, look at ways to bridge the skills gap and meet the needs of the middle class.

Q: Is there anything you would like changed about your state’s political process or system?

A: The No. 1 thing is eliminating the gerry- mandered districts that we see in the state of Indiana. I believe we need a nonpartisan commission to redistrict the state map in a way that is fair and unbiased. More competitive districts will help create a more balanced legislature, and that will mean better debates and better legislation.

Q: You need to be able to collaborate and understand that sometimes getting 70 percent of what you want is better than not getting anything at all.”