PROFILE: MICHIGAN SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE JASON WENTWORTH

A passion for helping fellow veterans led the Michigan native to elective office; only four years later, he’s set to serve as one of the state’s top political leaders

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

As a graduating high school student in the small Michigan town of Farwell, Jason Wentworth had a clear idea of his future career path. Politics was the furthest thing from his mind. He wanted to become a police officer, and because the minimum age was 21, Wentworth first enlisted in the U.S. Army to serve as a military police officer. That decision, after a few twists and turns along the way, ultimately would lead him to run for office, win three elections and, starting in January, become speaker of the Michigan House.

“During my advanced training to be an Army police officer, 9/11 happened,” he recalls. “It changed my perspective on what I wanted to do with my future.” Wentworth’s military service took him to South Korea and to the “alternative, underground Pentagon” military installation in Wiesbaden, Germany.

“Observing all the different styles I saw from people from different parts of the country shaped my views on leadership,” he says. “And the whole experience changed how I view service — to see it is a duty we owe our country.” He also began thinking more and more about what the country, including his home state, owes veterans.

“That’s where my passion is, that’s where my heart is,” Wentworth says. Upon his return home, Wentworth eventually began working as a regional coordinator in the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency. He saw firsthand not only veterans, but many of the challenges of living with a disability.

“People will see that about you and follow you. Stay even, and realize other people have things they want to accomplish,” he says of the role of a leader. “You can’t be the one saying they need to realize they need to listen to you.”

“I researched who was running and did a policy fix had long eluded the state’s system of no-fault auto insurance laws,” Wentworth says. “To address one of Michigan’s most controversial, complex policy areas — the state’s system of no-fault auto insurance laws — I researched who was running and did a policy fix had long eluded the state’s system of no-fault auto insurance rates, but finding a policy fix had long eluded the state’s system of no-fault auto insurance laws, which was 21 years old and, so far, the first time in their lives they’re needing to access benefits. They’ve never asked for help their entire lives, but they need it now. We owe it to them to be available to help. If people want to go to our [Department of Health and Human Services], they can get a benefit. It’s always open, it’s always there. Why don’t we do the same thing for veterans?”

Q: What legislative action was taken to improve access?

A: One of the things we did was create a grant program for counties to increase funding for services or to create new veterans departments, because you have some counties where there has only been a single person working part-time to help veterans.

Veterans benefits can be convoluted and complex. There’s red tape. We have veterans service officers who are experienced and can help. We should make sure those officers are more visible. That’s our goal. We’re still working to implement the legislation, and to advertise and expand outreach to veterans and their families.

Q: What do you view as the most important attributes of legislative leadership?

A: For me, everything is rooted in communication. You can’t make progress on policy without communication, and you can’t sustain legislative success without it.

“Staying even, and realizing other people have things they want to accomplish that may be outside of where you want to go. If you have that mindset, you can take every situation as it comes and not get too excited about things — not have your pants on fire all the time,” he says. “People will see that about you and follow you.”

Bio-Sketch: Michigan Speaker Jason Wentworth

- chosen in late 2019 to be new House speaker after two years as pro tempore (first elected to House in 2016)
- has served as chairman of House Select Committee on Reducing Car Insurance Rates and House Military and Veterans Affairs Committee
- spent five years as military police officer in U.S. Army; worked as regional coordinator for Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency
- lives in town of Farwell with his wife and their three daughters

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