

Ohio Rep. Dorothy Pelanda

House majority floor leader values chance to serve her hometown by being part of ‘community of legislators’

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

Ohio Rep. Dorothy Pelanda can think of no higher calling than to serve others and one’s community. For the Ohio native, who grew up on a farm on the outskirts of the town of Marysville, public service was a way of life.

“By example, my parents taught me that service to the community was integral to being a good member of the community,” Pelanda says.

Her father was a lawyer and a judge who served on the local board of elections; her mother was a teacher who worked in local polling places.

“We learned from Mom and Dad how important it was to vote,” Pelanda recalls, “and how important it was to be involved in the events of the day.”

That civic-minded belief system eventually brought Pelanda to the state Capitol in 2011, when she was appointed to an open House seat. She has been serving her central Ohio legislative district ever since, while also moving up the leadership ranks in the Republican caucus — she currently holds the position of House majority floor leader.

“It’s most gratifying to be able to give back to the people who gave so much to me in my growing years and my years as an attorney,” says Pelanda, whose 30 years in the legal profession include work in a prosecutor’s office, as a criminal defense attorney for indigent defendants, and as a civil litigator focused on family and domestic law.

She hopes her next phase of public service is as Ohio’s secretary of state; Pelanda announced her candidacy for the statewide position in March.

“The job is one of the most critical in Ohio,” she says. “Voting is the most fundamental way that Ohioans and citizens of our nation can participate in democracy. It’s critical that you have a chief elections officer — the secretary of state — who can assure our voters that their vote matters and that it will be counted correctly.”

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Rep. Pelanda reflected on her time in office to date, her legislative accomplishments and her run for Ohio secretary of state. Here are excerpts:

Q: How has your background as an attorney contributed to your role in the Ohio General Assembly?

A: [It] taught me to think analytically, to always question the premise, and to understand that there are multiple sides to every issue, not just one or two. Thinking logically and analytically is so critical in the job I have now as a legislator, and so is always questioning the premise — get to the core of the issue and then decide whether this is a problem in search of a solution, or it’s a solution in search of a problem, which it sometimes is.

Q: Through your various leadership positions, how have you viewed your role or responsibility in helping new members to the legislature?

A: The success of any business centers around a leader’s ability to build relationships, trust, confidence and mutual respect for both the leader and

Bio-sketch of Ohio Rep. Dorothy Pelanda

- ✓ Elected majority floor leader in 2017; previously served as assistant majority whip and majority whip
- ✓ Practiced law for more than 30 years; established Criminal Indigents of Union County to provide legal representation to indigent individuals
- ✓ Lifelong resident of Marysville, Ohio; married and has three adult children
- ✓ 2012 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD)
- ✓ Running for Ohio secretary of state



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those he is leading. This summer, I decided to visit and walk and campaign for the 14 new members in their district, and I did do it for almost every one of them. ... Learning about their district gave me so much insight into who they were. When they arrived, they had someone they knew already who cared enough to come to their district to help them. And it certainly helps me in understanding who they are.

Q: Of all the bills you’ve worked on, what do you consider among your most significant legislative accomplishments?

A: As a lawyer, I worked on juvenile issues and domestic relations, so in the legislature, I began to develop an interest and a focus on the populations that I call the voiceless and vulnerable — juveniles and the elderly. One of the pieces of legislation I am most proud of is House Bill 50, which the governor signed into law last year. It provides aid to those voiceless and vulnerable populations. [The bill] extends Medicaid and other benefits to the 1,100 juvenile foster youths who age out of the system never having been successfully adopted or placed, as long as they enter into workforce training and some kind of housing program. The other part of House Bill 50 mandates that each probate judge issue a 47-page best-practices workbook to everybody who is appointed a guardian [for the elderly] in the state of Ohio. I believe that both of these [provisions] are just the first steps toward the state improving what I believe to be frailties in our system for our juveniles and our elderly.

Q: You also had success last year in passing a bill (HB 216) designed to improve health care access by revising the scope of practice for advanced-practice registered nurses — for example, providing them with more collaborative opportunities with physicians and more authority to prescribe certain medicine. How significant will that change in state policy be?

A: That is another bill that I am proud of because, again, it focuses on families and

what families need most. It was first regarded as having no chance of passing. But by building relationships, not only with the supporters but with the people who were adamantly opposed to it, we got it over the finish line.

Q: What are some of the biggest legislative issues that you and your colleagues are working on now?

A: I would bet that every single member of the House of Representatives would agree that the opioid and drug crisis is the biggest issue facing our nation and the state of Ohio. We can’t incarcerate our way out of the problem. We’ve got to have an understanding that we’ve got to treat the drug traffickers differently than the drug addict. We’re getting there, but we’ve still got some work to do.

Number two would be workforce development. There is still a huge disconnect between the education our children are receiving and the jobs that are out there. Just this morning at a Chamber of Commerce breakfast, I heard that the ability for manufacturers and employers to find someone who can read, someone who can pass a drug test and someone who can show up on time are the three biggest issues facing employers today. In other words, it’s the soft skills, and the question of who is going to teach these soft skills to the [workers] of tomorrow.

Q: You’ve made the decision to run for Ohio secretary of state. When you leave the state House, what do you think you’ll miss most?

A: I will miss the community — the community of legislators and the ability to have so many diverse opinions come together to create a solution. It’s an honor to be among so many people who care so much about the future of Ohio and its citizens. I will miss the community of thinkers and people who share a passion for making Ohio the best it can be. ★