

# MICHIGAN'S LAWYER-LEGISLATORS of the 98th State Legislature

## REP. KURT HEISE BELIEVES IN THE POWER OF PUBLIC SERVICE

By Samantha Meinke

Kurt Heise has always been unique.

"I'm a weird guy," he said. "As a child, I followed politics like most boys followed baseball. I watched the news every night on all three channels, I read the newspaper, and on Sunday mornings I watched *Meet the Press*. Every four years I would watch the Republican convention from gavel to gavel."

He also adored his brother, William, who is 12 years older than Heise. When William turned 18, there was a strong chance he'd be drafted to go to Vietnam.

for war and never return. Both of his parents were World War II veterans, and they frequently discussed that the war had gone on too long and cost the lives of too many young people. Heise remembers them telling him President Nixon was the only one who could save his brother.

As the war drew to a conclusion, it became clear Heise's brother would not be leaving after all.

"It still gets me choked up," Heise said. "I thought my brother would be gone, then my mom and dad told me that Richard



Courtesy photo

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*"As long as I'm alive, I'm going to keep doing something in the public sector that I think makes a difference."*

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Though he was only five years old at the time, Heise knew what that meant. He was terrified that his only sibling would leave

Nixon ended the Vietnam War. Now historians may differ on that point, but as far as I was concerned—at the age of five—he

ended the war and spared my brother. I think that was the triggering event. I realized that politicians—people with public responsibility—make these key decisions."

To express his support, Heise made and mailed President Nixon a birthday card. Then, a few days before his sixth birthday, he received a personally signed letter from the president. The card he sent is on file in the Nixon Presidential Library & Museum because Nixon personally responded to it. Heise framed the president's letter, which now hangs on his office wall in Lansing.

"From then on, I became a junkie and followed politics," he said.

## Kurt Heise

First elected in November 2010; represents the 20th District encompassing Northville, Northville Township, Plymouth, Plymouth Township, and the eastern portion of Canton Township

Age: 49

**Legal life:** City attorney in Dearborn Heights and Woodhaven; practiced law in Plymouth and Canton Township; adjunct professor, Wayne State University; lecturer, Eastern Michigan University

**Previous public service:** Mayor's deputy in Dearborn Heights; director, Wayne County Department of Environment; co-chair, Michigan Groundwater Conservation Advisory Council

**Education:** BS in political science from the University of Michigan; JD and LLM in labor law from Wayne State University Law School

Heise was devastated when Nixon resigned three years later, but he didn't let that trauma turn him away from politics. His interest continued to grow as he matured, and when he headed to the University of Michigan he majored in political science.

"Toward the end of college, I decided to no longer be a spectator," Heise said. "I wanted to get onto the field and do this for myself."

He began by volunteering for local political campaigns. At 23, he was appointed to the Dearborn City Beautiful Commission. He attended Wayne State University Law School and went on to serve as city

attorney for Dearborn Heights and Woodhaven and later as deputy to the mayor of Dearborn Heights.

In 2002, he became the director of the Wayne County Department of Environment, which was then the second-largest environmental department in the state. He helped develop the State Watershed Alliance Act, served on the Blue Ribbon Commission for Lake St. Clair, and was co-chair of the Michigan Groundwater Conservation Advisory Council.

In 2009, the Ficano administration showed him the door after major philosophical differences caused a rift. That's when he was

approached to run for a seat in the Michigan House of Representatives.

"I was content to be the guy behind the scenes—the lawyer with the education, experience, and background to help my boss succeed," Heise said. "But it was hard during the height of the recession for lawyers to get jobs, so I took up the challenge."

He was elected to represent the 20th District in 2010.

He's very proud to have helped create laws that have contributed to Michigan's improving economy. And he's especially proud to have contributed to the indigent defense reform bill and the human trafficking package.

"I'm the father of two teenage daughters," he said. "It meant a lot to me personally to make sure children are not abused and exploited....Next we've got to deal with criminal justice reform—that will be my focus for this term. As an attorney, I can look at it in a more analytical, dispassionate way. I won't be around to see it finished—it will take years to reform the system—but we have to start somewhere."

He can't run for reelection in 2016 because of term limits, and he's not sure what challenges await him. But he knows one thing.

"My wife and I joke around at our house that I'm never going to retire," he said. "But actually I think that's true. As long as I'm alive, I'm going to keep doing something in the public sector that I think makes a difference." ■

## SPEAKER PRO TEM TOM LEONARD KNOWS COMMUNICATION IS KEY

By *Samantha Meinke*



Courtesy photo

Sometimes Tom Leonard makes mistakes. “I’ll be the first to admit it if I make a mistake,” he said. “My first job out of law school with Jennie Barkey, she taught me we’re all going to make mistakes, but it’s how you handle the mistakes that will help you grow. I’ve absolutely found that to be true.”

He’s fiercely passionate about serving as an advocate for the most vulnerable people, which he did for years as an assistant prosecutor in the Special Crimes Division of the Genesee County Prosecutor’s Office.

His early mistakes in those roles taught him to seek out multiple viewpoints and listen to all sides of an argument before making a decision, and since then, he

He carried that knowledge with him to the legislature and into his current role as speaker pro tem of the Michigan House of Representatives. It has helped him achieve what he considers his greatest professional accomplishment: reform of the preliminary examination process.

“That was my number one priority when I got here,” he said. “People told me, ‘Good luck. We’ve tried for years to get this done.... It can’t be done.’”

But Leonard didn’t let the naysayers discourage him. Instead, he rolled up his sleeves and drew on the communication and negotiation skills he learned as a prosecutor.

“We came in with what I thought was a very good proposal and we could have

“Had we introduced the bill without actually taking that step back and talking to them, it would have been a much more difficult process because they would have had to come out of the gate opposing the bill, as opposed to coming out saying, ‘Hey—this is pretty good legislation, we’re on board. We support it.’”

Leonard took the bill to a number of other stakeholders in the same way, making compromises and adjustments to it based on their concerns and suggestions for improvement. That was the difference between his legislation and every previous attempt to solve the problem—he got the interest groups into the room, worked through the impasse, and negotiated a compromise. Then he introduced the revised bill for a vote.

“We were able to not only get reform done, but we got it passed 147 to 1 and then got the governor’s signature,” he said. “It was very exciting to get preliminary exam reform done in a bipartisan way by bringing everybody to the table, hearing their concerns, and working together.”

He continues to apply the lessons he’s learned in life to accomplish everything he

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has become quite good at collaborating with people.

“I’ve learned that communication is key,” he said. “As a prosecutor, the vast majority of your time is spent in negotiation. You’re in the side rooms with attorneys, victims, police officers, and defendants, and you’re talking and negotiating. I believe that experience helped me mature a lot, not just as a person, but as a professional.”

introduced the bill that week,” he said. “Instead, we took a couple of weeks and stepped back. We talked to the defense bar and we talked to the ACLU. The defense bar came back and said, ‘Hey, this looks great—a lot better than what we thought it was going to look like—but can you please change A, B, and C?’ We said yes on A, yes on B, and we’ll meet you halfway on C, and we actually got them on board.”

can for the people in his district and his colleagues. Next, as chair of the Insurance Committee, he's focused on auto no-fault reform.

"I don't know if we'll be able to get everybody on board, but I'm going to do everything I can," he said. "I like where the discussions are headed." ■

*Samantha Meinke is the communications manager for the State Bar of Michigan. She manages all of the State Bar's interactions with the news media and established and manages its social media accounts. She regularly consults with lawyers, bar associations, and law-related groups on using social media to their best advantage, and has been a featured speaker on social media at ABA TECH-SHOW for the last three years.*

## Tom Leonard, Speaker Pro Tem of the Michigan House of Representatives

First elected in November 2012; represents the 93rd District encompassing Clinton County and portions of Gratiot County including the city of Ithaca and the townships of Sumner, Arcada, New Haven, North Shade, Newark, Fulton, Washington, North Star, Elba, Hamilton, Lafayette, and Wheeler

**Age:** 35

**Legal life:** Former assistant attorney general for the state of Michigan and prosecuting attorney assigned to the Special Crimes Division of the Genesee County Prosecutor's Office.

**Education:** BA in history and Spanish from the University of Michigan; JD from Michigan State University College of Law



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