

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

TODD COURSER HAPPILY PUSHES BACK AGAINST THE POWERFUL

By *Samantha Meinke*

Back in 2006, Todd Courser was content. He ran a flourishing law and accounting firm with offices in Lapeer, Romeo, and Port Huron. He took family camping vacations with his wife and four children for up to five weeks a year.

Life was great.

And then, starting in 2007, everything changed.

"All of a sudden business dropped off in a really significant way," he said. "We had over 100 accounting clients go bankrupt and out of business during that 2007–2008 time frame. These were people that had been clients of mine since I had started the business in '96.... Some of them I went to church with, some I had known for so many years, and I saw their businesses destroyed. Their cars got repossessed in my parking lot. The amount of Kleenex we went through in my conference room was unreal. It was really, really an awful situation."

The misfortune of his clients started to turn into the misfortune of his law and accounting firm.

"Half of the revenue for my practice disappeared in about an 18-month period," he said. "The bankruptcy side of my business started to explode. I was bankrupting people that owed me money. I was both the creditor and the listed attorney on the file, and trustees had to question the propriety of that. But my clients knew, and I knew that they were never going to pay me back."

He felt very strongly that the direction of the state and the country were wrong. He didn't think the political leadership worked to take responsibility for the next generation. And he worried that his children wouldn't be able to enjoy a bright future.



Courtesy photo

"I woke up one day and started to sense I was going to have to do something different," he said. "I went for a couple of days without really sleeping and I was in the kitchen in my pajamas, and my hair was kind of jacked up like Kramer (the *Seinfeld*

"I came here with expectations of pushing back hard against power. I'm suited for it and I'm geared for it.... I'm a happy warrior."

character), and I talked to my wife about what I was seeing and thinking. She said, 'What are you going to do about it?' And I said, 'I think I'm running for office.' She said, 'WHAT?'"

In 2008, he ran in the primary for the 82nd District seat he currently holds in the Michigan House of Representatives. He entered the seven-way race late and now describes it as "something of a knife fight." He came in third.

"I got done with that and was like, 'Well, that was terrible,'" he said. "But as time went on it began to feel more like the beginning of something."

In 2010, he ran for the 25th District state Senate seat against then-Rep. Phil Pavlov. Pavlov won the seat. Two years later, he ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the State Board of Education on a platform pushing for more charter schools and parental control of education.

In 2013, he ran for the Michigan Republican Party chairmanship in what turned out to be a very close race. Governor Snyder unexpectedly spoke in person in favor of keeping Chairman Bobby Schostak. After that race, rumors swirled that Courser would run against Snyder in the 2014 election.

Instead, he walked into the clerk's office with 30 family members and filed paperwork to run again for the 82nd District House of Representatives seat.

"I left it off the radar as long as I could," he said. "Obviously, I attract a lot of attention and a lot of resources and I have some enemies that are pretty powerful and rich."

Todd Courser

First elected in November 2014; represents the 82nd District encompassing Lapeer County

Age: 42

Legal life: Founded Todd A. Courser & Associates PLLC in 2006

Business life: Founded his accounting firm, Todd Courser & Co., in 1996

Education: Business management degree, University of Michigan, Flint, 1995; juris doctor, Thomas M. Cooley Law School, 2006

He finally prevailed in that last election and is now serving his first term in the Michigan House of Representatives.

He has already made waves in Lansing, receiving attention for the Contract for Liberty he co-authored with Rep. Cindy Gamrat. He has also confronted House leadership about his office furnishings and how seats are assigned in the Capitol. And he and Gamrat delivered the Liberty response to the governor's State of the State speech.

Courser says he's not in Lansing to make friends; ultimately, he's there to work for the people who voted for him because of the principles espoused in the Contract for Liberty.

"I want to bring a voice to the voiceless," he said. "That goes along with the legal profession, when you're looking at the pro-

fession at its best.... I came here with expectations of pushing back hard against power. I'm suited for it and I'm geared for it.... I'm a happy warrior." ■

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.

KEEPING PACE WITH REP. KLINT KESTO IS NO EASY FEAT

By Mike Eidelbes

“I’ve been everywhere,” country legend Hank Snow sang in his no. 1 hit of the same name in 1962. Rep. Klint Kesto hasn’t been everywhere, but he’s done everything...at least it seems that way.

Kesto got his start working at his family’s pizza and sub shop in Sterling Heights. In college, he was a code enforcement intern for the city of Southfield and interned for the U.S. Department of Energy. During law school, he worked for the U.S. Department of Justice and the Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office. After passing the bar exam, he worked in private practice and later joined the Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office in a full-time role. Then, in 2012, he ran for 39th District state representative, outlasting five Republican competitors in the August primary and defeating the Democratic challenger in November.

For a 33-year-old, Kesto’s résumé is quite diverse. Heck, he has an extensive résumé for a 53-year-old.

“I like to take advantage of opportunities that are different to get a little more knowledge and have different experiences,” said Kesto, whose district encompasses the

city of Wixom, Commerce Township, and part of West Bloomfield Township. “I’ve had a lot of communication with individuals from various backgrounds—wealthy, not wealthy, blue collar, private sector, men, women, old, young.”

Though he loved his job as an assistant prosecutor, Kesto leapt at the chance to run for state office.

“This was an opportunity that was open where I could be a part of this reinvention of Michigan,” he explained. “We had people leaving the state, no jobs. It was hard to find a job even as an attorney.”

The intensity of being a prosecutor—Kesto recalled selecting jury members for a case during a break in proceedings on a second case while jurors in a third case were in deliberations—pales compared to his current workload.

“In politics, you have your constituency you’re dealing with and that varies in terms of personality, ideology, philosophy, age, background,” he said. “You have the legislation you’re constantly dealing with—it’s voluminous, not only in the committees I sit on, but in general when we’re voting.



Courtesy photo

After all that, you have to deal with elections, because everything moves so quickly in the House.”

Kesto is used to moving quickly. Still, the pace in Lansing forced him to modify the way he works, especially when it comes to analyzing legislation. For example, when a bill crosses his desk, he reads the new language to determine whether it delivers its desired intent.

“You’re putting in legislation, relying on someone else to write it, knowing what your concept is, but not fully understanding what the words on the paper mean,” he said. “Let’s not create this vague language where nobody knows what’s going on but you feel good about it because it passes.”

A member of the House Criminal Justice Committee and chair of the Judiciary Committee, Kesto’s priority list this session is topped by criminal justice reform. Namely, he feels the key to the future of Michigan’s criminal justice system is maintaining the punitive aspect while enhancing prisoner rehabilitation.

“Teaching someone to do something so when they’re done being punished they actually have the skills to do something [is] where we need to do a better job,” Kesto

“I’ve had a lot of communication with individuals from various backgrounds—wealthy, not wealthy, blue collar, private sector, men, women, old, young.”

said. “There are a lot of people in the system who have mental health issues and substance abuse issues. We have to do a better job of rehabbing those [people] and others who need to be reintegrated through workforce development.”

Kesto would also like to see an expansive study of what makes people reoffend from a psychological standpoint.

“I want to know what is compelling an individual out on parole for armed robberies to go out and commit another armed robbery and shoot a clerk,” he said. “Is it desire for money? Is it the inability to get a job? Is there something wrong with their synapses?”

“There needs to be a comprehensive study on that, otherwise all we’re doing is allowing people who are dangerous... we’re using criminal justice reform to let them out.”

Kesto said his proudest achievement to date is becoming the first Chaldean-American elected to the Michigan legislature. He said he’s buoyed by the support he’s received from the state’s Chaldean community, which the Chaldean-American Chamber of Commerce estimates at about 121,000 residents.

Klint Kesto

First elected in November 2012; represents the 39th District encompassing Wixom, Commerce Township, and a portion of West Bloomfield Township

Age: 33

Legal life: Spent more than five years with the Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office; worked in private practice; interned with the U.S. Department of Justice during law school; as an undergraduate, was a code enforcement intern for the city of Southfield

Business life: Worked for his family’s business, Buscemi’s Pizza and Sub Shop; interned with the U.S. Department of Energy as an undergraduate

Education: Political science degree, University of Michigan, 2002; juris doctor, Wayne State University Law School, 2006

“It doesn’t matter if they’re from my district or not,” Kesto said. “Sometimes they’ll call me on specific issues. Mostly they say they’re proud, keep up the good work, they’d like me to go further, and they support me.

“That, and fix the roads.” ■

Mike Eidelbes is a copy editor and writer for the State Bar of Michigan. He has been a journalist and public relations professional for more than 20 years. He has a bachelor’s degree in broadcast journalism from the University of St. Thomas (Minn.) and a master’s degree in public relations from the University of Denver.

how you can

help

alawyerhelps.org

community service

access to justice

pro bono

