

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

## SENATOR STEVEN BIEDA STRIVES TO HELP THE VULNERABLE

By *Samantha Meinke*

Senator Steven Bieda has always been concerned about vulnerable people. He says it stems from an incident he experienced as a child.

"I remember when I was a child, getting blamed for something I didn't do," he says. "It was a weird situation where a neighbor from down the street accused me of something. He came to the house and was really angry and accusing....I remember feeling a sense of terror. My parents, while they were protective, wanted to know what happened too. I just remember so well that sense of unfairness...it always stuck with me."

Other kids in the neighborhood came forward to defend him and help prove he wasn't at fault. From then on, he developed a desire to devote his life to helping others.

Bieda was a serious kid fascinated with history and politics. He loved watching political conventions on television and reading the political cartoons on opinion pages in newspapers. He began reading the editorials that ran alongside those cartoons and became so well-informed that his uncle nicknamed him "The Senator."

Bieda decided he had to do more than just observe the political process—he wanted to get involved. He started out before he could drive by riding his bike door to door delivering campaign literature in support of U.S. Senate candidate Don Riegle's campaign. In high school, he became a political cartoonist and considered a career in political commentary.

Instead, he took his inspiration from many of the great historical figures he had long admired, and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in public administration from Wayne State University before going on to earn a JD from the University of Detroit



Courtesy photo

Mercy School of Law and a masters of tax law from Wayne State University Law School.

"The practice of law is a very respectable thing," he said. "I am very concerned about people's rights—that their rights are protected and that they're treated fairly."

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Currently, his biggest passion is getting financial compensation for wrongfully convicted individuals to counterbalance the financial losses they have suffered.

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Those were the issues that led me to go into the practice of law and ultimately into politics as well. I've always felt they are both very high callings."

He decided to put his qualifications to use in public service work as director of labor relations for the city of Warren and senior policy analyst for the Michigan House of Representatives.

Political operatives were impressed with his knowledge and speaking capacity and encouraged him to run for office. After a while, he decided to go for it.

He ran for a seat representing the 25th District in the Michigan House of Representatives in 2002. He won that election, and was reelected in 2004 and 2006. He was first elected to the Michigan Senate in 2010 representing the 9th District, and reelected in 2014.

During his time in the legislature, he has sponsored more than 30 public acts ranging from laws about reform of the courts and judiciary, tax law, consumer protections, and economic development. He has worked on laws related to paternity testing, DNA testing, and how FOIA requests are processed in the state.

Currently, his biggest passion is getting financial compensation for wrongfully convicted individuals to counterbalance the financial losses they have suffered. He has introduced a bill to do just that every year he has served in the legislature.

He says his motivation in seeking financial compensation for those who have been wrongfully convicted goes back to his childhood experience of being blamed

## Steven Bieda

First elected to the Michigan House of Representatives in 2002; first elected to the Michigan Senate in 2010; represents the 9th District encompassing Macomb County

**Age:** 54

**Legal life:** Director of labor relations for the city of Warren

**Political life:** Senior policy analyst for the Michigan House of Representatives

**Education:** Bachelor's and master's degrees in public administration, Wayne State University; JD, University of Detroit Mercy School of Law; masters of tax law, Wayne State University Law School

by an angry neighbor for something he didn't do.

"I think many people have had an experience like that in life—when you get accused of something you didn't do," he said. "Well, take that a step further and look at somebody who's been denied their freedom. The case that really sticks out for me is that of Ken Wyniemko. He spent nine years in prison for a rape and assault that he had nothing to do with. There were a number of things that went wrong with the trial, but at the end of the day, he's a guy who lost a good chunk of his life.

"I've found that although most individuals in Michigan who are wrongfully convicted and incarcerated may regain their freedom, it's much harder to obtain compensation. Sometimes they're penniless, and that strikes me as a huge injustice; changing

that is something I've been very proud to champion....I'm trying to convince other legislators that this is something we should do as a just society. That's really what inspires me to get up in the morning." ■

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*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.*

## FATHER KNOWS BEST: SENATOR TORY ROCCA EMBRACES PUBLIC SERVICE

By Mike Eidelbes

The third time was the charm for Tory Rocca.

His father, Sal, was leaving the Michigan House of Representatives for good in 2004, ending a political career that started in 1975. His mother, Sue, had a two-year run on the Macomb County board and was a state representative from 1995 to 2000.

“I told myself when I was a kid I wouldn’t [run for office] because I recall hearing my dad down in the basement calling up strangers, cold-calling, raising funds,” the younger Rocca said. “He approached me a few times asking me to run when he was retiring. I said no the first couple times. I said I wasn’t going to do it.”

“When the third time rolled around, I thought about the opportunity I’d be wasting and the chance to do something unique and the chance to do some good things for my community. I realized that opportunity might not come around again, so I’d probably regret not taking it.”

In November 2004, the Republican from Sterling Heights did what he thought he’d never do: win the race for the open 30th District House of Representatives seat. Six years

later, he was elected to his current post as state senator representing the 10th District encompassing Sterling Heights, Macomb Township, and part of Clinton Township.

Really, one can’t blame Rocca for wanting to buck the trend set by his parents. After all, at least one member of his nuclear family had held a public office since the time he was one year old.

“We have a hand-crank press for buttons...we still make buttons for fourth graders when they come to the capitol for tours. That was one of the things I had as a child in lieu of a toy,” he said. “I got to play with a button press. That was just how things were. We went and put up campaign signs in the summer instead of playing Little League.”

Rocca, who earned his undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Michigan, practiced for a couple years after passing the bar in 2000—“A lot of tort defense, some contracts, a little plaintiff’s work, some product liability,” he said—before taking a job as a claims adjuster for a commercial liability insurance company.

“Mainly, I was doing a lot of negotiation,” he said. “You try to settle things if you could.



Courtesy photo

We’d have hundreds of claims per year, so you’d try as much as possible to come to reasonable settlements.”

That experience as a negotiator has served Rocca well, especially at a time in Lansing when common ground is harder and harder to find.

“To accomplish practical things like fixing roads or solving other important problems, you actually need some people to try to work together,” he said. “I think most voters want us to be able to work together to find reasonable solutions to problems.”

Because of term limits, the relative inexperience of Michigan’s legislators can also present a unique set of challenges. Rocca believes his legal education and background give him an edge.

“We have fewer and fewer attorneys in the legislature and we have term limits turning more and more people out,” he said. “There are fewer and fewer people here who actually read legislation and understand it.”

“Attorneys have the skills and tools to understand it more so than other people—having the ability to pick something up and generally understand or be able to read

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“I’ve enjoyed [public service] more than anything else I’ve done, and I have more than a decade of experience getting results for the citizens I represent.”

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legislation and realize there's something wrong with it or it doesn't do what it's intended to do."

When asked about his proudest achievement as an elected official, Rocca quickly points to a measure creating a workers' compensation presumption for firefighters who develop certain types of cancer, making them eligible for benefits when they contract cancer because of hazards encountered on the job.

"Firefighters were actually getting cancer from things at work," said Rocca. "The studies were there to show it. There was no question about it. It seemed wrong they were suffering so badly and weren't able to be helped at all."

Soon, Rocca will face the end of his tenure in Lansing—the aforementioned term limits preclude him from making another run for state senate. Though he's not decided

## Tory Rocca

First elected to the Michigan House of Representatives in 2004; first elected to the Michigan Senate in 2010; represents the 10th District encompassing Sterling Heights, Macomb Township, and part of Clinton Township.

Age: 42

Education: Bachelor's degree and law degree, University of Michigan

his next step, it wouldn't be a shock to see him continue down the path he thought he would eschew for so many years.

"I enjoy public service a lot," Rocca said. "I've enjoyed this more than anything else I've done, and I have more than a decade of experience getting results for the citizens I represent." ■

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