

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

## REP. DEREK MILLER MAKES CONNECTIONS FOR HIS COMMUNITY

By *Samantha Meinke*

**D**erek Miller is a people person. He comes from a long line of individuals with this trait, many of whom preceded him in public service.

His grandfather, Art Miller, was the first mayor of the city of Warren. His grandmother, Edna Miller, was the first woman elected Macomb County clerk, a position she held for 28 years. His father, Art Miller Jr., represented Macomb County in the Michigan Senate for 26 years.

When Derek Miller won election to his seat representing the 28th District in the Michigan House of Representatives, he fulfilled a dream he has long had—to follow in his family's footsteps. At a young age, he understood the inherent nobility in serving his neighbors.

"I saw how gratifying it was when a neighbor would come over with a problem and my dad was able to directly pick up a

phone and get results," Miller said. "Many of the people we represent as legislators know there's an issue or a problem, but they don't know where to turn. If you can be the person who can get them that help, that's what public service is all about."

Although he was accepted at both the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, Miller chose to attend MSU to be closer to the legislature, where he one day dreamed of working. While in college, he worked for Dennis Olshove in the state legislature. In law school he worked for Judge Mark Switalski and then for personal injury attorneys Stuart Fraser and Edward Souweidane. Miller earned an internship with the Macomb County Prosecuting Attorney's Office where he found his element.

"It was something completely different," Miller said. "You're dealing with judges, defense attorneys, clients—you're running



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around, meeting people, thinking on your feet and interacting with others. It's a great, exciting job. The days would just fly by."

As a new attorney, Miller wanted to be a prosecutor, but there were no openings in the recession-era economy. He had law school debt to pay off, however, so he started his own practice.

"It was a struggle," he said. "If I didn't have a client to meet, I would go stand in a courtroom and try to get court-appointed cases. I would bring a lot of chocolates to clerks to get in their good graces," Miller joked. "I met some attorneys who would give me some cases and have me fill in for them. That was helpful and something you don't forget."

After a while, the economy picked up, the prosecutor's office had an opening, and Miller became an assistant prosecuting attorney in Macomb County.

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*"To get things done you need connections with a lot of people....If you don't understand how relationships are built or sustained, you won't get very far."*

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## Derek Miller

First elected to Michigan House of Representatives in 2014; represents the 28th House District, serving Center Line and part of Warren.

Age: 32

**Legal life:** Worked as a solo practitioner, then as assistant prosecuting attorney for Macomb County in the Senior Crimes Unit; served as liaison to the Warren/Center Line Drug Court

**Education:** BA in political science from Michigan State University; JD from the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law

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“There is so much responsibility and I enjoyed it,” he said.

But it wasn't long before public service on a larger scale came calling and Miller had to decide whether to remain a prosecutor or run for a seat in the state House.

“I worked with people in the prosecutor's office who had been practicing law longer than I had been alive—I learned so much from them and developed incredible friendships there,” he says. “It was really hard to walk away from that, but I thought the opportunity for this doesn't arise every day.”

So he ran for his current seat in the House, wrapping up the Democratic nomination without a primary after earning impressive endorsements from major Macomb County leaders. He won his election and took his seat in January 2015.

Miller has worked hard to protect Michigan's auto no-fault insurance system. He also hopes to make an impact on how Michigan

generates energy in the future. Additionally, he has introduced legislation to help prevent child abuse, House Bill 4974, and to protect vulnerable adults, House Bill 4550.

He hopes to make a difference for the people of Macomb County and Michigan.

Now when his neighbors need help, Miller is the one they call.

“I had someone down the street who had a sinkhole and they didn't know who to call,” he said. “I know you need police to rope it off, public works to figure out the sewer issue and get the work done, and to get someone there from the county. It's currently being resolved. It's no longer sinking and it's roped off.”

Miller has learned well from his elders how to step forward, serve the community, and make government productive.

“To get things done you need connections with a lot of people,” Miller said. “If you don't understand how relationships are built or sustained, you won't get very far.” ■

## SENATOR TONYA SCHUITMAKER RISES TO THE OCCASION

By *Samantha Meinke*

Senate President Pro Tempore Tonya Schuitmaker does not shrink from a challenge.

When she was just a year out of law school, a seat opened up on the bench in Van Buren County. She decided to run for it. Her platform centered on the idea of introducing a drug treatment court in the county, which at the time had the highest concentration of methamphetamine problems in the state.

She soon discovered she faced a very difficult uphill battle.

Schuitmaker lost the election.

But she did win something.

“I think you learn more in life from your losses than you do your successes,” she said. “I grew up very shy. And when you’re running for judge, you either sit on the sidelines

and don’t participate or you give it your all. I overcame my shyness and gave it my all.”

She made a lot of connections that helped her build a thriving law practice in the county. She joined the firm her father founded and practiced estate planning, family, business, and municipal law. She also took a lot of juvenile court referrals.

And she wasn’t ready to give up on serving people.

She began volunteering extensively in her community, serving in the Van Buren Rotary Club and becoming active with the American Association of University Women. Her volunteer work expanded and she became involved with the Boy Scouts of America, the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy. She served on the Van Buren County Commu-



Courtesy photo

nity Corrections Advisory Board, the Van Buren County Community Mental Health Board of Directors, and as vice chair of the Michigan Board of Real Estate Brokers and Salespersons.

“I was born early, and my mom instilled in me the sense that I’ve been given a great thing from God, and I need to go out and make a difference in the world,” Schuitmaker said. “Both of my parents are the inspiration behind that.”

She ran for more elections, winning a seat on the State Bar of Michigan Representative Assembly and becoming president of the Van Buren County Bar Association.

In 2004, she decided to take the plunge into state-level politics and ran for a seat on the Michigan House of Representatives.

Her efforts to make connections within and to provide service to her community paid off. Although she was in a four-way race in the Republican primary, she won 56 percent of the vote. She went on to win the general election and began her career as a state representative.

Schuitmaker accomplished a lot in the Michigan House of Representatives, but says she is particularly proud of helping one of her constituents get an unemployment check, which led him to reconsider his plan to take

### Tonya Schuitmaker

First elected to Michigan House of Representatives in 2004; first elected to the Michigan Senate in 2010; represents the 26th District serving Allegan and Van Buren counties as well as Kentwood and Gaines Township in Kent County.

Age: 47

Legal life: Partner at Schuitmaker Cooper Schuitmaker Cypher & Knotek PC in Paw Paw

Education: BA in business from Michigan State University; JD from the Detroit College of Law

"I always believe you treat people the way you want to be treated.... That has served me well."

his own life. She is also proud of the first bill she cosponsored that extended the DNA sunset for wrongfully imprisoned people.

Although she had difficulty getting laws passed in her first few years in office because she was in the minority caucus, she developed a reputation for working well with colleagues across the aisle.

"I did work in a bipartisan way in the minority," she said. "I always believe you treat people the way you want to be treated.... That has served me well. It's like opposing counsel—you can argue the facts of the case

in court, but at the end of the day you walk out friends. There is camaraderie there—you experience the same thing."

Throughout her time in the Michigan House of Representatives and now the Michigan Senate, Schuitmaker has gone on to craft and pass all kinds of legislation, but she's particularly proud of senior protection bills and economic reform bills. Next up, she's working with Sen. Rebekah Warren and First Lady Sue Snyder to combat the high rates of sexual assault on college campuses in the state.

She doesn't know where life will take her once her current term is up. She won't be able to run again because of term limits. But she does know what she wants to leave behind.

"At the end of the day, I want to leave with a solid reputation," she said. "I worked hard and treated others well and worked to accomplish great things for the people I represent." ■

*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.*



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Lawyers volunteer to provide free legal services to low-income families or nonprofit agencies who serve those in need. It is one way to fulfill the duties in the Voluntary Pro Bono Standard.

### LAWYERS GIVE MONEY



#### ACCESS TO JUSTICE FUND

Lawyers make donations to the Access to Justice Fund to support civil legal aid for the poor. It is one way to meet obligations under the Voluntary Pro Bono Standard.

### LAWYERS GIVE TIME



#### COMMUNITY SERVICE

In addition to giving pro bono legal services to the poor and monetary donations for legal aid, many lawyers also give time to other community efforts.

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