

BUSINESS CENTRAL

January February 2007

They have nothing in common. They are married and single; students, business owners, and employees; privileged and blue collar.

They have everything in common. They are young, passionate, and idealistic. They are...

The Next Generation

By Gail Ivers

Larry Hosch had his midlife crisis when he was 18 years old. He went to Guatemala and Tijuana to do service work in 1995 and came back a different person. "It was a life changing event," he said. When he first returned he was so quiet and withdrawn his parents thought he had been molested on the trip. "I was just trying to process everything," Hosch said. "I had lived a pretty sheltered life to that point." As a result of that trip, he scrapped his plans to study aerospace engineering at Georgia Tech and instead applied to St. John's University in Collegeville where he studied social work.

Though not a crisis, Tara Westby's story has a similar theme. One year shy of graduating from the University of Minnesota with a degree in chemical engineering she suddenly thought, "I'm in the wrong field." She abruptly transferred to St. Cloud State University where she is currently working on the double majors of Political Science and Economics.

John Binkowski, on the other hand, is more likely to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. An open seat in Minnesota's 6th Congressional District was an opportunity that demanded his attention. Frustrated by what he calls "non-representative leadership," Binkowski made up his mind to run for office even before he had the support of the Independence Party. "I'm sick of seeing our country divided into colors," Binkowski said. "I don't think our current policies reflect real people, working people."

Binkowski's interest in creating change in Washington, D.C., is not life long. In fact, of the five people less than 30 years old who ran for office in Central Minnesota in November, only Richard Carlbom had a history of activism. Carlbom, who was elected to a second term as mayor of St. Joseph, was student body president in high school and president and political affairs director of the College Democrats while at St. John's University.

Carlbom is also the most political of the group. "I love talking politics," he said. "I don't think there's anything about me that isn't political." As the democratic field and political director for the 6th Congressional District, Carlbom is conscientious to separate his work for the Democratic Party from his work as mayor of St. Joseph. "There are plenty of people in St. Joe who are republicans," he said. "When I'm at a function as mayor I don't campaign for anyone."

St. Joseph has had enough divisive issues the last few years without party politics entering into the mix. "We've dealt with some of the hardest situations the city has ever experienced," Carlbom said. "Discussions around a new school, a new water plant, water restrictions, possible road construction through the sisters' [St. Benedict's Monastery] property... But it's been an incredible learning experience."

An Incredible Learning Experience

"This running thing has opened up, honed, stretched so many of my skill sets," said Westby. Just the mechanics of running a campaign surprised many of the young candidates. "Simple structural things -- we had to set up a P.O. Box and a checking account. We had to learn and follow campaign laws."

"Be on time, follow a schedule," Nate Stang added.

“I’ve overcome the number one fear of public speaking,” Binkowski said with a smile. “There’s a lot of value in getting out and meeting people, I can be pretty introverted sometimes.”

That was the fun part of campaigning for Stang. “I love people. I’m a pretty personable guy, I’m in the hospitality business and I meet lots of people every night.” As a result it didn’t take any convincing for him to decide to run for office. “How do you know if you don’t try?” he said. What he wasn’t prepared for was the reality of partisanship.

His mother warned him that he would be publicly criticized, something he was not used to. What he learned was “You have to step outside yourself,” he said. “If someone won’t shake your hand because you’re a democrat or republican, you can’t take that personally. You have to learn to take criticism. I’ve never been criticized so much in my life.”

The Age Question

At 21, Stang was the youngest candidate on the ballot. “At first I thought age would be an issue,” he said, “but it really hasn’t been. Some people think so, but then I tell them what I’ve done -- I’ve put a lot of responsibility on myself at a young age. I don’t hear about age much at all.”

“We have a right to do this,” Binkowski, 27, said, “that what’s important to remember. You have to be 25 to run for Congress – that’s it for criteria. That’s how the people who put our country together wanted it. People thank me for running as a young person more than anything else. I think younger candidates are drawing new people to the party.”

Only Carlbom, 25, felt his age occasionally made his role more challenging. Though he never received much feedback about his age as a candidate, as mayor he is acutely aware of it. “I have to be incredibly sensitive about age,” he said. “My age can potentially put up a barrier with citizens. My goal is to find the best solutions, so I need to get rid of barriers to compromise.”

Perhaps that’s a difference between running for a local office such as mayor, and running for a regional or state office. Hosch, now 29, was mayor of St. Joseph from 2000-2004. During his first campaign, at age 23, he distinctly felt that his age was a disadvantage.

“The first time people weren’t happy I was elected,” he said. Even though he received 54 percent of the vote in a three-way race, detractors pointed to the student population as the sole reason for his win. But, Hosch is quick to add, “no one denied me the opportunity to prove myself. And we did some good things,” he continued. “We filled up our industrial park in four years. We started up the school committee to get the process going for a high school in St. Joe. We did a professional community wide survey to determine support. Even though I wasn’t mayor when the referendum passed, I was there when the process started.” Residents must have liked what they saw because in 2002 Hosch was reelected with a greater percentage of the town vote than the student vote.

In some respects youth can be an advantage, according to Hosch. For one thing, running for office takes a lot of energy. “It also takes a lot of sacrifices. It doesn’t pay that well compared to having another job, and it’s definitely a full time job,” he said. “If you have a family it’s a huge sacrifice.”

Westby, 25, also thought her age was an advantage. “I had two guys say I was too young,” she said of her run for Minn. House District 15B. “Other than that my age is a very positive thing. Younger women like that we’re running.”

Westby entered the campaign at the last minute. Though she was excited about the prospect of serving in the Minnesota House, her goals were much broader. “I needed campaign experience to work at the IRI [International Republican Institute]” she said. Running for office allowed her to hone her skills in writing, research, and managing people. “Our little campaign [brought] a lot of excitement to the [Republican] party. People appreciate when you’re willing to work hard. I never would have imagined

our campaign would have had such an impact.” Westby was also very careful about the look and presentation of her campaign and marketing materials. “We look more professional and organized,” she said. “That sets us apart. We need to do that because we’re young.”

Not just young, said Westby, but “raging idealists. That’s why I want to work for the IRI. I want to work to set up democracies worldwide.”

Idealists and Proud of it

Idealism is another theme that ran through all the conversations. Hosch said it best: “I really believe a positive difference can be made. I believe there’s a role for government and government isn’t always bad. If the private system can’t fill holes, then government should.”

“I’ve really enjoyed being able to raise issues that wouldn’t have been raised otherwise,” Binkowski said, “like a new tax plan and campaign finance reform.” Binkowski lets his idealism peek out when he discusses the war in Iraq. He marched in Madison, Wisc., protesting the war. “It didn’t accomplish anything,” he said. “I wanted to see tangible results. We don’t share the burden of this war very evenly. Military families are the only ones who are carrying the burden. Getting elected gives you the bully pulpit, it gives you access to the president of the country to say what you think.”

Hosch freely admits that idealism is a basic criterion for those who seek public office. “I’m idealistic,” he said, “but I want to remain idealistic. If I lose that, it’s time to leave.”

Bring democracy to the world. Advocate for constituents. Resolve local conflicts. Raise new issues. Weighty topics for a group of twenty-somethings whose work life – and life work – has barely begun. Such a statement would no doubt offend them – and with good reason.

“The next 50 to 60 years are going to be determined by my generation,” Stang said. “I want a say in what’s going on, what’s going to happen in future years. I wish more people would get involved.”

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