

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin.

It started with a presidential handshake

January 19, 2010

Vol.156, Issue 12

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Sen. Arthur J. "A.J." Wilhelmi can remember the exact moment he fell in love with politics.

It was the fall of 1976 and President Gerald R. Ford was in Wilhelmi's hometown of Joliet on a whistle-stop tour of the state. Wilhelmi was 8 years old, the youngest of six children to a dentist and homemaker.

"I remember there was literally one rope that separated us from the president and Mrs. Ford. They walked by and shook everyone's hands," Wilhelmi said. "I remember when I shook his hand, I looked up at him. He was such a tall man and I was a little boy shaking the president's hand.

"It left me with a profound impression and from that point on, I have had a huge interest in politics and government," said Wilhelmi, now 41 and an Illinois senator from Joliet who chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee.

While it didn't take Wilhelmi too long after that handshake to realize he was a Jimmy Carter fan, it took him more than three decades to make the decision to turn his lifelong interest in politics into a career.

By 2005, Wilhelmi was 12 years into a law career, practicing real estate and business law with the Joliet law firm of McKeown, Fitzgerald, Zollner, Buck, Hutchison & Ruttle.

He started his career there in 1993, after earning an English degree from Loyola University and a law degree from Chicago-Kent College of Law. Throughout his school career, Wilhelmi was able to get his political fixes by working on local campaigns.



Arthur J. "A.J." Wilhelmi
Illinois Senator, 43rd District

Age: 41

Party: Democrat

Appointed: 2005

Elected: 2006

Committees: Gaming; Judiciary (Chairperson); Agriculture and Conservation (Vice-Chairperson); Criminal Law; Transportation; and Committee of the Whole.

Law firm: Murer, Brick & Wilhelmi LLC, the law department of Murer Consultants Inc.

In 1998, Wilhelmi got an even closer look into politics when he helped campaign for his oldest sibling, Steve, who successfully ran for a seat on the Will County Board.

Wilhelmi returned to his brother's side four years later, when he ran for county treasurer. This time, however, Wilhelmi saw a side of politics that he never wanted to experience again.

"We worked so hard and came up short. It was a really bad year for Democrats," Wilhelmi said. "I remember telling myself that if I ever got into the business, I was going to work really hard so I wouldn't have that feeling of despair again.

Wilhelmi said that organizing a fundraiser for then-state Sen. Barack Obama's 2004 bid for the U.S. Senate helped recharge him after the loss. It was at around this time that Wilhelmi began to seriously consider running for elected office.

But before Wilhelmi had a chance to campaign, he was appointed to the Illinois Senate in 2005 to fill the vacancy created when Larry Walsh left the General Assembly to run for Will County Executive.

With a little help from some friends and family, Wilhelmi successfully ran his first campaign that featured himself as a candidate. Garnering about 70 percent of the vote, Wilhelmi was elected to the Senate to represent the 43rd District, which includes parts of Bolingbrook, Elwood, Joliet, and Naperville, among other cities.

In addition to the sense of accomplishment he felt after winning his first election in 2006, Wilhelmi, D-Joliet, said he experienced one of his biggest legislative accomplishments that year as well.

Wilhelmi said then-Lt. Gov. Patrick J. Quinn asked him to sponsor legislation now known as the "Let Them Rest in Peace Act."

The measure was in response to members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Ks., who held protests at the funerals of several fallen soldiers. The law required protestors to stay 200 feet away and made it a crime to be disruptive at these funerals.

Before it was signed into law, the rookie lawmaker had to take his proposal before the Senate Judiciary Committee, which has historically been made up of lawyer-lawmakers known for asking tough questions. Wilhelmi is now the chairperson of this committee and a familiar face to lawmakers and lobbyists who work on legislation that requires a lawyer's eye.

"I remember standing up on the floor of the Senate to present that bill and there was a chill down my spine," Wilhelmi said. "I felt like this is why I'm here — to pass meaningful legislation that's going to make a difference."

Like his vivid memory of the presidential handshake he had as a kid, Wilhelmi said he will never forget the moment the Senate passed the bill.

And if for some reason he does, it's captured on tape. He has the floor debate, which includes praises from his colleagues, on an audio recording that he said he will share with his children one day.

Wilhelmi and his wife, Michelle, have three young daughters who range in age from 9 years old to 18 months.

In addition to Wilhelmi's career as a lawmaker, the avid sports and reading fan continues to put his legal background to good use.

In 2008, Wilhelmi left the McKeown law firm to take a job with Murer Consultants, Inc., a healthcare consulting firm in Joliet.

The firm recently opened up its own law department, Murer, Brick & Wilhelmi LLC, which, according to the firm's Web site, will utilize Wilhelmi's skills and allow the firm to expand the scope of its legal services.

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