A second-generation state legislator is taking inspiration from his past, and predecessor, in the first year as one of his home state’s top political leaders.

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

Devin LeMahieu has been watching and learning about politics and public service all of his life. As an 8-year-old, he spent election night in front of his family’s console TV, watching returns come in from the historic presidential election of 1980. His father, Daniel, had volunteered for the Reagan campaign that year, and later joined the Wisconsin Assembly himself for a 12-year run as a legislator.

That exposure to politics inspired the younger LeMahieu to get involved as well, though it’s sometimes taken him in unforeseen directions.

At age 34, he ran for and won a seat on the Sheboygan County Board of Supervisors, spending nine years in that part-time position. “I really enjoyed the work at the local level,” he recalls, “and realized how important it is to have people who are willing to put in the time and be a public servant.” By 2014, he was ready to try and follow in his father’s footsteps, with plans to seek election to the Wisconsin Assembly. But thanks to a series of other legislative and congressional resignations, along with some encouragement from then-Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, LeMahieu instead jumped into a race for a seat in the state’s upper chamber.

“And here I am,” he says. Not only is he serving in the state Senate, he’s now helping lead it because Fitzgerald, the man who recruited him to run in the first place, won a congressional race this past year, creating a vacancy in the top leadership position of the Senate Republican Caucus.

Less than 48 hours after Fitzgerald’s departure, LeMahieu’s colleagues chose him to be the new majority leader. At age 48, LeMahieu is now one of the state’s top political leaders. He discussed his views on leadership and effective policymaking in a recent interview with CSG Midwest. Here are excerpts:

Q How would you describe your leadership style, and what are some of the characteristics of strong legislative leadership that you’ve observed over the years?

A “I’ve been in the Senate now for six years, and Senator Fitzgerald was the majority leader (for that time). I sat back and watched and observed the way he led our caucus for the last six years, and I thought he did a really good job of letting the caucus get to its own conclusions — directing the caucus but not getting out of his skis. Essentially not getting out in front of issues, or trying to ram his own will through.

He let individual members of the caucus weigh in and then tried to build consensus from there. I think that’s an effective way to head a house. That’s sort of the role I plan on taking.

I own a small business and I’ve managed people, so I have that experience. But generally, I think the way my predecessor accomplished his work here was very effective and led to a well-run Senate.

Q What are some of the factors that led you to pursue the position of majority leader?

A I’m a single guy. I do own a small business, but I have a very flexible schedule and Wisconsin’s a pretty large state, so being the leader of the Senate requires a lot of time and effort. My current situation gives me the ability to drive around the state and help out my colleagues and spend the time I need down in Madison to make sure that, in the Senate, we’re doing what’s best for Wisconsin.

Q What has the transition been like this year?

A In the Senate Republican Caucus, we have five new members, three of whom moved up from the Assembly and two brand-new legislators. So a quarter of our caucus essentially is brand new. There’s different personalities, and you have to try and get them to work together, but we’ve only two months into this experiment and I’m obviously still learning as I go.

We have a budget to pass and a lot of other important things to do, which will take a lot of effort, but I respect all members of the state Senate. And especially for the other Republican senators — who have their own districts to represent and their own voices — it’s my job to get us to come together on different issues.

Q Has anything about being majority leader surprised you so far?

A Senator Fitzgerald made the job look pretty easy, and at times, you don’t understand all the work that goes on behind the scenes. That’s fine. I’m ready and willing to work, but there’s just a level of activity and work that goes on behind the scenes that I didn’t know if I was expecting. I mean, I knew it was going to take a lot more of my time, but I’m enjoying my role.

Q Are there lessons you learned on the Sheboygan County Board that stick with you today?

A It was great serving in a nonpartisan capacity because you learned how to compromise and find a solution that was good for the county. If I can move the needle in the right direction, do what’s best for Sheboygan County, and keep moving in the right direction, that’s much more effective than being the voice of ‘no’ at all times.

Obviously, there are some times when I’ll vote ‘no,’ but generally, getting good things accomplished is more important and is very important to being able to govern at all levels of government. That is the tack I’ve taken in my first six years in the Senate. Especially when you look at our state budget. The easiest vote is ‘no’ because you can always point to all kinds of things that you might not think are great. But it’s important to look at the overall picture. Is that budget doing what is right for Wisconsin? Is it holding the line on taxes? Is it actually making investments in things like infrastructure and K-12 education and other important areas?

Then you realize that it’s actually moving the state in the right direction and being fiscally responsible. That’s a lesson I learned in 2006 that I’ve taken with me.

Q What are your own legislative priorities for the new session?

A Typically in Wisconsin, the leaders in both houses sort of shy away from pushing their own legislation or asking other members to do it. Instead, they take a more 30,000-foot approach in making sure we get a good budget, but also helping out our colleagues with their legislation through the committee process and building a floor calendar that makes sense.

In the first two months [of 2021], we had two great bipartisan bills that the governor signed into law. So I think it’s been a great start to the session. We’ve also had a host of bills that have been moving their way through the committees that unfortunately didn’t get done last session because of when the pandemic hit, and we’re looking forward to getting a bunch of those bipartisan bills done here early on in this session.

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