

PROFILE: MICHIGAN HOUSE MAJORITY FLOOR LEADER ABRAHAM AIYASH



His family is testament to what he calls 'the American promise'; keeping it alive for future generations is part of what drives his work as a lawmaker and leader

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

Abraham Aiyash's parents came to Michigan from Yemen in the 1970s, his dad becoming a union auto worker and his mother a homemaker who never had the chance to go to school or learn to read and write.

A generation later, their son holds one of the top leadership posts in his home state of Michigan. And he's broken down some political barriers along the way.

First Arab American to serve as majority floor leader in a U.S. state legislature.

Highest-ranking Muslim American in a state legislature.

Youngest House majority floor leader in Michigan history.

"It can sit heavy on you," Aiyash says. "It's one of those things where as I walk into this chamber and my office every day [in the Capitol], I'm reminded of all the people who have served in this position, and every single one of them didn't look like me.

"To see what happened to my family, over just one generation, is such a testament to the American promise. Look at my mother. She never got a chance to go to school, but she was able to cast a ballot for her son."

How can he carry that promise forward?

It is a question that drives Aiyash as a legislator, as well as why he relishes the position he is in, even while admitting to the frustrations of gridlock, partisan strife and a process that he jokes often moves slow like honey, but "without the sweet."

"You have these moments, these glimmers of hope [while serving in the Legislature], where you really see how this institution can be a mechanism to take people's pain away, to build a stronger and safer society, and to help make a society that is more connected," Aiyash says.

"We can have so much of a direct impact in a way that is so meaningful."

'STUFF THAT KEEPS YOU GOING'

He sees the promise and impact of legislating in all kinds of ways.

New state dollars have repaired many of the once-crumbling alleys in his hometown of Hamtramck where kids play and gather.

A new law has removed barriers in his community and across Michigan for individuals wanting to become professionally licensed barbers (on-the-job apprenticeship hours can now take the place of formal coursework).

And on visits to local schools, students pepper Aiyash with questions about politics ("Do you know Biden? Do you



BIO-SKETCH: MICHIGAN REP. ABRAHAM AIYASH

- ✓ chosen House majority floor leader in late 2022, becoming the youngest person in Michigan history to hold the position and the first Arab American to hold it in any U.S. state legislature
- ✓ first elected to the Michigan House in 2020; previously served as legislative staff
- ✓ has led community efforts in areas such as environmental justice and workers' rights, as well as served in leadership for the advocacy group Michigan United
- ✓ is the son of Yemeni immigrants who now represents the community where he was raised — Hamtramck and Detroit
- ✓ is a 2022 graduate of CSG Midwest's BILLD leadership program

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know Trump?" they ask) and how a local kid like himself became a legislator.

"I love that tactile sense of politics," Aiyash says. "It's the stuff that really keeps you going in this work."

The work changed considerably for Aiyash in 2023, the start of his second term in the Michigan House. His House Democratic Caucus has a partisan majority in the House for the first time in more than a decade, and Democrats also control the Senate and governor's office.

Aiyash, meanwhile, was chosen by caucus peers in late 2022 to serve as House majority leader.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, he reflected on his views on leadership and ways to build relationships among members, inside and outside of one's own party caucus. Here are excerpts.

Q What have you learned in terms of effective legislative leadership, either what you've observed or tried to implement in leading a 56-member caucus?

A I think it's important not to start with the assumption that you start with 56 votes. You have to work it from zero, and try to go up to 56 by working with members.

So you need to have patience with the process, and you have to appreciate the different passions of all the members of your caucus.

There are going to be disagreements. And it's important for me and all the folks here to remember that when we disagree with an idea, that doesn't

mean we're disowning or disavowing the individual who had the idea.

Q Can the same go with members from across the aisle, especially during this era of high partisan discord?

A I like to hope so. ... Ask any of my Republican colleagues, and they'll tell you that I'm a fierce debater.

Part of it is learning the story of the man or the woman you're debating or working with on legislation. Figure out ways of understanding each other, bringing people together.

It's such a lost art today because of all the money that proliferates our politics and [heightens] the desire to take power. It creates a very intense tribalism. That is not healthy for our society. It's not sustainable for our democracy. So I try to resist those temptations. ...

It's a matter of, do I think they care about their community and are fighting just as hard as me? Yes. You just happen to have a different viewpoint, and I try to remind myself of that.

Sometimes I'm going to bang my head against the wall with some of the stuff they're pushing for, but that stuff comes from a place of real conviction.

Q What are some examples of how you've seen those kinds of relationships of trust or respect be built?

A I have a colleague, on the other side of the aisle, who is a meat

smoker. He's been very conscientious, very gracious, in making me meat specific to the religious-restrictive diet that I have as a Muslim. That is a really meaningful gesture to me, of someone being respectful of my faith.

Also, my counterpart (Minority Floor Leader Bryan Posthumus) and I make it a point to get together once a week. We don't discuss anything related to the chamber or what's happening on the floor. We just talk — sharing travel tips and travel hacks, how to maximize points on your credit card. I've given him all the tricks I've learned.

Q That said, you and the House Democratic Caucus have had an historic opportunity this year to advance a legislative agenda. What are some of the accomplishments you would point to so far as most meaningful to you?

A New worker protections, like repealing our state's so-called "right-to-work" law and reinstating the prevailing wage.

As the son of an auto worker, I can't tell how valuable unions were to my family. I don't have my teeth today were it not for the [United Auto Workers'] negotiated health care plan. So those two legislative victories were very important.

And we also reinstated a working family's tax credit and repealed a pension tax on our seniors. Those are transformational things for people.