PROFILE: WISCONSIN ASSEMBLY MAJORITY LEADER TYLER AUGUST

‘Get people to buy in, have them take ownership’: Wisconsin native shares lessons learned from his 13 years as a legislator and longtime caucus leader

by Jan Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

Most parents aren’t quite sure of the career path that their child will take, let alone one just a few years removed from kindergarten. But in the case of a young Tyler August, his mother and father may have had a pretty good inkling.

“When I was 8 years old, my mom would find me watching the 6:00 news in the basement,” August says. “I don’t think that’s what a whole lot of 8-year-olds were doing at the time. It was an early sign of what would become August’s deep interest in politics and commitment to public service — as well as his ascension to one of Wisconsin’s top leadership positions.

He served as an intern for a state Senate campaign while in college, got involved early on in party politics, and soon came to Wisconsin’s state Capitol as a staff person for his home-district representative. And when then-Rep. Tom Lothian decided to leave office, he didn’t have to look far for a suitable replacement.

Lothian asked August, his chief of staff, to run.

“I thought about it and talked to a lot of folks and decided to do it,” August says, “and the rest is history.”

That first race, in 2010, was historically close. August initially appeared to lose by a few votes in the Republican primary, but a subsequent recount gave him a razor-thin win: 23.97 percent to 23.93 percent. August hasn’t faced races nearly as close since then, and he’s spent nearly his entire 13-year legislative career in leadership. After winning a second term, August was chosen speaker pro temp, holding that post until this current session, for which his caucus unanimously chose him to be Assembly majority leader.

Here are excerpts from a recent CSG Midwest interview with Rep. August.

Q: Who have been your role models in terms of legislative or political leadership?
A: Here in Wisconsin, certainly [former state Rep. and Gov.] Tommy Thompson has been a great mentor of mine ever since I first ran. He was excellent at leading the state and bringing people together. When I was younger, Reince Priebus became and still is a good friend of mine. With [Rep.] Tom Lothian, who did this job at the opposite end of his professional life than I did, I was able to learn a lot of things about even something as simple as patience and not thinking that every single hill is worth dying over. While my leadership style still has to be mine, I’ve built it on watching what worked for many other people and trying to incorporate that into how I operate.

Q: How has leadership changed for you in shifting from being speaker pro temp for so many years to now being majority leader?
A: Some of the lessons learned while I was pro temp, as far as working with the minority party, carry over quite a bit. My role certainly has changed; my priority is now to lead the Republicans. But there is still the opportunity to work across the aisle on certain issues, on the process when bills were moving. The experience of being in that room is part of why my caucus was confident in my ability to step up and do this new role. Not only had I helped us have success outside of the building in campaign season, I helped us in the building when it comes to legislative matters as well.

Also, having been in leadership meetings as pro temp, I was already part of the process within our caucus and beyond the scenes when bills were moving. The experience of being in that room is part of why my caucus was confident in my ability to step up and do this new role. Not only had I helped us have success outside of the building in campaign season, I helped us in the building when it comes to legislative matters as well.

Q: What are some of the adjustments you’ve had to make since the shift in partisan control from a Republican to Democratic governor?
A: That’s a big shift when you have members of a caucus that had so much success in the eight years under [former Republican Gov.] Scott Walker. Now it’s much more difficult, and a resetting of expectations is just the biggest difference. We have very different views of what’s best for the state than the current governor does, so managing expectations of what we can actually get done has become a big part of this job.

Q: What do you look back on as some of your biggest legislative accomplishment(s)?
A: It’s an interesting question. Because I’ve been in leadership for so long, and got there so quickly, I haven’t authored a lot of bills on my own. Being a part of Act 10 [a measure on collective bargaining for public workers] six weeks into my first term will always be toward the top, if not the top, of the list because we fundamentally changed the way that government operates.

One of the bills I did author (AB 143 of 2015) regulated and allowed companies like Uber and Lyft to operate in Wisconsin. That became a model bill for other states, which is pretty cool. That doesn’t happen very often.

And I authored the constitutional amendment to change the way the chief justice of the Supreme Court is selected [Editor’s note: Approved by voters in 2015, the measure switched the appointment from one based on seniority to selection by the justices every two years].

The other accomplishment I’m humbled by, and very proud of, is the fact that I was unanimously elected majority leader out of 64 people. That meant a lot. It is something that I’ll remember for a long, long time.

“The best way to lead a group of people, whether it’s in politics or otherwise, is to lead by inclusion.”