

Speaker Busch tackles problems with teamwork

By LIZ BABIARZ

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lbabiarz@fredericknewspost.com

ANNAPOLIS — On the window sill in House Speaker Michael E. Busch's office in the Maryland State House sits a framed photograph of a young man, dressed in a military uniform.

The soldier featured in the faded, black and white photograph is the speaker's uncle — Michael Erin Busch — for whom he is named.

The speaker says he never met his uncle, who died fighting in World War II. But Mr. Busch keeps the picture in his office as a reminder of his family and his roots.

"Sometimes you wonder what you're doing here, or why you're here, or how you got named the way you are," Mr. Busch said, holding the picture in his hand. "This is my background. ... I like to keep it close."

Mr. Busch, 58, a Democrat, has been a member of the House of Delegates for 18 years. This is his third year as Speaker of the House, the highest ranking position in the House of Delegates.

And while power may change some people, it hasn't changed Mr. Busch, his staff says.

"Basically, he's still the same guy," said Edie Segree, Mr. Busch's aide who has known him for 25 years. "... You can't forget where you come from, and I don't think he has."

During his political career, he's become "a bit more polished," but he remains honest and fair, Ms. Segree said.

These traits help him lead the 140 members of the House of Delegates, said House Majority Leader Kumar Barve.

"People have a lot of confidence in his judgment, partly because of his style of listening to people that are experts and arriving at a sound decision," said Mr. Barve, D-Montgomery County. "When he first started as speaker no one really knew what his style was going to be like, but he has proved to be very fair and very sure-footed in his decision making."

Glory days

Talking with Mr. Busch, who lives in Annapolis, traits of the former football star and coach shine through.

The husband and father of two young girls, 6 and 9, was born in Baltimore, but grew up in Anne Arundel County, the district he represents.

As a student at St. Mary's High School in Annapolis, Mr. Busch rose to prominence through his "first love" — sports. He played basketball, but really excelled at football. He was a two-time Most Valuable Player, chosen best athlete in the county and was awarded a football scholarship to Temple University in Philadelphia, where he studied education.

"Sports helped define me as a young person," Mr. Busch said. "I look back on it as good training. In team sports, you learn that success is gained by everyone working together."

Going to college during turbulent times also helped shape him. Mr. Busch said he remembers watching thousands of blacks marching through the streets of Philadelphia, fighting for civil rights. He also recalls watching the draft on television in his dorm room, and the uneasy feeling when his number was called. A leg injury kept him from serving in Vietnam.

In the decade of peace and love, Mr. Busch says he wasn't a hippie, though he was influenced by the "social revolution."

"In the 1960s, I was like a lot of other people who felt our generation was going to change the world," Mr. Busch said. "... It was generated on how to make the community better. It was not driven on expectations of great material gain."

After college, Mr. Busch taught history for eight years at two different high schools in Anne Arundel County. His love of sports drew him into coaching basketball and football, which he said gave him skills needed in the state legislature.

"You learn a lot about motivating people to reach the best interest of the group; how to pat someone on the back and how to push them," Mr. Busch said. "The one thing you learn more than anything is the ultimate achievement is about the group, and not about you."

At 40, the teacher and coach says he swore he would never get into politics. But after enough nudging by local politicians and people in the community, Mr. Busch ran for the House of Delegates in 1986 and won.

And when he got to the State House and was assigned to the House Judiciary Committee as a non-lawyer, he thought, "What have I done to myself?"

"In my wildest dreams I never thought I would be here so long," he said.

Call him 'Coach'

Annapolis was overwhelming at first, but Mr. Busch never lost sight of what he was chosen to do.

"I was proud to be a member of the General Assembly, proud to be part of history," he said. "... I thought it was a great opportunity to do some beneficial things for my community and support the state of Maryland."

It wasn't long before he was reassigned to the House Economic Matters Committee. He was named chairman, a role he "cherished," in 1994.

He said the issues on the committee were interesting. "It was a lot of problem solving."

On the committee, he helped pass the Patient Bill of Rights and the Patient Access Bill. He also revamped managed care organizations, maintained Care-First as a non-profit and reorganized state economic incentive programs.

Delegate Mary Ann Love, D-Anne Arundel, was on the committee with Mr. Busch. She recalls how he would huddle with committee members to work on a bill and "make the sure the play was going to work."

"He's 'coach' and he'll always be that," Ms. Love said. "It's the strategy he uses."

While Mr. Busch loved being committee chairman, he found himself vying to be speaker when Cas Taylor, who had held the speaker's post, lost in the 2002 election.

After a night of calling Democrats to garner support, Mr. Busch was elected speaker Jan. 8, 2003.

Now as the leader of 140 delegates, Mr. Busch relies on some of the skills he picked up in his coaching days.

"The biggest issue is how to try to best motivate them to get along with one another," he said. "In some instances it doesn't work, in some it does."

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Mutiny

It hasn't all been smooth sailing for the speaker. He's had to work with Republican Gov. Robert Ehrlich, with whom he routinely butts heads, particularly about slot machine legislation.

"I wish we had a better working relationship here," he said.

Mr. Busch has also endured contentious debate over slot machines, a divisive special session on medical malpractice and a coup attempt by the Republican party.

When last year's deal on slots unraveled, House Minority Whip Anthony O'Donnell, R-Calvert, called for Mr. Busch's ouster. He said he could get the 71 votes to install a new speaker.

But the Democrats rallied behind Mr. Busch. And as punishment, the speaker moved Mr. O'Donnell's seat from the front of the chamber to the back row.

Looking back on the situation, Mr. Busch says his action was needed.

"You want to start a mutiny, there are two choices: Either the captain walks the plank or the person who starts the mutiny walks the plank," he said. "If there's no repercussion for taking that kind of action, people will do it on a regular basis."

Mr. O'Donnell, on the other hand, said he was making a "political statement."

"I will continue to fight to have the minority party's voice heard in this legislature," Mr. O'Donnell said. "I will not be stifled or bullied into being ... silenced."

House Republicans also tried to "send a message" last month that they were unhappy with Mr. Busch for cutting short debate during the special session on medical malpractice, said House Minority Leader George Edwards. Forty-seven Republicans broke with tradition and abstained from voting for Mr. Busch during the election at the start of the 2005 session.

Since then, Republicans have talked to the speaker, requesting a fair share of time to debate hot issues. He seemed receptive to the idea, said Mr. Edwards, R-Allegany.

"We have been talking lately, so I'm hopeful some of things we have been discussing will come to fruition and there will be a better relationship between the 'R's and the 'D's,'" Mr. Edwards said.

And all "petty politics" aside, "we get along well," Mr. Edwards said. "... He's a good man. We may

not agree, but at least we can still sit down and talk about it."

Door's always open

Accessibility is Mr. Busch's greatest asset, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle say. And it isn't just politicians to whom Mr. Busch makes himself available.

People constantly flow in and out of his office, according to Nancy Earnest, his scheduler. His door is always open.

"His calendar is pretty filled because he tries to see everyone: legislators, constituents and people with issues," Ms. Earnest said. "And then there are those that just drop by, too."

Once Mr. Busch is done meeting with people in his office, it's not unusual for him to drop by the press room in the basement of the State House. He'll pull up a chair and rehash the day's events with reporters. No other high ranking lawmaker does this.

On good days, he'll burst into song.

After the State of State address when the governor complained about the lack of respect in Annapolis, Mr. Busch sauntered into the press room, singing Aretha Franklin's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

The day Mr. Busch announced his plan to boost school construction funding without slot machines, his song was Buffalo Springfield's "For What it's Worth."

"Stop, Hey, What's that sound? Everybody look what's going down," he sang to members of the press corps.

His sense of humor and fun-loving personality have helped unify the Democratic party, Delegate Galen Clagget said.

"Of all the people I've had come to the Fish and Plow Club (in Frederick), he's the one that stirred the people the most," said Mr. Clagget, Frederick's only Democratic lawmaker.

Mr. Clagget recalls how the speaker told a story of going to his grandparents' house as a young boy. On the wall were two pictures — one of Franklin Roosevelt and one of Jesus.

"He was 10 years old before he knew the difference between the two. That's how strong they were as Democrats," Mr. Clagget said. "People really laughed and they liked Mike, all of them."