

# PASSIONATE PURSUITS

By Rebecca Patrick

## Four Legislators in a Different Light

Public service is but one facet to those who serve in the Indiana General Assembly. And some of the individuals there have some pretty unique and compelling stories to tell ...



Rep. Dan Forestal – Firefighter

He always knew what he wanted to do. In fact, the memory of when that crystallized at age nine or 10 is still very vivid.

Two of his firefighting cousins stopped by a family party to say hello. While there, they got a call to go on a run.

“They had their radios to their ears and then turned and went running through the hall, jumped on the truck and tore out of there with lights and sirens going. ... I can remember thinking at that moment that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

Forestal has been a firefighter now for nearly seven years with the Indianapolis Fire Department. He works 24 hours on, 48 hours off. During the legislative session, he takes unpaid leave from his job.

Most of the calls into the station are for medical runs. But in mid-November, an early morning arson fire at an apartment complex got Forestal’s attention big time.

“There was a lot of accelerant everywhere. I happened to have the nozzle going in. There was so much gas. I sprayed it back off of this landing and when I stopped spraying there and then started spraying in another area, the water came back down with gas in it and then

boom, it blew a fireball all around me,” he recalls.

“My captain had to reach up and yank me down a flight of stairs ... because I was catching on fire. Things like that stick out and they’re exciting. I don’t know how else to put it. You have to kind of love the adrenaline of it or you wouldn’t love doing it.”

It was one of the more intense runs Forestal has been on. “For three hours we were fighting a heck of a fire. We had to rescue someone off of a second-story balcony – and I was on fire. It’s kind of a little scary. You walk out and go, ‘Wow, that was close.’ But it’s what I do and I love it.”

The opposite of that dramatic scene would be any number of odd, if not humorous, requests the fire department gets.

“If the 911 dispatcher isn’t sure where to direct them, they generally will send a fire truck out. We were called to a house where a woman was pointing at the sidewalk and screaming. It turns out she was upset about the bugs on the sidewalk and wanted us to get the bugs off.

“Sometimes things like that can be frustrating,” Forestal admits. “However, we did go ahead and kick a few bugs off since we were there. You laugh about these types of

things afterwards.”

While it’s a wide range he witnesses, it’s the distressing situations that really stick with him.

“It gives me a unique perspective on what the city needs and the state needs as a whole. Sometimes we go into areas that are very disadvantaged. I think an afterschool program would be great here. Some of these families are probably depending on the free and reduced lunch program. It definitely influences what I do at the Statehouse.”

### Legislative Detail

First term, District 100; Democrat

Open PACE (property assessed clean energy) market financing will be Forestal’s big focus this session.

“It’s a loan program with really great terms for businesses to energy retrofit their properties, and then pay the loan off with the guaranteed energy savings from the work that was done. Their monthly expenses will never go up ... whatever their savings are for the month, that’s how they will pay back the loan.”

## Sen. Ryan Mishler – Funeral Home Director

When he left to go to college at the University of Southern California, Ryan Mishler thought his Hoosier days were behind him. He had no intentions of returning, running the family funeral home business or following his father into the state Legislature.

“But I ended up doing all three,” he laughs. Mishler is president of Mishler Funeral Homes, which has locations in Bremen and Milford, as well as a monument company. He took charge full time in 1999.

“I probably really wanted to do (the job) all along. My issue was that I didn’t want to have just worked for family my whole life. I wanted to try to do my own thing,” Mishler offers.

“But what really got me was when I was still in California, I would get these notes from people from home – generally older folks – that would be along the lines of, ‘What are we going to do if your Dad retires; who is going to take care of us?’ That meant a lot, and I thought that’s where I should be. So I moved back and never regretted it.”

Mishler’s mother, uncle and two aunts are still involved in the business. His father passed away a decade ago. There are also six funeral directors on staff.

While there can be tough, emotional days at work, Mishler tries to focus on what he sees as the reward.

“It’s generally the toughest time in somebody’s life, taking care of a spouse or child or family member. You go through the whole thing with them. You kind of became part of the family for that period of time.

“I’ll get notes from people on the anniversary dates of when their relative passed or at holidays. We used to have a guy who came in on the anniversary of his son’s passing and visit with us every year,” he shares.

Mishler says he keeps every card that families have written to him after a funeral. (He also keeps all the messages he receives as a legislator.) “I have a box of them. Those remind you of why you do it. When you look at the challenges, I think that right there is what makes you continue in this business.”

Mishler’s father handled the funerals for Indiana First Lady Elizabeth Bowen in 1981 and, later on, Gov. Otis Bowen’s second wife, Rose. In May 2013, Mishler made the arrangements for Gov. Bowen’s ceremony (photo below).

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## Rep. Vernon Smith – Youth Advocate

It was through his profession as an educator that Vernon Smith found what would become another passion in his life: helping at-risk young males.

A former student came to him 20 years ago concerned about Gary being designated as the murder capital of the U.S. Smith’s solution was to form a group that focused on mentoring: “We needed to get into their minds, spirits and behavior ... in order to bring about change.”

The first incarnation was the Gary chapter of the national 100 Black Men. A few months later, it was turned into a local-only organization: the Christian-based African American Achievers Youth Corps (AAAYC). In its history, the AAAYC has worked with more than 2,000 boys. Currently, a little less than 200 are part of the program.

Properly trained adults serve as role models in a variety of settings. “We provide group mentoring, recreational opportunities, plus tutorial services through work-study students at IU (Northwest, where Smith is a professor),” he describes.

Participants pay \$2 for a trip to the movies or bowling alley, or no more than \$5 to see a play or go to a Chicago Bulls or Indiana Pacers NBA game. The AAAYC picks up the tab for the rest.

Smith emphasizes that enriching them culturally, about Black heritage, and spiritually is also part of the regimen, as is “providing entrepreneurial services for them; we teach them to not be just consumers but producers.”

The latter comes in the form of The Glen Theater in Gary. “We were able to get possession. It took us \$800,000 in grant money to refurbish the place,” Smith notes. “We’re operating now in our sixth year.”

The venue hosts plays, film festivals, musicals and fashion shows, and offers employment for the youth participants.

Smith stays in touch with those who come through AAAYC. He mentioned one individual has started his own program and teaches entrepreneurship, while two former members are ministers of large churches in Gary.

Giving back in this fashion has changed Smith’s life in many ways.

“Because I am single, usually every other weekend I was going somewhere – to New York or flying to

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Photo courtesy Sam Householder, *The Goshen News*

### Legislative Detail

Represented District 9 since 2004; Republican

School funding tweaks, fiscal matters and possible health care licensing issues are what Mishler expects to work most on in 2014. A big component, he says, is “how the Affordable Care Act is going to affect the state fiscally.”

### Legislative Detail

Represented District 14 since 1990; Democrat

Smith has been asked by Lake County officials to introduce a bill dealing with non-profits and filing dates.

“Many times they will miss those key days for non-profit or tax-exempt status. What we’re doing is allowing it to be the discretion of the county (if they want to give an extension). Non-profits often don’t have paid staffs and as a consequence aren’t aware of these deadlines.”



## Rep. Sharon Negele – ‘Candy Lady’

This Michigan native landed in Indiana because she and her husband wanted a different lifestyle than the hectic one they had in Houston running a cellular phone business. The wish: An existence that allowed the couple to slow down and focus more on their family (which then included a young son and daughter).

“I was frustrated because there was so much more I wanted to do as a mother. I was having a hard time balancing my career (corporate finance) with being a Mom,” Negele admits.

“The breaking point was when I went to meet with my son’s first grade teacher and found out he had an assignment book that I was supposed to be signing every day – and I didn’t even know it existed. ... So when my husband, Dennis, mentioned getting out of the cell phone industry, I was all for it.”

The opportunity that triggered their 1996 move back to the Midwest was a sweet one, literally. Wolf’s Homemade Candies, in Attica, had been around for decades, and the owners were looking to retire.

“The only thing we knew about candy was that we liked to eat Snickers bars,” Negele laughs. “But finally Dennis convinced me to go fly here with him and check it out, and we decided it was something we could do. ... We were able to come to an agreement within a few weeks.”

The deal was buying the business (which

included a custard/ice cream stand across the street) and the couple’s house next door, plus learning the art of candy-making from the Wolfs for one year.

Her husband manages the candy production, while she is in charge of the financials, shipping and administration.

All of the cooking is still done by what Negele calls “old world methods. We use our copper kettles (80 years old) and our maple paddles. The mixer, it’s called a cream-beater, is 120 years old. These (techniques) are specific to our recipes.”

Once the couple was fluent in the business, the next step was taking it to the next level. “That included entering the wholesale box chocolate business, and eventually we wanted to expand to other retail outlets,” Negele explains.

“But we wanted to do that in a tempered state so I could do some of the things (with the family) that I was complaining about before that I wasn’t doing.

“I became treasurer and then president of the PTA and ended up being president of the Attica Baseball/Softball League. So I got to do all these things I wanted to but could never do in Houston,” she affirms.

As for wholesalers and other retailers, Negele says, “We’re choosy about who sells our candy. All but one of the flower shops (for example) are in the Midwest. We stay within something we can manage ourselves.”

That’s a philosophy that led to doubling of revenue over a 10-year span.

Today, during its peak season from October through February, Wolf’s produces between 200 and 300 pounds of finished candies daily and employs 15 full- and part-time workers. The top-selling treats: its version of the Turtle (called a Woffie), toffees and caramels.

Retail is where most of the money is made, and the in-person purchases often provide a certain joy for Negele.

“The customers are just so happy when they walk in. That’s something I didn’t even think about until we experienced it. It’s like everyone has that kid in a candy shop look on their face. And how excited they are ... it just makes you smile.”

### Legislative Detail

First term, District 13; Republican

“I’m co-authoring with Rep. (Steve) Braun some reform to our energy policy. I have three wind farms in my district which are pushing hard for competitive procurement. So we are looking at different ways to improve upon their access to the Indiana energy market – while working with the existing structures in place for many years.”

## Mishler

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Going from a field in which compassion is a big part of the job to his legislative duties can be a bit of an adjustment, Mishler acknowledges.

“When you come here (to the Statehouse), you have to have thicker skin. Sometimes it’s hard to say no, especially when I sit in the Health and Provider Services Committee and hear about issues that financially we can’t help.”

The two responsibilities do intersect in a positive manner too.

“When I’m working the front door at the funeral home, there can be a lot of people come through the door. Most of them are going to chat with me and tell me what’s on their mind. They may say it’s not really the time or the place, but they know they have your attention. I then share those things with my caucus,” Mishler states.

“I think my profession has made me do a better job at the Statehouse. It helps me with some of the decisions I make, and I kind of like it that way.”

## Smith

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L.A. If not, I was in Chicago. I don’t travel on weekends like I used to. I’ve become a child advocate. I go to hearings for the boys,” he remarks.

“It’s not atypical for me to get a call at midnight or 2 a.m. from a parent having trouble with a child, and I’ve got to do counseling over the phone or go over there.

“I’ve had to put in a lot of individual time with boys, counseling them to get them going in the right direction, but it’s been rewarding to me too,” he stresses.

“I guess the one thing I (had) missed in my life was having a son. But (now) I’ve had sons – they come and go – but I’ve had sons in my life that I could try and impact their lives.”



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*Rep. Vernon Smith*

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