

LIFE IN REVERSE



GARY WILHELMS' CAREER IN POLITICS STARTED AS AN OREGON LAWMAKER AND IS WINDING UP AS A COLLEGE INTERN.

BY PETER WONG

When Representative Karen Minnis stood up to introduce the guest seated beside her in the Oregon House of Representatives during a special session in February 2008, no one noticed anything unusual about him at first.

Gary Wilhelms has been a state representative, a Republican leader in the chamber, a lobbyist for 17 years, and a top legislative staffer, spending more than three years as chief of staff for Minnis while she was speaker of the House.

But then Minnis introduced Wilhelms as her college intern.

"It does raise eyebrows when you tell people you are a 70-year-old intern," Wilhelms said at the time.

Wilhelms was gathering information for a paper he was writing for an Eastern Oregon University class about the 2008 session. The 19-day session was regarded as Oregon's tryout of annual legislative sessions—something he recommended as co-chair of a citizen panel reviewing legislative operations.

Wilhelms was not at the Capitol for show.

Peter Wong is a Capitol Bureau reporter for the Statesman Journal newspaper in Salem, Ore. He has covered Oregon government and politics for three different newspapers in the past three decades, is the dean of the Capitol press corps, and sits on the board of the Association of Capitol Reporters and Editors.

"People ask me all the time if my career is going backward," Wilhelms said later. "But I tell them I love it."

Wilhelms would have earned his college degree decades ago, but illness forced him to leave Oregon State University and abandon his plans to study forestry. Instead, he went to work for the telephone company, where he would spend the next four decades, aside from a stint in the Army.

FIRST STEPS

In 1968, while working in Baker City, east of the Cascade Mountains, Wilhelms first got involved in politics. He led the local campaign for Bob Packwood, then a 36-year-old Republican state representative who was a long shot for the U.S. Senate.

"That's when I decided to become a Republican," he says.

In 1972, Oregon switched from multi-member legislative districts based on counties to single-member districts—and the House seat in Klamath Falls, where Wilhelms was working, had no incumbent. Three Republican representatives came to town to urge him to run.

"But I had three little kids running around then," Wilhelms says. "My wife said if I wanted to run, it was OK with her, but on

As part of his college assignment, he was at Minnis' work station at the Capitol three days a week during the short session. "If I can help accommodate his goal and he can get a few college credits from his involvement here, I'm happy to do it," says Minnis, who left the Legislative Assembly in January after 10 years.





one condition: If I was going to Salem, all of them would come with me.”

Roger Martin, who became the House Republican leader in 1975, was one of the trio. “We convinced him that he should run. Although we lost a majority in the House that year, he ran counter to the political flow and was elected.”

Wilhelms won with 52 percent, was re-elected two years later with 58 percent, and was unopposed for his final two terms. Registration then favored Democrats by 20 percentage points, although the district today is solidly Republican.

IN THE HOUSE

As a first-term representative, Wilhelms was assigned to the labor and revenue com-

mittees, just as Democrats won control of the Oregon House for the first time in eight years—and a redistricting plan resulted in nearly half its 60 members being new.

“The one thing everybody remembers was that the first time he stood up in the chamber to give a speech, he forgot to turn on his microphone,” Martin says. “But nobody missed a word, because he has a booming voice. When he makes a point, everybody looks at him and listens.”

Wilhelms worked with the 32-year-old counsel for the labor committee, Ted Kulongoski, who the next year was elected to the Oregon House and is now governor.

“Ted Kulongoski was a charming young man, he had a great résumé, and he got along with just about everybody,” Wil-

helms says.

But Wilhelms disagreed with the top priorities of his new committees. One was the 1973 law that allows public employees to bargain collectively, which Kulongoski drafted and passed by a partisan vote.

The other was a plan promoted by Republican Governor Tom McCall to shift the financing of public schools from local property taxes to state taxes. Oregon voters defeated the plan.

When Martin ran for governor in 1978, Wilhelms decided to seek the Republican leadership. Wilhelms in 1979 led a GOP caucus of 26, five short of a majority, but with added clout because half a dozen Democrats refused to vote for their party’s nominee for speaker. What Wilhelms got



PHOTO: THOMAS PATTERSON

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THE THIRD HOUSE(S)

For the next 17 years, Wilhelms went over to the “third house,” and even did a two-year stint as president of the Capitol Club, which represents professional lobbyists in Oregon.

“He was one of the most popular lobbyists with all members,” says Martin, who is now a lobbyist. “He is a Republican, but he works with Democrats and got along well with them.”

When he retired after 40 years from Qwest, the telecommunications company, at the end of 1996, Wilhelms still had college tuitions to pay and a need for supplemental income. So he became a special assistant to the incoming president of the Oregon Senate, Brady Adams.

“I brought a lot of history, I knew the process from the inside and outside, and I knew the lobbyists and how they operated, so I could be a buffer for whomever I was working,” he says.

Three years later he went over to the staff of the then-House speaker, Lynn Snodgrass. After a brief stint in 2001 as a redistricting consultant for Oregon House Republicans, he became chief of staff to Minnis, who was then the House majority leader and became speaker in 2003.

LOOKING AT THE SYSTEM

It was in that job in 2005 that he helped shape the legislation creating a citizen panel

to review legislative operations, the first such panel in 30 years. Wilhelms said the credit for the panel goes to Peter Courtney, the current Oregon Senate president.

“Other people on the panel had two forms of experience as a legislator, a lobbyist or staff person,” says Marjorie Taylor, the administrator for the panel, who now works elsewhere in state government. “Gary came at this from all three angles.”

Yet Taylor said Wilhelms’ vast experience did not stand in the way of taking a fresh look at suggestions for legislative improvements. “He could have been set in his ways, but he was open to learning more about the legislative process,” she says, both from other states and from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

One proposal was for a test of annual legislative sessions, which Oregon voters narrowly defeated in 1990, and which lawmakers had tried without success to put on the ballot again. With Arkansas’ approval of an annual-sessions ballot measure in November, Oregon is just one of five states where lawmakers still meet every other year.

“A trial run [in 2008] proved that we could do it, and it shortened the 2007 session. The legislature is still getting its work done in less time than in each of the past two sessions,” says Wilhelms, who was around for record-setting sessions in 2003 and 2005.

In addition to a test run of annual sessions, the panel at the end of 2006 endorsed more staffing for members and legislative functions, a citizen review of legislative pay, and renovations of the 30-year-old Capitol office wings and the 70-year-old Capitol. Wilhelms is a business-oriented conservative, but he said Oregon, which has nearly doubled its population in the four decades he has been active in public life, has changing needs.

“Any time you talk about spending money on the legislature, you are going to have anti-government people who are going to be critical,” he says. “But we are no longer the same state we were in the 1970s. All kinds of things are requiring the legislature and individual legislators to change significantly. It takes more work, the issues are more complicated, legislators need more staff, and they need space in which to work.”

Wilhelms did complete his college paper on the legislature, and he is on track to earn his degree in 2010.

was the right to name the minority-party members of committees—and the power to forge coalitions with some of the dissident Democrats on some issues.

“We may not have been able to pass anything, but if something was truly controversial, we were able to block it,” Wilhelms says. “We were able to negotiate.”

Like many members of a part-time legislature, Wilhelms faced a choice of whether to enter politics full time—a race for a congressional seat was a possibility—or leave altogether. His employer, Pacific Northwest Bell, resolved it for him by offering a job transfer that would make him its chief lobbyist. “I was sorry to leave the House,” he said. “But at that time, I was looking at four children I would have to educate.”