

Balloons and Bassoons, Camels and



BY MORGAN CULLEN
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Many people have several careers over the course of their lives. Senator Curtis Bramble (R) of Utah is having them all at once. He’s a CPA with an active tax practice, vice president of an insurance verification company, managing partner of a home warranty business, a consultant and expert court witness, and the owner of Stars and Stripes, a hot air balloon business. And it’s that last business—the balloons—that really turns heads.

“Ever since seeing ‘The Wizard of Oz’ as a boy, I had thought it would be neat to ride in a balloon,” he says.

So when the city of Provo conjured up the idea in 1983 of hosting a balloon festival as part of its Fourth of July celebration, Bramble seized the opportunity. Within months he’d earned his pilot’s license, balloon rating and instructor’s certification, and incidentally formed a business and learned how to run a festival. Since then the business and his piloting career have “taken off.”

How does this relate to being a legislator? It’s not about the “hot air.” Instead, Bramble says that in a balloon “you can only go where the wind goes, but the skilled pilot will find that one

layer of air that will take you where you want to go. Politically, you can do the same thing, notwithstanding the prevailing winds. You can accomplish what you need to do, but only as slow or as fast as the wind will take you. If you’re patient.”

Bramble may be a bit of an overachiever, but many legislators hold several jobs, and some of those jobs are just as unusual as his. We’ve pulled together a few “odd jobs” from around the states, but we’d like to know about others. If you have an offbeat job, please let us know.



Senator
Curtis
Bramble (R)
Utah

Maine Representative Russell Black, maple sugar producer

Representative Russell Black (R) of Maine is one sweet guy. He makes his living producing maple sugar and honey, among other things, on his diversified farm. “Unless you’re a potato farmer or a dairy farmer, there isn’t enough income doing any one thing on a farm in Maine. We do what we have to in order to pay the bills.” He is a fourth generation farmer on the same land.

This year, his first in the Legislature, he doubled his maple sugar production, a bit of a surprise since the Maine Legislature meets from January to April or June, depending on the year—and sugaring is possible only in March.

Black sees maple sugaring through a policy



Representative
Russell Black (R)
Maine

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Comedy Unusual occupations give these lawmakers unique perspectives on legislative work.



Maine Representative Russell Black taps a maple tree.

perspective as well as a business perspective. One question up for debate in Maine is whether maples on public land can be leased out for tapping. While that remains uncertain, one thing is for sure: “You can’t ship maple trees to China. It’s something that’s unique, it’s a niche market, and we can create jobs by promoting it here.”

Michigan Senator Joe Hune, exotic animal farmer

Senator Joe Hune (R) of Michigan is emphatic with his answer: two humps, always. He makes part of his living selling two-humped Bactrian camels, the cold climate kind native to central Asia, to whomever wants one. “Camels are the only one of my investments that has held its value in recent years,” he says, cracking a smile.

It’s simple economics. First, the camels are valuable because they are rare; fewer than 500 Bactrian camels live in North America. Second, the animals are difficult to import. And third, camels reproduce slowly and take time to rear their young, so each calf is a welcome one. All in all, they have proved to be a good business venture.

Camels are just the most recent in a long line of exotic livestock for Hune, a line that began when his parents permitted him to bring a pair of rabbits to the farm. The bunnies were followed by zebras, then Scottish Highland cattle and now camels, miniature donkeys—“Mine are all Republican,” Hune says—and cold-



Senator Joe Hune sells bactrian camels from his farm in Michigan.

loving parrots known as rosellas.

“I spent my whole life working around livestock and crazy animals, so I think it prepared me pretty well to work in the Legislature,” Hune says. While he also has a real estate license, it’s his farm background that made him an excellent choice for his current post, chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee. In this role, he’s a booster for his state’s producers. Michigan ranks second in the nation for the diversity of its agricultural commodities—and his camels are unique in that mix.



Senator
Joe Hune (R)
Michigan

Alabama Representative Joseph Mitchell, musician

Representative Joseph Mitchell (D) can be found at the statehouse focusing his energy on the

issue that first motivated him to run for public office—education. Before he was elected to the Alabama House of Representatives, Mitchell served on the Mobile school board, but it was through music he found a passion for the issue.

The love of music provided the discipline and motivation at an early age that helped him excel in school. He holds two graduate degrees from public institutions in Alabama and a doctorate in educational administration from Texas A&M University. He also plays more than 200 varieties of flutes and reed instruments, including the concert flute, oboe, bassoons, saxophones and bagpipes. “I simply love to perform for people and make it a point to leave my audience with a better understanding and appreciation for music.”

Mitchell is a classically trained musician and has performed with the Atlanta Symphony, but it’s jazz he loves most. Over his career he has performed with notable musicians, such as Gladys Knight and the Pips. “I love the improvisational aspects of jazz. It is a wonderful feeling to play something different every time.”

As an award-winning music educator, Mitchell has maintained a firm commitment to education both inside and outside



Representative
Joseph
Mitchell (D)
Alabama



Alabama Representative Joseph Mitchell is an educator and a musician.

the Legislature. “We all need to play a proactive role in educating the next generation, whether it is through music or something else,” Mitchell says. “I like to think I have made a small difference, both as a legislator and as a musician, here in Alabama.”



Representative Jason Lorber (D) Vermont

Vermont Representative Jason Lorber, stand-up comedian and actor

When Jason Lorber (D) was first elected in 2004, his colleagues quickly pointed out that he was the first comedian to serve in the Vermont House of Representatives. But Lorber clarifies that. “I’m just the first professional comedian to serve in the legislature,” he says.

When Lorber isn’t busy introducing legislation or attending committee meetings, his constituents can find him performing at comedy clubs around the state. Originally an actor, he switched to comedy to get back on stage without the commitment of rehearsing. “I was in graduate school and just didn’t have the time, but I really missed the interaction with the audience.”

After finishing his MBA at Stanford, Lorber returned to acting and comedy. But the roles Lorber plays as a performer and legislator are very different, and it can be challenging to wear both hats effectively. As a comedian, he often finds himself going beyond accepted social boundaries to get a laugh. As a legislator, that is not necessarily the most effective way to get your point across. “Many times when I get up to debate a bill, my colleagues are



Representative Jason Lorber like to make clear he is simply the only professional comedian in the Vermont House.

genuinely disappointed that I didn’t say anything funny.”

Lorber believes his stage experience helped prepare him for his role as a legislator. As soon as he entered politics, he already had a good grasp of many intangibles that often take years to learn. Comedians have to be quick on their feet, know their audiences and get their message across in a way that resonates with people. The same is true in politics.

Lorber teaches business professionals through his improvisational workshops to let go, project a stronger image, embrace uncertainty and feel comfortable even when they don’t have all the answers—skills invaluable both in and out of elected office.

Alaska Senator Donny Olson, pilot, physician and reindeer herder

Born and raised in the remote village of Golovin, Alaska, aviation has played a critical role in Senator Donny Olson's (D) life ever since he was a child. Olson's father was a pilot who delivered mail in northern Alaska to communities often accessible only by airplane.

"Where I grew up there were no roads connecting our communities together so we were very dependent on airplanes to provide much-needed communication and supplies throughout the year. I knew from a very early age I wanted to become a pilot like my father."

Olson received his pilot's license when he was just 16 years old, but his parents insisted he continue with his professional education and serve his community. Heeding that advice, Olson became a physician who uses his skill as a pilot to provide emergency medical care and deliver babies in some of the most inac-

cessible places in northern Alaska.

"When I went away to school, I experienced the luxury of electricity and indoor plumbing for the first time. My father always warned me the bright lights of the city can be very alluring, but not to forget where I came from."

It was in this spirit of public service Olson decided to run for the Legislature. "I spent most of my life flying from one village to another, so I got to know the concerns of my constituents very well. When I first ran for office, I told the voters, 'I have delivered your mail, your freight and your babies. Now I want to deliver meaningful legislation at the state Capitol.'"

With 310,884 square miles of geography and 90 separate villages, Olson represents the largest state legislative district in the country. But that doesn't slow him down one bit. In his spare time, Olson herds reindeer with a helicopter and responds to calls from the North Slope Borough Search and Rescue Team.



Senator
Donny Olson (D)
Alaska



Alaska Senator
Donny Olson finds
being a physician
and a pilot a good
fit in Alaska.