Only 24 when he was first elected to the Texas House in 1996, Dennis Bonnen became speaker this year after serving as speaker pro tem for the past three sessions. Bonnen is the CEO and board chairman of Heritage Bank. A native of Angleton, Texas, he graduated cum laude from St. Edward’s University in Austin with a bachelor’s degree in political science.

Are leaders born or made?
Both. There are all kinds of leaders in life. I think that many times in history we’re surprised by our leaders sometimes in that they rise above an occasion more than what we thought they were capable of. Most people have leadership within them and the question is, do they open up to that leadership opportunity and do they take advantage of those challenges?

You placed cups in the House members’ lounge printed with the message: “School finance reform—the time is now.” Why?
Every member has identified that the No. 1 issue for them is significant school finance and property tax reform. I thought it was important to show that I hear the message and that I will use the strength of the speaker’s office to help ensure that we’re successful on the No. 1 issue for the members.

Your brother Greg serves with you in the House. He’s older, but you’re the speaker. So, who’s the boss?
Legislatively, I would be the boss because I have significant seniority on him—he’s in his fourth term and I’m in my 12th. It’s wonderful working with him. He’s an incredibly smart, hardworking legislator. And any time, whether it’s your brother or any other member, that’s the kind of member in the Legislature you want to work with.

What prompted you to run for office at such a young age?
My parents. I’m the youngest of four children and they taught us all—and showed us through the years—to always be involved, civic-minded and engaged in our communities. My mother was one of the founders of the Friends of the Angleton Library in our hometown and has been on the board for years. My father was a longtime member of many civic clubs and served as city attorney and then city judge. They didn’t tell me to run, but my running for state representative was an opportunity to serve the community the way our parents taught us to.

The Texas Legislature is one of a handful that meets every other year. What’s the advantage of that?
The general principle of meeting every other year is that we are citizen legislators. We go home and work in real jobs and real businesses. I coached youth soccer, I’m involved in the community, I’m involved in my children’s lives. We live very normal, average lives in the 18 months that we’re not in session. I think that brings a sense of reality and sincerity when we come to session. Since this is not the full-time gig, we’re here to get a job done and go back to those families and those jobs and those normal lives that we all get to live.

How do you de-stress from the pressures of work?
I don’t have many hobbies. The joke I tell folks is that I’m addicted to being a member of the Legislature and I decided I would run for speaker to try and break my addiction. But, really, downtime is being with my two sons and my wife.

What final words would you like to share?
Be a problem solver. The people that elected you and the people that elected your colleagues are counting on you to bring real solutions to real problems. And be open to compromise, which is the only real way to reach a legitimate solution to a real problem.

Jane Carroll Andrade, a contributing editor, conducted this interview, which has been edited for clarity and length.