

WALKING THE TALK

BY CAROL MARAVIC

Rob Wonderling is the first to admit that it sounds kind of corny. But he has a passion for the citizens of Pennsylvania and for public service.

“I love the simple notion that by serving in elected office, the people have given me the opportunity to lend a hand to someone in need, or improve a community,” he says.

Wonderling, a second-term senator from Montgomery County in the Delaware Valley northwest of Philadelphia, is as far from the “old-school politician” as you can get. He is much more comfortable being called by his first name than senator, and he spends a lot of time traveling around his district, talking informally with his constituents and listening to their concerns.

It was those travels that led him to write a book about issues of concern to Pennsylvanians—*Talking PA*. Wonderling hit the road in November 2006 after choosing 21 Pennsylvanians whose concerns illustrated a variety of policy matters.

It’s no surprise Wonderling took such an unconventional route to become familiar with constituents’ issues. He hosts a monthly television show, usually featuring local businesses, area landmarks and community organizations in his district. And every year he sponsors a “Senator for a Day” event to give high school students a chance to learn first-hand about the legislative process.

Carol Maravic is director of communications for the Pennsylvania Senate Republican Caucus and works at the state Capitol in Harrisburg.



Wonderling talks with a local emergency medical services provider in his district. Pennsylvania is home to more volunteer fire and rescue companies than any other state.

ENTHUSIASM AND COMMITMENT

His colleagues in the Pennsylvania Senate give him high marks for his enthusiasm and commitment to public service.

“Senator Wonderling is an energetic and innovative member of the Pennsylvania Senate,” says Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi. “Rob has a talent for boiling down complex issues to a level where people can really see how decisions made by state government affect families and businesses.”

That’s one of the main reasons he ran for

office. He says lawmakers need to see and understand the connection between what they do and the people they work for.



**SENATE MAJORITY
LEADER
DOMINIC PILEGGI
PENNSYLVANIA**

A SENATOR HIT THE ROAD TO WRITE A BOOK ABOUT WHATS' ON THE MINDS OF PENNSYLVANIANS.

"These are folks who are busy tending to the needs of their own families, jobs and communities and don't have the time to immerse themselves in the nuances of public policy," Wonderling says.

"But they do expect their government and their public servants to work for them with integrity, vision and a commitment to excellence. And they do expect to be heard."

That was the impetus for the book.

"I felt that after four years of being inundated by white papers and high-priced lobbyists and experts, not to mention an increasingly cynical public, I wanted to strip all that away and sit down with folks and really talk about what mattered to them," he says.

ON THE ROAD

Wonderling chose people from across the state and from all walks of life to interview. The topics ranged from the high cost of health care to nano-technology to high school football.

"I didn't know any of the subjects in advance. I did a lot of Googling to find people who I thought would be interesting," he says. "Their stories each align with a point of policy that I wanted to focus on. Actually, it was really hard to winnow it down to 21 people, because there are so many interesting and compelling stories out there."

His subjects included Ryan Matsook, a second-year high school football coach for the Beaver Falls Tigers, and a Wal-Mart manager who spoke proudly of his career and his company.

Wonderling talked with Maryann Gushue, a family practice doctor from rural Mifflin



Wonderling hosts an annual "Senator for A Day" event to give high school students a hands-on look at how state government works.

County. And he spent the day at the Upper Bucks County Vocational Technical School with Tim McCarthy, who teaches a popular class in auto collision technology.

"I left several interviews in tears because the people were so charismatic and inspirational. I talked to an Iraq veteran who was struggling with post traumatic stress disorder, and had never shared his story with anyone outside his family. It was a humbling experience," Wonderling says. "Here I was a complete stranger with a tape recorder, and I was just amazed at the richness and the honesty of their conversations."

He was particularly touched by one interview with a father and two daughters who have been struggling to care for his wife and their mother since she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in early 2003. They talked about the physical and emotional toll that it has taken on them and how hard it was to keep her in their home as her condition worsened.

"The people that I interviewed came from a wide variety of backgrounds and represented a wide variety of life experiences," he says. "While they are not politicians in any sense

A QUICK GLANCE AT ... SENATOR ROB WONDERLING

- ◆ Elected to the Pennsylvania Senate in November 2002 and re-elected in 2006.
- ◆ Chairman of the Communications and Technology Committee and vice chairman of Game and Fisheries Committee.
- ◆ Formed the Pennsylvania Technology in Health Care Working Group, which brings together state leaders in academia, technology, health care and government to find ways to integrate the use of technology in health care.
- ◆ Served as deputy secretary of Transportation under former Governor Tom Ridge.
- ◆ Received a B.A. from Allegheny College and a master's degree in government administration from the University of Pennsylvania.
- ◆ Works for Bentley Systems Inc., an engineering and software technology company.
- ◆ Lives in Lower Salford Township with his wife Kristin and their sons Sam, Mark and Ben.

To download a free copy of Rob Wonderling's book Talking PA go to www.talkingpa.com. If you would like a free copy, please email rwonderling@pasen.gov



Wonderling joins some young constituents who are learning about science at his “Kids Expo.”

of the word, their lives intersect with matters of public concern in Harrisburg. In a very real sense, their stories can serve as a road map for our collective future.”

FROM STORIES TO POLICY

In each chapter, Wonderling makes a link between the personal stories and dreams of those he interviewed, and the kind of good practical public policy that can help people succeed—whether it is a single mother pursuing her GED, or a coal-company entrepreneur who is finding new ways to use technology to improve his business.

“I think at least a half dozen pieces of legislation have been introduced as a result of the things we heard from the folks we talked to,” says Wonderling, who is chairman of the Communications and Technology Committee.

In his travels, Wonderling visited Jim and

Barb Warburton’s 300-acre dairy farm—one of 9,000 in the state. Pennsylvania is the fourth-largest dairy state in the country and breeding stock from dairy herds is prized all around the world for its quality. The Warburtons come from a long line of dairy farmers and while they hope their children will continue the tradition, they face increasing pressures. For example, the nearest large-animal vet is 40 miles away and his practice is so short-handed he often has to forgo his regular duties to deal with emergencies.

“Few people are as important to dairy farmers as large-animal vets, yet only three out of every 10 veterinary students who begin their training in that field end up practicing. There is a need out there—and one we need to fill,” Wonderling says. “Often we overlook small but important changes that can make a huge difference in people’s lives.”

He is working on legislation to provide

FOUR QUESTIONS

SL: What keeps you up at night?

Wonderling: Nothing. It drives my wife crazy, but I don’t worry about the next day.

SL: What’s your proudest accomplishment as a legislator?

Wonderling: Helping more than 15,000 folks who have a specific problem or concern.

SL: What are you reading?

Wonderling: I just started a short biography of former Pennsylvania Governor David Lawrence.

SL: What do you want your sons to remember about you?

Wonderling: Being a loving dad who instilled in them the notion of love for each other.

financial incentives for students who choose to become large-animal veterinarians. Wonderling says he doesn’t believe in more government, but a more modern government.

“One thing I’ve noticed is that we don’t move Pennsylvania government with any sense of urgency or eye to the future. We don’t look for opportunities for young people or for ways to make older Pennsylvanians safe and secure. Oftentimes we default to a position of mediocrity instead of excellence because it is just easier, and I think that is something we really need to work on,” he says.

The most important thing he has learned from writing his book, he says, is the need for humility in public service.

“People aren’t public servants anymore, they are celebrities and that is not the way our Founding Fathers wanted it to be,” he says. “People are crying out for a ‘servant’ model of leadership. It has to be rooted in service and humility and not in arrogance. You don’t have to know all the answers, but you have to keep people talking and engaged.”

That’s the goal of Wonderling’s latest project—www.talkingpa.com—an Internet outgrowth of his book.

“Our goal is to purvey good information about policies that affect the lives of Pennsylvanians, but even more important, to talk about policies that can make a difference,” he says. “Public service is not hierarchical. Legislators don’t have the market cornered on ideas. We need to hear from the people we represent and we need to listen.”