Attorney Craig Coughlin entered politics nearly 35 years ago, serving on the school board and city council in South Amboy, N.J. He was elected to the Assembly in 2009 and has served as speaker since January 2018. Coughlin graduated from St. John’s University School of Law in New York.

Are leaders born or made?
It’s actually a combination of both. You need the innate skills and desire, and you need an environment that helps direct you. You can’t be afraid to lose if you’re going to be a leader, and I think that only comes from the environment you’re raised in. If you grow up in a place where it’s OK to be out in front on an issue in your family, that’s a terrific training ground for being a leader.

How did your upbringing prepare you?
Everything I have or ever will be is the product of Claire Coughlin’s work. My dad died in 1962, a time when the world was different. She was a single mother who raised two kids by herself. Never once did I hear her say, “Woe is me.” If there was a problem, you solved it. If there was a challenge, you met it. My sister and I were both raised to be confident and to go forward. Sadly, she has passed and I wish she had been here to see me get to be the speaker. I think she would have been proud.

What did you learn from the last election?
That people demand a certain tenor in their government and that we ought to be mindful about the things that are important to our voters. People here were dissatisfied with the things we’ve seen in Washington. Before the election, our 12 congressional seats were split 7-to-5, now it’s 11-to-1 Democrats. We had huge voter turnout, which is really hopeful, because there were people engaged on both sides of the aisle, and I think that’s important.

What are your legislative priorities?
To expand medical marijuana and also consider legalization of adult-use marijuana. We’re going to look to raise the minimum wage to $15. One of the things I’ve tried to focus attention on is eliminating hunger in this state. And we’ll do things like expand paid family leave.

What was the worst job you ever held and what did it teach you?
When I was in college, during the summertime I cleaned out chemical barrels. The image that sticks in my mind is doing that in the pouring rain. I remember thinking, this stinks, it’s not for me. I also remember thinking how incredibly lucky I was to be able to go to college and pick my career. That hammered it home when it was a pain in the neck to study or write a paper. It reminds you that there are people doing those jobs every day. That’s how they feed their family. You have a duty to stick up for them.

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?
I wanted to be a sportscaster. And I get to be the play-by-play announcer on my local-access TV channel. I do the games with our mayor here in Woodbridge Township. We do baseball, football, basketball, hockey ... You name it, we do it. It’s just great fun to do high school sports.

What book is on your nightstand?
A book about World War I called “A World Undone: The Story of the Great War.” With the recent 100th anniversary of the end of the war, I felt I didn’t know enough about it.

What final words would you like to share?
We should be optimistic about the future, particularly about the leaders of tomorrow. The reason I say that is that I have great confidence in my three sons, all in their 20s. I work with some dedicated, smart young people on my staff, and we have a group of legislators in the Assembly who are in their 30s and they’re all energetic and ambitious and I think they have a real appreciation for their work. The final word is that we’re going to be fine.

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