

PARTISAN BUSTER

The Michigan Political Leadership Program makes it easier for state lawmakers to have good relationships with others across the aisle.

By Cynthia Kyle

Beer's in the bathtub. Soft drinks are chilling. Homemade brownies, chocolate chip cookies from a bakery, Cheetos and potato chips tumble over the hotel suite's dining table.

The sofa's packed with people, knee to knee and nose to nose in the heady conversations of school board budgeting, bipartisan coalitions and the nitty-gritty of campaign fundraising.

A newly elected African American school board member is bumping elbows with a suburban city clerk intent on learning more about voter diversity.

Mid-floor in this tiny campus hotel room, a political consultant is holding court alongside a reporter who periodically exclaims "that's incredible" to an explanation of why all public colleges should be private.

These are members of the 2004 class of the Michigan Political Leadership Program (MPLP), a training program launched in 1992 to combat strictly partisan politics in a term-limited state.

"One of my proudest moments in life was creating MPLP," says Bob Mitchell, a legislative staffer, Democratic congressional candidate, consultant and now founder of Trans-Elect New Transmission Development Co. based in Reston, Va. He and a small group in Lansing, Mich., wrote a business plan and raised \$750,000 to give life to MPLP.

From MPLP's ranks have emerged 100 past

and present elected community leaders. Among them are school board members, 10 members of state government and now a speaker of the House of Representatives.

This Friday night, like Fridays once a month from February through October, the 2005 MPLP Fellows are coming together to dine, debate and learn more about themselves and each other.

Political affiliations along with conservative-liberal labels will be shed in common tales of winning and losing elections, their hopes and dreams for a better world, and the good food they've brought to share.

"I truly love that program," says John Helmholdt, a political fundraiser with roots in the Republican Party and a 2004 MPLP graduate. He's organized two political action committees of up-and-comers in Grand Rapids, his hometown. "They're starting to get in line to become part of this program."

Just after dinner tonight, members of the Class of 2005 are huddled in small groups in a Marriott Courtyard conference room in Grand Rapids.

The fellows are intent on tonight's assignment: They are to envision themselves as an incumbent member of the Michigan Legislature, running in a district that is entirely new territory.

The district is buffeted by the global economy, and voters are restless, the printed assignment cautions. "Recent polling shows that 65 percent of all registered voters think the state is on the wrong track. How do you get re-elected despite these challenges?"

The fellows must ask themselves why they're running, how they will launch campaigns, contact voters, raise money and keep track of every task. They're plotting media buys and filling in campaign calendars.

One group barely breaks concentration even as guests enter the room. The group is searching for a "hot topic" that will touch the voters in an exercise they hope to take with them into real-life, hands-on campaigns they likely will face outside this venue.

Later this night, Fellows designated as hosts will welcome colleagues to a flood of snacks and after-hours debate that will spill with them into nearby bars and restaurants well into the night.

Early Saturday, after bacon, scrambled eggs, cereal and sweet rolls, they'll board a trolley to tour Grand Rapids, and witness housing, health care and entertainment development rising in the city's downtown.

Later, they'll be challenged by a "Budget Busters" exercise that will divide them into assigned political parties and ask them to bring the state's budget in balance against a vortex of declining revenue.

A SELECT GROUP

Each year since 1992, coincidentally when Michigan voters passed the most restrictive term limits in the nation, 24 political junkies and legislative hopefuls have been selected from across the state to take part—at no charge to themselves—in this unique multi-partisan learning environment. So far, some 300 people have gone through the program and 100 typically apply each year for the slots.

For each of the 10 monthly weekends, the MPLP fellows move from community to community throughout the state, meeting consultants, reporters, business leaders and fundraising specialists they hope to call on when they need help as candidates, newly elected officers or citizen activists.

"This is in-depth training," says 2005 Fellow Janice McCraner, a Republican and county commissioner. She typically drives four hours to MPLP weekends. "I haven't missed a session. After my first one, I was so enthralled. I'm amazed at the experts they can bring in."

Among 2005 fellows are a township planning commissioner who works in distance learning at the University of Michigan, a former state Senate aide who is with an associa-

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tion, the founder of a breast cancer-fighting foundation, a precinct delegate and a former Detroit police officer turned criminal investigator for a state environmental agency.

They are led by a man and a woman, one a Republican and one a Democrat, who challenge the 24 to craft campaign strategies, debate the finer points of media relations and get to know each other as people rather than as members of the other political party.

"It has allowed me to be more of a 21st century leader, not getting bogged down in the stereotypes of the past," says Lindsay Huddleston, a legal research analyst for Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm. He took part in the class of 2004.

"Here was a program where for one weekend a month it was OK to say you love politics," he adds. "It was almost a support group."

A BOND FORMS

Members of each class talk of how surprised, and gratified, they are when fellows contribute money and support to their campaigns.

Detroit attorney James Heath, a 2005 Fellow, came within 20 votes of unseating an incumbent House member, and is considering a second run. He'll be armed with MPLP insights next time, he asserts. And, his classmates predict, he'll have 23 more volunteers—his MPLP colleagues.

Each term ends with an even larger show of sup-

port—a poignant fundraiser now so large it must be scheduled over two days at two ends of the state. Graduates compete to sell tickets, rise for a standing ovation, and laugh together in the crossfire of national political figures of opposing viewpoints.

The first year's reunion speakers were strategists Mary Matlin and James Carville, fresh from political combat for opposing political parties and just a year married.

"We picked people from both sides of the aisle," recalls Aaron Payment, now in his second year as tribal chairman of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and member of MPLP's inaugural class in 1992.

Payment then directed the tribe's state and federal policy efforts and drove across half the state to attend the training. "You need a license to drive a car. You need a license to get married. You don't need a qualification to be a legislator," he says.

Now Payment serves as an MPLP presenter, introducing new classes of Fellows to his tribe and governance. "In many cases, I'm giving people their first exposure to Native American people," he says.

Former Republican National Committee Chair Ed Gillespie and former Democratic

National Committee Chair Terry McAuliffe will square off March 2, 2006, in a banquet hall in the state's southeastern corner. Speakers and sponsors will then trek through the frosty dark to Grand Rapids for an early morning breakfast repeat.

Until then, MPLP fellows spend their weekends together—with a different roommate each session.

Fellows say universally that the program, now housed in Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR), fosters new relationships and greater understanding in an era of term limits.

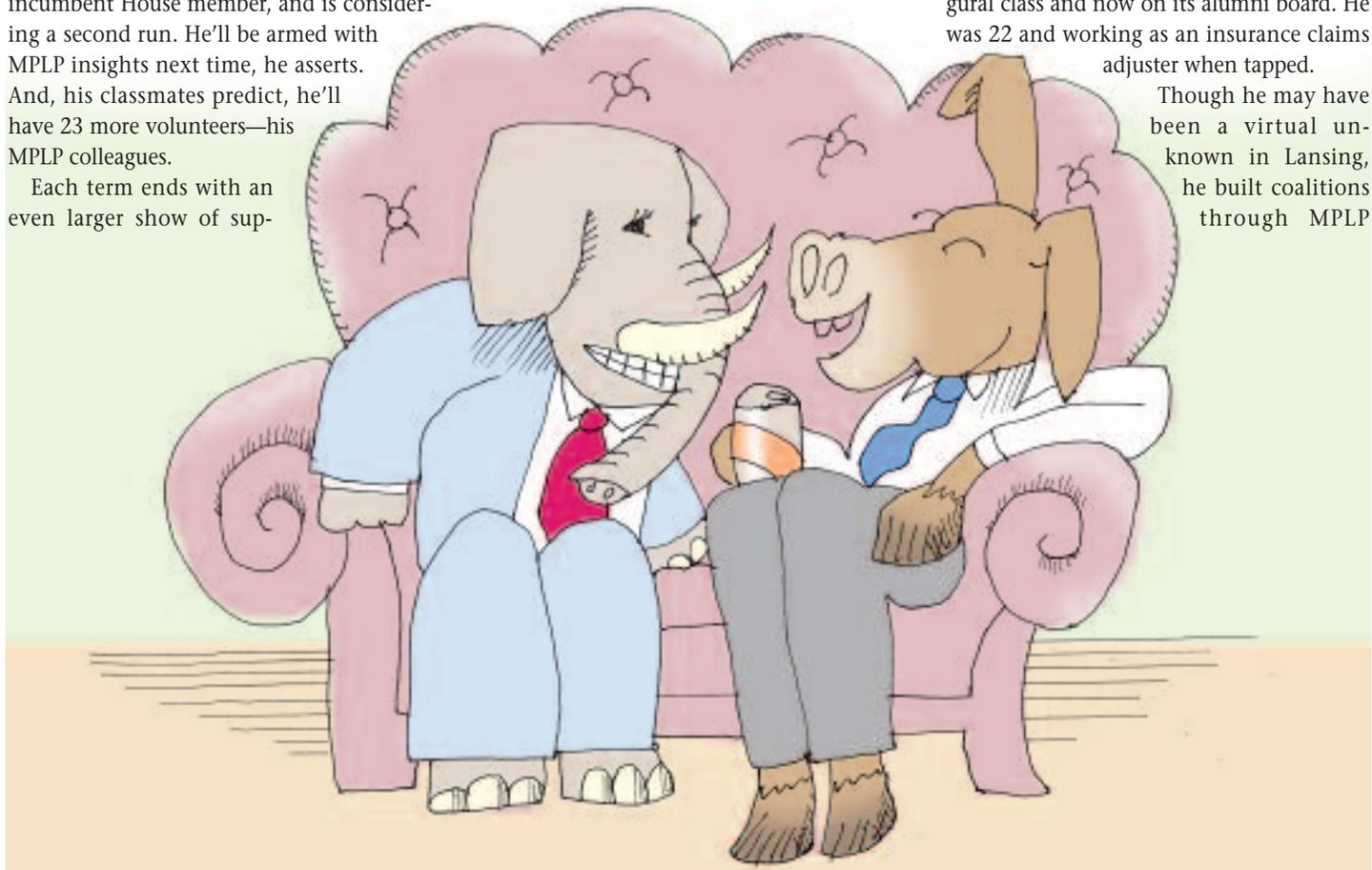
"I really can't say enough good things about the program," says Barbara Goushaw, a political consultant in Berkley outside of Detroit.

She's half of the only MPLP marriage to date. She and her husband Fred Collins were Fellows in back-to-back years. "Politics brought us together," she says. They are also the group's only Libertarian Party members.

TERM LIMITS AS CATALYST

MPLP "has been a great icebreaker," says Craig DeRoche, a member of MPLP's inaugural class and now on its alumni board. He was 22 and working as an insurance claims adjuster when tapped.

Though he may have been a virtual unknown in Lansing, he built coalitions through MPLP



FINANCED FOR THE FUTURE

There have been changes in the Michigan Political Leadership Program. National political consultants served as presenters in the early days.

"We decided against doing that," says Lynn Jondahl, former state House member and MPLP co-director from 1995 to 2002. State-based agency directors, media managers and fundraising consultants were called upon, instead. A series of forums—on broad topics like health care and higher education finance—have opened to the public as well as to fellows recently. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek and Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation of Midland in Michigan have contributed grants.

A session on ethics was added. A transportation case study was the fruit of joint work with the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

An annual dinner was added as a way to help pay for an ongoing program. Governors have worked the dinner. MPLP fellows join lobbyists, students, nonprofit association leaders and supporters for what is now considered the state's largest multi-partisan event.

"It's a real fine mix of Michigan politics," says Jondahl.



SPEAKER
CRAIG DEROCHE
MICHIGAN

and business connections before his state House term. He climbed from city council to House member, and then in the first year of his second term, to speaker of the House.

The suburban Detroit Republican moved swiftly. He installed a former policy analyst, rather than a staffer from the GOP caucus, as chief of staff and mixed business leaders with political leaders on his transition team.

DeRoche credits the savvy moves to "kind of a blend. My understanding of the political process, my life experience and MPLP."

It was term limits that helped bring DeRoche to Michigan's capital, but partisan politics that inspired MPLP's creation, Mitchell says.

"I always thought it was a travesty that we do so little in our country to prepare people to serve in public office," he says.

"There are plenty of campaign schools. The real job is what happens after you get elected. I saw example after example of people taking positions not based on being the best solutions but being what was good for politics. Because of term limits, the program is even more important."

In recent years, MPLP has gained a follow-

ing as a training ground for elective politics, but its intent is far broader, insists Lynn Jondahl, former state House member and MPLP co-director from 1995 to 2002. "It's a valuable way for anyone who in the broadest sense wants to develop skills to work in the political world."

MPLP's current co-directors have considerable such experience.

James Agee is a former public school principal and superintendent who served in the state House and was the Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor in 1998.

Anne Mervenne, now a suburban Detroit lobbyist, worked 12 years in the administration of Republican Governor John Engler, directing the governor's Detroit office and advising the state's first lady. She was a legislative staff member and served as a county commissioner for four years.

Former Fellows have made the most of their training.

"Pan"—short for Patricia Anne—Godchaux was the first MPLP graduate elected to the House. She won a GOP seat in suburban Detroit and now co-directs a similar program, the Institute for Local Government, at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

"I learned a lot about running a campaign. More important, I learned a lot about statewide issues," she says.

Republican Senator Wayne Kuipers, in 2002, was the first Fellow elected to the Senate. He also served in the House from 1999 to 2002. "It certainly helped me articulate what I was believing and feeling. We had to



SENATOR
WAYNE KUIPERS
MICHIGAN



REPRESENTATIVE
ED CLEMENTE
MICHIGAN



REPRESENTATIVE
DICK BALL
MICHIGAN

debate. We had to fight. We had to argue. We had to stand up for what we believe," he says.

MPLP directors try for a 12-12 split between the two political parties. Interaction is encouraged.

Ed Clemente, from the class of 1997, was the first Democrat elected to the state House from MPLP ranks. The House member from a suburban Detroit community formed a fast relationship with MPLP colleague and now fellow legislative rookie Representative Dick Ball, a Republican from the state's more rural mid-section.

"It makes it easier up here (in the Legislature), especially with term limits, to have a pretty good relationship with someone on the other side of the aisle," says Clemente.

Ball, an optometrist, had served on his local school board and lost two elections for state House before he put MPLP training to work. "What I learned in MPLP really served me well," he says.

"There are people who are interested in running for office," says Doug Roberts, IPPSR director and former state treasurer during a Republican administration. "They go through the program and, lo and behold, they end up getting elected, and they can at least talk to each other." ■