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Peters launched career at grassroots level

BY ANNETTE KINGSBURY • ECCENTRIC STAFF WRITER • NOVEMBER 13, 2008

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Although he's a Democrat, Congressman-elect Gary Peters built his political career in a predominantly Republican landscape.

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He grew up in Rochester Hills where his parents, Herb and Madeleine, still live, and he will represent the 9th U.S. House District, which encompasses the Birmingham-Bloomfield area, and which until recently was a stronghold of Republican voters.

Peters graduated from Rochester High School in 1976 and began his political career on the Rochester Hills City Council, where he was appointed to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of Betty Adamo in 1991. He served until 1993, when he chose not to run for a full term.

Darlene Janulis, a supporter back then, was at Peters' headquarters election night to celebrate the victory.

"He did a wonderful job for us" on city council, she said. However, Janulis had no inkling then that he would run for higher office.

"I had hoped that he would. He really had a lot of talent," she said.

"Gary reached across the aisle to a lot of people, he really did. ... I think he appealed to a lot of people."

Barnett Jones, who served on the Rochester Hills council alongside Peters, remembers thinking that his colleague was destined for bigger things.

"You could tell right then that Gary used common sense," Jones said. "We both kind of worked the same. We would ... go out and talk to the people. ... And I believe he'll do the same thing when he goes to Washington."

Jones, a Republican who is now Ann Arbor's police chief, said Peters put listening ahead of ideology.

"He was there to represent the will of the people. ... His father was very, very much the same," he said. "Gary Peters, the man I worked with and discussed issues with, ... he represented the city of Rochester Hills and the constituency there. And he'll do the same thing in Washington."

FAMILY FOCUS

After leaving city council, Peters, 49, moved to Bloomfield Township and went on to serve two terms in the Michigan Senate, from 1995-2002. After an unsuccessful bid for attorney general in 2002, he was appointed state lottery commissioner in 2003.

When he claimed victory on election night shortly before midnight, his entire family was with him: wife Colleen Ochoa;



Gary Peters smiles at his parents, Madeleine and Herb Peters of Rochester Hills, after claiming victory Tuesday night in the 9th District Congressional race. "We're just kind of on cloud nine," Herb Peters said. (Lawrence McKee | Staff Photographer)

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children Gary Jr., 22, Madeleine, 13, and Alana, 11. Sisters and in-laws also joined him on stage at the Troy Hilton.

"When you run for office it is a whole family event. They went through an awful lot," Peters said.

Family, he added, "has always been what this campaign has been about. ... Families who are worried about whether they are going to have a job, worried about whether they are going to have health care. ... That is why I'm so proud to be ... part of a bigger movement across America that elected Barack Obama."

Peters called his campaign "a real grass-roots effort."

"We knocked on almost 400,000 doors, we made over 300,000 phone calls, over 5,700 individuals contributed to our campaign," he said.

He told cheering supporters that his goals include reinvesting in the economy, creating jobs, "and get Michigan moving forward again."

"I think it's going to be an incredibly exciting time in American history," he said.

BROAD BACKGROUND

Peters started his career in the finance field. After graduating from Alma College in 1980, he earned a master's degree in business administration at the **University of Detroit** in 1984. He worked at Merrill Lynch, where he was a vice president.

He also earned a law degree at Wayne State University. After Sept. 11, 2001, he enlisted in the Navy Reserve and spent some time in the Persian Gulf. He has also taught at Wayne State University, Oakland University and Central Michigan University.

Along the way he's received the Champion of Justice Award from the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association, Public Servant of the Year from the Michigan Fraternal Order of Police, Environmentalist of the Year from the Michigan Sierra Club, and the Outstanding Legislator Award from the Michigan Association of School Psychologists.

Peters entered the race for Congress in August 2007. "when everybody thought that was a very tall mountain to climb," he said.

"We're just kind of on cloud nine," his father said Tuesday night. "We've watched Gary grow. ... We didn't know Congress was in the offing. ... Whatever he chose to do, we were there right behind him." Herb Peters said he can't wait to see his son on the House floor.

"You bet. I wouldn't miss that for anything."

'GLAD HE WON'

Scot Beaton, who also served with Peters on Rochester Hills City Council, remembers his former colleague as pragmatic and able to cut to the chase. He recalled an incident where a businessman came before council asking for a zoning variance to put a driving range on landfill property in the Hamlin-Adams area.

"This discussion went on and on," Beaton said. "I looked at Gary and Gary looked at me and said. 'This is a landfill site; nothing is ever going to happen there.' ...

"He really has this wonderful ability to see through all the nonsense and red tape ... and say, 'Let's make this happen.'"

"I'm really glad he won; I'm so thrilled," Beaton said. "We need change up there in Washington. He's going to be very open to everybody's opinion. He won't shut anybody out."

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