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Prof Takes Political Science from Classroom to County Board

"Your actions and inactions do affect real people. They aren't just budgetary numbers."

-- Tari Renner

Associate Professor of Political Science, Illinois Wesleyan University
as a candidate for the McLean County (Ill.) Board

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--When the McLean County Board convened its monthly meeting on Dec. 7, a college professor was among its ranks, bringing an interesting background of classroom political science and hardball politics to the 20-member body.

Tari Renner, associate professor and chair of political science at Illinois Wesleyan University, was elected to a four-year term on the board Nov. 3, knocking off an incumbent in a political year that was generally safe for officeholders.

This full-time professor turned part-time public servant is no political waif--some local government clone of an idealistic but inexperienced Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

Though the McLean County Board is his first major elective office, Renner, 40, is a veteran of numerous political wars, developing and supervising public-opinion polls for elections ranging from presidential primaries and U.S. Senate races to big-city primary contests.

He also has kept close tabs on Central Illinois politics as a weekly commentator on WEEK-TV (NBC affiliate) for the last two-and-one-half years.

"I've had three minutes every week to deal with complicated issues," Renner explained, noting that this was good training for crisply and concisely discussing issues with voters on the campaign trail.

This sound bite approach to public policy, Renner jokingly refers to as "freeze dried political science."

Different Vote, Different Voice

Renner says his goal as a county board member is "not just to be a different vote than his predecessor, but to be a different voice.

"I want to remind people on the county board," Renner explains, "that there are many people in this community who don't live like them--or think like them. It's easy to neglect this large number of people and to forget the human side of county government."

Renner's political temperament is proactive. Much of his political energy as a board member will be spent on economic, social, and human services issues, including supervision of the children's protection network, the county nursing home and related health issues, and the working poor.

"These are the issues I ran on," says Renner, who has first-hand knowledge of the tough life faced by the working poor. From the age 8-15, he grew up in Florida in a single parent household that sometimes was on welfare and food stamps.

"We were toward the bottom of the economic ladder," Renner says. "So, I have an

understanding of the struggles of single parent households. This experience defines my world view and policy priorities."

Twin Careers

Renner believes that his twin careers--political science professor and elected official--will reinforce each other. In the state and local government courses he teaches, Renner says he'll be able to bring specific examples of county government issues into the classroom. As an academic political scientist serving in public office, Renner hopes he can bring a "bigger analytical picture" to the county board and increased professionalism to analyzing and questioning data used by decisionmakers.

"One career is a subset of the other," Renner explains.

County government and academia, Renner concedes, are "two different worlds," but not as dramatically different as some might think.

"As chair of IWU's political science department," Renner says, "I've had to make decisions--choices. I've had to hire people and let people go. As a department chair, as a representative of the faculty, I've had to make tough choices involving salaries and evaluations."

High-Energy Approach

Renner's high-energy approach to politics is seen in the rapid-fire way he launched his successful primary campaign. Irked by the county board incumbent's stance on child abuse and neglect issues, Renner tossed his hat into the ring at 4:05 p.m. on the Friday before the Tuesday primary. He waged a spirited write-in campaign as a Democrat in a generally Republican part of Illinois. However, his county board district has a track record of supporting Democrats like President Bill Clinton and congressional candidates.

A local radio station broke the story of Renner's candidacy--the same station on which the night before his opponent lamented that all candidates for the McLean County Board were running unopposed.

"Be careful what you wish for," Renner quipped. "Last night he lamented the lack of political competition--now he has competition."

Retail Politics

As the campaign unfolded, Renner's activism and directness was seen in the way he approached retail politics.

"Personally," Renner said, "I went to 80 percent of likely voter households. This was the main way I communicated my message to voters."

One day Renner was campaigning at a housing project, where he encountered several African-American teenagers, who chided him with comments like: "How do we know that you're going to do anything--you're just another white boy?"

"You don't know," Renner responded. "But you've never seen the incumbent here--even in an election, he may mail things to you, but he won't come to see you or talk to you."

The core message of Renner's campaign was that elected officials must take the lead in devising practical solutions to community problems.

"We cannot afford the 'wait and see' approach of the current incumbent," Renner told voters. "The issues are too important and the stakes are too high."

Key Issues

From Renner's perspective, the key issues facing McLean County are:

- Making sure the community's physical growth proceeds sensibly and doesn't neglect downtown Bloomington.
- Strengthening and protecting neighborhoods facing growth and change.
- Facing up to responsibilities in child protection and human services, realizing the county's role in these problems will continue to grow.
- Protecting the local environment from pollution such as recent attempts to regulate mega-hog farms' waste.
- Saving the McLean County nursing home.

Renner's campaign was a skillful blend of news media coverage, precinct walking, debates, public events, pinpointing and contacting likely voters, and labor-union endorsements and funding.

Election Victory

Renner defeated the first-term incumbent Republican, Lee Newcom, 59.3 percent to 40.7 percent, spending just \$2,400 on the campaign. Renner's victory came in the aftermath of his opponent winning the endorsement of Bloomington-Normal's major newspaper and gaining support from major interest groups like the Farm Bureau.

Renner's Background

Renner joined the IWU faculty in 1994 after serving at Pittsburgh's Duquesne University as an assistant professor of political science (1988-92) and an associate professor of political science (1992-94), where he taught several courses including state and local government, the budgetary process, urban public policy, American government, and American political parties. His chief research interests are American elections and political cultures and urban local government.

He was director of survey research and a senior statistical analyst for the Washington, D.C.-based International City Management Association from 1986-88. In that post, Renner conducted policy surveys on issues ranging from public budgetary practices; police, fire, and refuse collection; and city and county salaries, to human service delivery, municipal labor-management relations, and private fund-raising activities in local government. Between 1984 and 1993, he conducted several public opinion surveys focusing on the 1984 presidential primary election in Maryland; a statewide Pennsylvania survey for the 1992 presidential election; and other contests.

Previously, Renner taught political science at Washington College in Chestertown, Md., and American University in Washington, D.C.

He was a management analyst at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C. from 1980-82.

Renner is a member of the American Political Science Association, Midwestern Political Science Association, Pi Sigma Alpha (Political Science Honors Society), Southern Political Science Association, and the Urban Affairs Association.

He earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of South Florida and a master's degree and doctorate in government and public administration from American University.

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.

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