

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Hershman Delivers on
Game-Changing Policies

By Rebecca Patrick



GOVERNMENT LEADER OF THE YEAR

Ronald Reagan had him at hello. That's how the current Indiana Senate majority floor leader recalls the day that ostensibly changed his life.

Brandt Hershman was working at the Purdue University student newspaper in the late 1980s when the 40th U.S. president came to town. The college junior covered the visit and was struck by Reagan: "He had a tremendous message and was a tremendous communicator."

Hershman took the opportunity to also talk to some of the president's staff; he was fascinated. Against the odds and without any connections, Hershman decided to pursue a White House internship.

He not only got an interview but was offered the job – only to have to decline the opportunity from his hospital bed. Hershman had been seriously injured in a motorcycle crash, which resulted in 10 different surgeries and two years of crutches.

"At 21 you feel life is over as you know it. But they said they would keep my resumé on file. ... And a year later, out of the blue, the phone rings – my mom picks it up and thinks it's a joke. It's the incoming Bush administration wanting to know if I wanted to come out and interview for a full-time position in communications."

Soon he was on his way to D.C. as a staff member for the first President George Bush and beginning his own path to public service.

Off and running, eventually

After starting out on the bottom of the ladder, Hershman was promoted to one of only several individuals responsible for President Bush's personal communications.

"Not speeches, but personal VIP correspondence, some policy

messages, a little bit of everything," he remarks.

A poignant instance stands out more than two decades later.

"I wrote the president's remarks that were delivered as part of a eulogy for the soldiers from Pennsylvania that were killed in a scud missile attack in Saudi Arabia. And to write the remarks, sit there, think of the gravity of what you were doing and have them helicoptered to Camp David so he could take a look at them. It was an amazing experience."

Hershman made a point to take it all in.

"George Bush had enormous respect for his staff. He expected excellence from them, but he treated everyone like family. It was a great learning experience for a 20-something about the importance of public service and how it should be done."

Hershman jokes, "I often referred to myself as a bug speck on the windshield of the White House. You didn't amount to much, but the view was great. I had the opportunity to learn from the president and his staff; it was really life-changing."

After a few years in Washington, Hershman felt the tug to move back home, in part to help run the family farm in Jasper County. He also returned to become the first staff member for what became Steve Buyer's successful congressional campaign in 1992.

"I literally quit the White House (to work) for a congressional challenger for free because I believed in the power of ideas," Hershman stresses. "It was a campaign no one thought he had a chance to win. It was another tremendous learning experience and the hardest I ever worked."

Eight years into being Buyer's district director, Hershman decided to become a candidate himself for state Senate District 7.

He talked over the pros and cons with his wife of 68 days, Lisa, while out for a Sunday drive.

"I thought, you know, the worst thing that could happen is I could lose. And that's not the end of the world. ... (But) I ended up winning and I've been here ever since."

Standing out

In his first term in the Senate, Hershman was the youngest member by almost a decade. He fondly recalls being seated in the back next to current Senate leader David Long, with whom he became fast friends.

Long calls Hershman an "outstanding legislator" from the onset and counts on him to speak on the Senate floor in critical situations.

"I can turn to him and say, 'Brandt we need you.' He can step out of his chair and go up and speak on any issue and argue it effectively. He's probably our best, most gifted speaker in the Senate, and we have a lot of talented speakers. So that's saying a lot. ... He can ad lib and be able to argue a point of a difficult piece of legislation about as well as anyone I've ever seen."

Indiana Chamber President Kevin Brinegar says Hershman is "one of the more thoughtful and thorough legislators that I've had the privilege of working with. He likes complex, even controversial issues; he dives in and does his research."

Hershman acknowledges he likes to immerse himself in the topics at hand.

"A lot of the issues that we face are increasingly complicated. So I've always been one of those policy-oriented folks who really enjoys sweating the details. Because when I go to my colleagues – on both sides of the aisle –



Hershman calls himself a jack of all trades on the Senate Republican leadership team, but with particular focus on policy and message development.



Hershman on entrepreneurship and innovation: "It's vital that Indiana be able to market itself and tell its story on a national and international basis in order to attract the attention and investment that we need to turn those young minds' great ideas into Indiana jobs."

to ask for their support, I want them to have confidence in knowing that someone has done the due diligence."

That also means keeping on open mind.

"I sit down and try to look at the arguments on both sides of any given issue and move the rhetoric to the side," Hershman explains. "I dig into it to see what the impact's going to be on Indiana."

"There are a number of issues that are very easily demagogued; that has occurred over the years, and it's unfortunate when the public debate devolves down to those 10-second sound bites. What you really need to do is ask the question: What's it going to make Indiana look like in the future?"

And you need to be receptive to taking questions and listening to feedback as well.

That ability is what has most impressed Tom Easterday, executive vice president for Subaru of Indiana Automotive (SIA), which sits in Lafayette in Hershman's district.

"The senator has always been open to listening regardless of the topic. It may not be a specialty area of his, but he's still very willing to listen. And on his areas of expertise, he's very open to suggestions. He always gives very thorough explanations if we have questions too."

"I've always had a great deal of respect for that. And it's not just to a big company like SIA. I've seen him interact with (various) constituents and do what I think is a fabulous job of responding and giving straightforward answers."

Crossing the finish line

As Long puts it, Hershman has "carried a lot of meaty bills" to a successful conclusion during his time at the Statehouse.

Two pieces of legislation Hershman is most proud of are lowering the corporate tax rate to less than 5% by 2022, which happened two sessions ago, and instituting widespread telecommunications reform (2006).

Both remedies took the state from the cellar to near the top nationwide. The telecom situation was particularly dire: Indiana had the worst environment in the country for such investment.

"Legislation was stalling for a number of years before, and I told those who were pushing that to put Sen. Hershman in charge of the bill; let him carry it. He'll get the job done – I can almost guarantee that. You have to have the right spokesperson for this issue. He was exactly that," Long recalls.

"As a result, broadband has been brought to a lot of people around the state that wouldn't have had it otherwise. Some \$500 million in additional investment has occurred. And it's been a bill he's spoken on around the country. Indiana's telecom reform was a cutting-edge bill that's been duplicated in a lot of other states."

Adds Hershman, "Indiana was the second state in the nation behind Texas to deregulate telecommunications, and we did so more extensively than Texas did."

"Indiana competes very well in broadband speeds and access. Every single thing the proponents of deregulation said will happen, has happened. Every single thing the opponents of deregulation has said would happen, has not."

In 2015, Hershman's efforts on another long-sought effort proved invaluable. This time it was the repeal of the state's prevailing wage statute for public construction projects. While the bill's authors worked the overall measure, Hershman rolled up his sleeves and focused on improving the local bidding component.

Offers Long, "We made that bidding process substantially better. And that was specifically because of Sen. Hershman's work on that."

Tax master

But it's in the tax arena where Hershman, the chair of the Senate Tax and Fiscal Policy Committee, has repeatedly left his mark.

"I tell people I can't promise you that you won't pay any tax. There are things that you expect and reasonably so from your government. What I'm going to tell you is that I'm going to try and collect that tax in as fair a fashion as possible, I'm going to ask you for as little of your money as possible, and I'm going to do so in a manner that helps us to compete and win for economic growth down the road," he says.

In the last 10-plus years, Indiana has moved from 38th in the nation in business climate to eighth, according to the non-partisan Tax Foundation.

"And we are still moving up. To be able to move up 30 places during the worst recession in recent history says a lot about what we are able to do as Hoosiers, to drive for more efficient government, to be willing to be more competitive and make tough choices," Hershman shares.

"I helped lead some of those fights but I have to give credit to my colleagues on both sides of the aisle. Nothing happens in the General Assembly without consensus being built. We were able to build a bipartisan consensus that we wanted to compete and win. Now we are doing it."

Brinegar, however, is quick to point out that Hershman has been at the center of Indiana's improvements.

"He has been absolutely instrumental for a number of years in improving Indiana's business tax climate. He's been involved in reducing the corporate tax rate from what was the sixth highest in the country to what will soon be phased down to the second lowest in the country."

"This year, he was the author and chief conferee on several pieces of critical tax legislation. In particular, the elimination of the so-called 'throwback rule', which allowed Indiana to tax out-of-state sales if

they were not taxed elsewhere. Removing that was very important to businesses,” Brinegar declares.

“He also took the lead on eliminating the personal property tax for some 150,000 small businesses (that have \$20,000 or less in equipment). They now no longer have the burden of inventorying their furnishings and their equipment, and then filing a tax return or paying someone to file a tax return for which sometimes the bill was \$5 or less.”

For Hershman, it all comes back to his overall mindset: “Part of the thing that holds people back from starting a business in this state are regulatory headaches. If we make it easy to start a business here, more people will make the leap.”

As he reflects on his fiscal role, Hershman shares a story that epitomizes his approach.

“It takes going through a lot of what is pretty dense material. (Statehouse reporter) Maureen Hayden wrote an article, two years ago now, when I was chairing the Tax Commission. She said something to the effect that we were wading through all these tough fiscal issues and the only one in the room that had a gleeful enjoyment of it was me,” he chuckles.

“If you’re doing what you love, then it’s not work. I don’t always love the regulatory morass we’re wading through, but what I do love is the outcome and I’m very excited about what we’ve seen happen in the state and a lot of it has been due to the improvements we’ve made in the business climate.”

Aspirations and passions

In 2010, Hershman threw his hat into the ring for his former boss’ seat in Congress. He finished second in a crowded Republican primary to Todd Rokita. But that doesn’t necessarily mean Hershman is looking for round two any time soon.

“I honestly don’t know. I am very interested in moving the state forward and I’m honored with what we’ve been able to do here. I’m also in a position of leadership (now).”

“The real question is whether there’s a real opportunity to add a positive voice for change in Washington. Because Congress and the White House have been so ineffective in reaching consensus and moving this country forward. And I think we’ve set a very good example here in Indiana as to how, even in very difficult circumstances, to advance the ball,” he concludes.

Hershman emphasizes just how well the state body works together.

“Over half the legislation that came out of the Senate last session was unanimous. That shows our ability to work through partisan differences and do some very innovative things to advance our state. If I felt there was an



A thirst for knowledge was instilled in Hershman by his mother, a teacher. That trait is evident in his thorough, deliberate approach to learning all aspects of a public policy.

opportunity to do that representing Indiana at the federal level and the opportunity presented itself, it could be a very interesting challenge.”

That sense of moving the needle truly resonates for Hershman.

“One of the most satisfying things about being in the General Assembly is the ability to take an idea from concept to fruition in a period of months. If someone calls me today and identifies a problem for their family or their business, we have the ability to turn that into law and change the course of our state in under a year’s time.”

He also has kept his desire for personal growth and continual learning. Several years ago, Hershman decided to “act upon 25 years of procrastination and go back to law school.

“I did so at night, during a budget year session. I completed all but one hour of the four-year program in three years. It’s a good reminder that you can do things you don’t think you have time for.”

Hershman’s communications and legal

backgrounds dovetail with the business process management consultancy he has with his wife, who serves as the lead. She is a former senior executive for a Fortune 100 company and an internationally published author.

But it’s far from all serious business with Hershman. Both Long and Easterday mention his wicked, dry sense of humor.

Hershman has an adventurous side too. He has a pilot’s license and likes downhill skiing.

The senator is passionate about his family – he still is involved in running the farm – his two rescue Rottweilers and, naturally, public service.

Hershman shares the Indiana Chamber’s vision that our state has so much to offer and its potential is limitless.

“Public service is a difficult profession in this day and age. But it’s also vital. Somebody has to be willing to step forward to help develop that potential. I’ve been particularly privileged by the people in my district to serve on their behalf, and I’m proud of what we’ve been able to do for Indiana.”