

Birch Bayh-Richard Lugar

**GOVERNMENT
LEADER OF
THE YEAR**

THE BEAT GOES ON

MESSMER PLAYS THE RIGHT
NOTES FOR SMALL BUSINESS

By **Matt Ottinger**

State Senator and Majority Floor Leader Mark Messmer was sweeping the floors and doing odd jobs in his father's firm in Jasper at a young age.

He would ultimately return to the family business, Messmer Mechanical, in 1988 armed with an engineering degree from Purdue University.





Collaboration has been key between Senate President Rodric Bray (left) and Sen. Mark Messmer. Bray values Messmer's ability to navigate difficult legislation and enjoys their partnership in representing Hoosiers at the Statehouse.

"When I was (in high school), we were a smaller company and my dad said his friends who were large mechanical contractors told him we needed an engineer in the company to move into the commercial and industrial markets effectively," he recalls. "I didn't really know what an engineer did."

Now an owner of Messmer Mechanical, he could see the looming threat last year that COVID-19 could have on Hoosier businesses in terms of safety and economics. In response, he authored Senate Enrolled Act 1 to protect Indiana businesses that were following proper safety protocols from frivolous lawsuits (pertaining to employees potentially contracting COVID-19).

"I viewed (the bill) as our most significant jobs protection measure," Messmer says, noting the impact on small businesses like his, which employs around 50. "Large businesses could probably bear the brunt of a civil lawsuit and absorb it, but the smaller the business – a mom and pop shop up to our size – just the cost of defending yourself in what would be a frivolous lawsuit, it would be tough for some to take that hit.

"Just the cost of discovery and attorneys to fight your way through something like that; it would be crippling," he asserts.

Indiana Chamber President and CEO Kevin Brinegar agrees.

"Senator Messmer's leadership on this issue was especially noteworthy as it provides peace of mind for businesses of all sizes and types," Brinegar states. "The law came as a great relief to businesses – particularly smaller businesses – across the state. That's the reason this was our top legislative priority this session."

Messmer's support of broadband expansion, renewable energy and other small business-oriented measures also are commended by Indiana Chamber executives.

A quick conversation from this past legislative session has stayed with Brinegar. "Senator Messmer said, 'I don't need to be here, but I come here to make a difference and in doing so, I'm making a big sacrifice because I'm spending time away from my grandchildren who are very, very important to me.'

"And that just struck me – that this is someone who's very dedicated, a true public servant, who is making a sacrifice. He's not there for the notoriety. He comes to the Statehouse from his home in Jasper to make a difference. And he is."

Into the fray

A work ethic imbued in him from early days and a desire to serve motivated Messmer to run for the Indiana House in 2008. Furthermore, he had a strong desire to remove the incumbent, who he felt was not appropriately representing the district.

"I was tired of emailing him, phone calling and writing him letters, so decided I would run against him," he states, adding the incumbent ultimately decided not to run for re-election.

Of chief concern was a desire to support Gov. Mitch Daniels' Major Moves program and facilitate the development of Interstate 69 in southern Indiana to spur connectivity and support the Naval Surface Warfare Center Crane Division – an installation that touches three Indiana counties. Daylight Savings Time was also an impetus.

"Whether you like changing your clocks or not, that allowed Indiana to compete for continued business development," Messmer affirms.

Changing houses

Messmer was elected to the Indiana Senate in 2014 and contrasts the nature of the two bodies, favoring the four-year election cycle over the more hectic two-year campaign interval in the House.

"Every time you go through an election, you get beat up by the other party and go through rigorous campaigns," he relays. "It's hard to get out of that high-intensity political sensitivity. You try to work in a bipartisan manner as much as you can but when you get beat up every two years, it's hard to heal quickly enough to have good decorum."

Messmer touts a "smoother" camaraderie in the Senate.

"I feel like every member of the Democrat Caucus is a personal friend of mine," he reveals. "The decorum in general is more deliberative and fits my personality style a little better."



Messmer has been pleasantly surprised by his ability to remedy challenges faced by individual constituents while in office and finds a great deal of satisfaction in improving their lives.

House Majority Floor Leader Matt Lehman knows Messmer quite well as the two have been roommates in downtown Indianapolis during legislative sessions since 2010. Lehman admires Messmer’s ability to stick to his convictions.

“We haven’t always agreed on the nuances of a piece of legislation, but he is willing to listen and have his opinion challenged,” Lehman relays. “But he is solid on his convictions and stands strong against the winds of change.”

Standing strong and remaining informed are critical, according to Messmer.

“I try to be thoughtful, reasonable and level-headed on policy statements,” he points out. “I do know hardcore Democrats who vote for me because even if they disagree with me on one issue, they agree on two-thirds of everything else. Just being consistent is important and you should do what you say you’re going to do.”

Lehman also asserts Messmer’s collegial nature isn’t confined to his Statehouse colleagues.

“He’s a quiet person who can push hard if need be,” he adds. “He is a man who is committed to his family, his church and to his community.”

The most rewarding aspect of being a state legislator is the ability to impact the lives of constituents, according to Messmer.

“For the first five years, I kept a diary of the things people would call about and

problems I was able to solve for people,” he recalls. “After about 500 entries, I just stopped writing everything down, but the pace doesn’t slow down. On a daily basis, you can really help people.”

In recent memory, he’s placed an emphasis on helping those who are victims of crimes. He relays the story of one constituent whose daughter was being groomed by an alleged sexual predator, which he believes laid the groundwork for victims’ rights updates by prosecutors the following year.

Messmer also believes Indiana’s approach to having a part-time legislature lends itself to positive outcomes.

“In Indiana, we do it the right way with a general assembly that requires people to have a regular job – or be retired from a job,” Messmer says. “People need to be in the world for a while – learn what it means to pay your bills and raise a family.”

A broad array of experiences lends itself to thoughtful leadership, he concludes.

“We need people keenly interested in serving as a public service commitment. Campaigning doesn’t sound like it would be fun, but it is when you get out and meet people one on one.”

No place like home

When asked about his upbringing, Messmer states, “I am blessed to have had the opportunity to grow up in Jasper.”

He calls it “its own economic hub” due

to its history and vast array of employers.

“The community was built with German historical roots, a hard work ethic and a high degree of entrepreneurship,” Messmer imparts. “People show up to work and they want to work hard.”

Furthermore, he enjoys the occasional inquiry from those passing through: “Where is the bad part of town?”

“There is no bad part of town,” Messmer reports. “The community has always had an impeccable appearance to it.”

He also credits an abundance of volunteer organizations filled with people “willing to step up to help one another.”

When asked what issues are most pressing for his area, he responds – from the perspective of both a business owner and legislator – with “manpower.”

“We successfully hire young kids out of high school with the network of family and friends and employees, but it’s a struggle for everybody,” he admits. “The entry level hotel, restaurant and tourism industries are hit the hardest.”

The weight of the pandemic is pressing on parents and the educational system as well.

“Access and the cost of daycare are a prohibition on folks to get into the job market,” Messmer says. “The quicker we get stability across the board from COVID-19, the better.”

Connectivity is also a critical piece in southern Indiana for education, employment



Living a harmonious life is a focus for Messmer as he shares his musical talents at church and other venues. His faith and family are the forces that drive his passion for shaping policy to benefit Hoosiers.

and more, which has made it a focus for Messmer. He’s worked on broadband infrastructure and grant funding initiatives in recent years.

“In rural areas, in that last mile of installation, the costs are so prohibitive with a low density of customers in underserved areas,” he conveys. “The only way it will happen is with grant dollars,

whether it be state or federal.”

Steadfast and faithful

Messmer’s Roman Catholic faith not only shapes his approach to running a business and helping his constituents, but also provides a conduit for him to share his love of music.

He can be found playing the upright acoustic bass at church – something he’s done for more than 20 years. The acoustic guitar and trumpet are among other musical endeavors, and he also sings.

“I’m not a great soloist, but can harmonize pretty well,” he qualifies.

His faith also begets a family-oriented, ethical atmosphere at Messmer Mechanical, where facilitating family participation is a priority.

“We support taking time off for family, and our employees are empowered to make decisions and do what’s right for the customer,” he shares. “Customer satisfaction is first and foremost. Sometimes it may cost us money on projects but in the long run you build a reputation of doing a first-class job and build long-term customers who keep coming back.”

These attributes render Messmer an admired member of his caucus and worthy honoree of this award.

“I think (Messmer) knows everyone in southern Indiana by name,” Lehman remarks. “If you want to be a servant of the people, he is a good example to follow. A principled, good listener and a friend to all.”

He touts his parents for providing positive influences during his upbringing and credits the business prowess of his wife, Kim, as serving as constant inspiration as well. She’s earned 13 pink Cadillacs as a direct sales executive for Mary Kay Cosmetics, having started in 1985.

“I started going to her national events and I read the autobiography of Mary Kay Ash and then enjoyed being around that company,” Messmer explains. “I’ve learned from her business philosophy: Don’t do things that conflict with your faith or put your family in jeopardy. God first; family second; career third.”

Messmer, a father of four and grandfather of five, explains he and his wife support and encourage each other in a healthy way.

“She’s made me a better husband and we try to work together, pray together and grow in our faith together.” ■