

Former student, now senator, finds legislature life 'exciting'

By Terry Howard
and Shelley Smith

Nicknamed John-Boy Walton, freshman senator Don Wesely said he feels the hectic pace of the Nebraska Legislature is one of the most exciting experiences of his life.

Wesely, 24, a 1977 UNL graduate, said that even though his job with the Legislature is something he "wouldn't trade for anything," he still wishes he had more free time.

"Let's see, free time. I went to a movie last week," he said.

Wesely has introduced 10 of the 535 bills before the Legislature and has cosponsored 10 others.

He said his bills cover a wide range of issues, including energy, and problems of the mentally retarded, handicapped and elderly.

Wesely was born on a farm in David City and moved to northeast Lincoln when he was five. He said he still has many relatives that live on farms in David City and has benefitted from them greatly.

"I was able to cross the boundaries from the farm to the city. I still have ties with these people and they have given me an accurate rural interest," he said.

Wesely's father worked at Goodyear Tire Co. for 15 years, and Wesely said his father's experience with strikes and unions also has given him a background in the labor area.

By living 20 years in the district which he represents, Wesely said he has been able to "react naturally" to how his constituents feel on an issue.

Wesely said he was asked to run for the Legislature by friends in October 1977, but didn't actually declare his candidacy until January 1978.

"I was working on a master's degree in history and then planning on going to law school," Wesely said. "Friends encouraged me to run and I realized I could be a very effective person in the Legislature—in a positive way."

He said the job isn't as tough as he expected but said he realized that every freshman senator is at a great disadvantage because of his lack of experience.

"Right now I have a very small fraction of the potential I might have," he said, but added that his effectiveness will increase with time.

"The reason you become effective and a leader is that you work hard," he said. "If you don't work, you don't get anywhere."

He said the number of bills introduced makes it impossible to study thoroughly each bill, and said he spends a lot of his free time just thinking about what each bill means.

"I'm the kind of guy who likes to review both sides of an issue," he said. "I ask questions and after feeling I have heard both sides, then I make a decision."

He credits his good-working relationship with the other senators to his low-key approach in problem solving.

He said his approach is to present an idea, ask to have it considered and then look for the best way to reach the goal.

So far, Wesely's approach seems to be working. He was elected chairman of the enroll and review committee and, of his four bills that have had hearings, only one of them had even minor opposition.

After the legislative session is over Wesely said he plans to "sit and relax," for a while, but then plans to jump right back into legislative issues.

"I've already blocked off about half of my time this summer to spend on legislative duties," he said.

Wesely was hired by Geis Investment and Insurance Co. last year and then given

a leave of absence when the session began. He said he also plans to earn some money this summer to supplement the \$4,800-a-year senatorial job.

Wesely is not married but said he tries to keep up his social life between attending dinners and receptions.

And, he said, he is not sure what he'll be doing in the future.

"I've been talked to already about higher political office, but I think it's out of the question," Wesely said.

He added that the voters would decide whether he'd be back after this four year term.

"What I'm learning is that the Legislature needs people with experience. It needs representatives with experience to provide some leadership."



Photo by Kathy Chenault

Freshman Sen. Don Wesely confers with a veteran, Sen. Frank Lewis.

'Friends encouraged me to run and I realized I could be a very effective person in the Legislature.'

Study . . .

Continued from page 3.

"A bicameral could outperform a unicameral if the latter senators had a negative view," Sittig said.

Nebraska's Unicameral, the once radical departure from the American two-house system, has become part of the tradition of the state, Sittig said, so that today "you can't find a single responsible person in Nebraska who wants to go back to a bicameral."

Sittig said there has been no official bill proposed in the unicameral, no petition started and no prominent spokesman who has ever advocated returning to a bicameral legislature.

However, in the last forty years, there have been contentions over the non-partisan nature of the Legislature, Sittig said. Richard Marvel, the speaker of the Legislature, said he originally was in favor of

non-partisanship, but has changed his mind.

"I was perturbed that 60 percent of the bills introduced are passed because there is no opposition to the bill," Marvel said.

Partisanship could serve to rally opposition to a bill, he said.

"I'm willing to try it (partisanship) out, but it will take a constitutional amendment to change it," Marvel said.

Eric Sandberg, co-coordinator of state Sen. Don Wesely's door-to-door canvassing last fall, said the non-partisan nature of the Legislature makes name recognition of candidates important.

"Without parties, theoretically you have to start from scratch to build a campaign organization," Sandberg said. "Theoretically, with parties you already have the cam-

aign organization in place once you win the nomination of the party."

One of the advantages of non-partisanship, Sandberg said, is that it makes it easier to build a broad power base, and easier for Democratic candidates to appeal to Republicans for their votes and vice versa.

While it is possible the state will return to partisanship, its one-house nature appears to be permanently established, Sittig said.

Sittig said it would take a wretched performance on the part of the senators in the Legislature before people would "swerve from tradition" and vote to return to a two-house legislature. Something like Watergate would do the trick, he said.

"Barring anything like that," Sittig said, "the Unicameral is as firmly established as it can be in this state."