



Anuzis brings a different background to state GOP's top job

2/3/2005, 5:40 p.m. ET

By KATHY BARKS HOFFMAN

The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — The Michigan Republican Party is on the verge of being led by a Harley-riding former Democrat who barely spoke English until the first grade.

Saulius "Saul" Anuzis, who grew up in Detroit in a blue-collar Democratic family that immigrated from Lithuania, is about to become the GOP's next chairman.

Anuzis, 45, wasn't initially interested in succeeding Betsy DeVos, a major GOP donor and fund-raiser who's stepping down after leading the party the past two years.

But in a contest that at times had candidates popping in and out of the race faster than you could say "red states," Anuzis has pulled enough party leaders and grass-roots activists into his camp to make his election at Saturday's state GOP convention all but inevitable.

"I'm pretty satisfied with the broad range of support we've been able to garner statewide," Anuzis — pronounced ah-NEW-zis — told The Associated Press during a recent interview. "I want a united party."

His switch to GOP politics began officially while he was a student at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where he started the College Republicans club in 1979 after someone started a group supporting Massachusetts Sen. Ted Kennedy's Democratic presidential bid.

He left a few credits short of graduating, going on to manage the campaign of Sylvia Skrel for a special state House election in Livonia.

But his rise in GOP politics didn't really get under way until he hooked up with a young farmer from the opposite side of the state, a Kent County state representative named Dick Posthumus.

Posthumus hired Anuzis to work on the House communications staff, then made him his campaign manager when he ran for the Senate in 1982.

The assignment turned out to be something of a culture shock for Anuzis. His first day on the job, he found Posthumus at his farm with his hand clutched in the mane of a halterless horse that had gotten loose. Anuzis had no idea what to do when Posthumus, dressed in a suit and late for a meeting, told him to take the horse back to the barn.

"I'm a city kid from Detroit. I'd never seen a horse up that close," Anuzis says.

Fortunately, Posthumus' wife showed up, relieved him of the horse, and let Anuzis move into the family's basement for the length of the campaign.

Posthumus won that race, and Anuzis served as the new senator's administrative assistant, moving up to chief of staff when Posthumus became Senate majority leader in 1991.

Soon after, Anuzis decided it was time to move on. He'd twice run unsuccessfully for a House seat in Eaton County and, during a bruising fight, nearly succeeded in getting the state GOP to nominate former New York congressman Jack Kemp for president in 1988 rather than Vice President George H.W. Bush. Bush won the nomination, but Anuzis attended the Republican National Convention that year as a Kemp delegate.

In 1992, he started the first of two telecommunications companies he has owned over the past 13 years. He sold the first one in 2000, and now runs Quick Connect USA.

He thought his days in politics were over. But then he got a call late last fall suggesting he consider running for state chairman. At first he declined. But once he got in, he moved quickly, making hundreds of phone calls, crisscrossing the state and lining up support.

He says his time away from politics has been a healthy break rather than a reason he shouldn't run the party.

"We talk about family values, and I went out and lived them," he says. "Instead of going to Republican meetings and traveling around the state, I started going to Boy Scout meetings and coaching football."

Those ties to his family and to his heritage are important to Anuzis. The first in his family to be born in the United States, he has stayed close to his Lithuanian roots. His wife of 19 years, Lina, also is of Lithuanian descent, and all four of their children speak Lithuanian and have Lithuanian names: Matas, 16, Tadas, 14, Vytis, 12, and Marius, 9. A staunch Catholic, he sends his children to Catholic schools.

He also speaks with pride of the Righteous Among the Nations award his parents and paternal grandparents received from Israel's national Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, for helping three young girls escape from a Jewish ghetto and make their way from Lithuania to Estonia during World War II. One of those girls, now grown, nominated them for the award.

Anuzis tells a story of how his family was resettled after the war, first in a displaced persons camp in Germany, then in the basement of a church in Brooks, Minn. There, the priest gave his father a set of 19 books on how to become an electrician. He first had to learn to speak English, but he mastered both the language and the skill.

The family moved to Detroit when his father got a job at Fisher Body, joining a neighborhood filled with Lithuanians.

"I didn't learn to speak English until the first grade. I almost flunked out," Anuzis recalls.

These days, he spends his free time enjoying one of the most American of symbols: a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. He owns a 2003 Road King the company put out for its 100th anniversary, and teams up with his wife — who owns her own Harley — on rides that draw 55,000 motorcyclists.

Anuzis says his blue-collar background is similar to that of many Michigan Republicans, despite the party's country club image. He has been a Teamster, joining the union while he worked at UPS to put himself through college.

Tom Shields of Lansing-based Marketing Resource Group says Anuzis reminds him of former GOP Chairman David Doyle, who now works at MRG and brought a lot of nuts-and-bolts experience to the chairman's job.

"You saw opposition basically fade off when Saul announced" he was running, Shields says. "Everyone else had something they were not bringing to the table. With Saul you had the full package."

Anuzis knows it won't be easy running the Republican Party in a state that has voted for a Democratic presidential candidate four times in the past 16 years and where Democrats hold the governorship and both U.S. Senate seats.

But he thinks Gov. Jennifer Granholm and U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow can be beaten in 2006, and he's confident he can do what's necessary to help that happen.

"Republicans see a great opportunity," he says.

###