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An Advocate for Rural Wisconsin: Representative Edward Brooks Reflects

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Introduction

On August 22, 2018, legislative analysts Emma Gradian and Jillian Slaight interviewed Representative Edward “Ed” Brooks as part of the Legislative Reference Bureau’s oral history project. This project collects and preserves legislators’ stories and insights—especially those not recorded elsewhere—on the eve of their retirement.

Ed Brooks was born in Baraboo, Wisconsin, on July 1, 1942. He worked as a dairy farmer and advocated for the industry as a member and leader of dairy cooperatives. His career in government included a long tenure as a Town of Reedsburg supervisor from 1979 to 1985 and Town of Reedsburg chair from 1985 to 2019. In 2008, Brooks was elected to represent Assembly District 50, which he served until his retirement at the conclusion of the 2017–18 legislative session.

Despite his illness, Rep. Brooks graciously agreed to answer a series of questions about his time in local government, dairying and politics, and his decision to run for state office. He also spoke about his experiences in the legislature, including staffing, mentors, committee work, floor sessions, constituent contact, relationships with the media, bipartisanship, and his advocacy for rural communities. This publication summarizes and excerpts highlights from this interview.

Local government

Brooks explained that his foray into local government was not the product of concerted decision-making. Instead, a neighbor caught him unawares while he was milking cows:

I was milking cows one evening, and I couldn’t get away, and the neighbor came over and said he wanted to get off of the town board. He asked me if I’d consider running. And I talked to my wife . . . and we considered running. Again, it’s entry level, and he assured me the time commitments were probably half of what they really were—but that’s okay.

Brooks ran unopposed for his seat on the Reedsburg Town Board because, as he put it, “town board is kind of like church council; there aren’t a lot of people who want the job.” He characterized local government as “low key,” while conceding that “politics at all levels have gotten perhaps a little more volatile.” During his tenure on the board, Brooks identified ATVs and UTVs as one of the most “hot button” issues, but described how residents on opposite sides of the issue heard each other out at the town board meeting:

We had a town hall. You’d think we had a reevaluation of all the property, and it came in a lot higher than people thought. But they came because they either were for or they were against it. There were people there that said, “Why would anybody want to ride a UTV?” And then there were also people there that said, “I’d like to answer that! Because it really is a family sport.” . . . The hospital administrator who doesn’t live in our township—he

was there because he's an ATV person . . . So it kind of took the "bite" away from those who were opposed to it. The main people that were opposed to it were birders. They didn't want noise and distraction scaring birds, and so they had their say. When it was all said and done, it was passed by the town board on a two to one vote.

Brooks ultimately served several decades on the board after first serving in 1979. "We had no notion of staying this long in town government," he reflected, but he continued to serve because people in his community increasingly placed their trust in him.

Dairying and politics

Before becoming active in politics, Brooks became involved in Wisconsin Dairies Cooperative in 1977, and eventually became chairman of its board. Although the state assembly was not "on the radar" yet, his experiences in this context would lay the groundwork for his eventual candidacy:

It was kind of like the legislature. We have three assembly districts per senate district, and [in Wisconsin Dairies Cooperative], they had so many districts that would make up an executive committee district, and those executive committee districts, they would do a delegate meeting, where we'd meet with essentially 10 percent of the producers. It was kind of a good fit for when I decided—or was encouraged—to run for state office because my network had expanded statewide. I'm certainly not a statewide candidate, but it gave me the opportunity to meet a lot of additional farmers, say, in Monroe County, which is part of my district, or in Juneau County.

Brooks's involvement with Wisconsin Dairies Cooperative eventually brought him to the state capitol to testify on related legislation. "It was eye-opening," he remarked, particularly because he had not been to the capitol since grade school. Later, as vice chair of the National Milk Producers Board, he would also testify before Congress in Washington, DC, on legislation related to milk pricing. As Brooks explained, Jesse Ventura, then governor of Minnesota, was the focus of all attention at that hearing:

The room was packed, and I thought, "This is a pretty big deal for a little country boy!" But the governor, he testified, and had to stop and take a drink of milk halfway through. Again, the theatrics . . . I don't know if you're old enough to recall Jesse Ventura, but he was a professional [wrestler] that became governor of Minnesota. Again, a showman . . . He would pause his testimony, and take a drink of milk, and then when he finished, essentially the room cleared out. So we got to testify in front of Representative Charles Stenholm, who is from Texas, but he understood the dairy industry . . . He was a good listener, because he understood, and I think there's [a] couple other people that came and went. But again, most of them were there because the marquee player was Governor Ventura at that time.

Later in the interview, Brooks responded to a question about whether he still believed cooperatives were more effective than legislatures in raising the price of milk—a position he stated once in the 1990s. He answered by saying “there’s limits to what the state can do,” but admitted that milk pricing was a very complicated issue:

Farmers have always been marketplace people; they like to get their money in the marketplace. Individually, they think that they are the most efficient person, that they can survive somebody else who isn’t efficient. We hear all kinds of things about quotas and stuff like that, but the reality is most of the farmers don’t want quotas because when you have a quota, you cannot grow at a reasonable rate, and farmers generally like to produce. Production is not an issue; marketing is an issue right now because we’re overproducing. That’s a tribute to our members, our dairy farmers in the state and nationwide that are producing probably 4 percent more milk every year, they say, with fewer cows. To solve the dairy issue is really a marketplace thing. It can receive some help from Washington . . . but, again, the bottom line is most dairy farmers would prefer to get their money in the marketplace . . . It’s been a difficult thing, no denying it, it’s very difficult.

Running for state office

Asked to describe his political outlook before running for state office, Brooks said “you could always describe me as a conservative.” He added that he was “not necessarily a card-carrying Republican,” and tended to “vote for the person” rather than the party. Above all, his experience in local government shaped his outlook on government more broadly:

Smaller government got to be more important as I went through my career and can see the growth in government. I can see how efficient the town government was because we were frugal. We didn’t have a lot of money to spend, and that determined how frugal we had to be.

Brooks considered running for an assembly seat from time to time, but declined to do so for various reasons. In 1991, he explained, “our children were younger, and it wasn’t a good fit,” so he opted to support the candidacy of Sheryl Albers. Years later, when Albers retired in 2009, the seat opened up again:

I was kind of enjoying farming. I was bouncing across the field. We didn’t have cell phones at that time, and at the end of the day, I got home, and I checked the answering machine, which we did have—pretty high-tech for those days. But there had been phone calls on there from, say, John Manske, Dave Ward, the [Wisconsin] Federation [of Cooperatives], saying, “You know, Sheryl’s not running . . . Have you ever thought about running?” Well, I hadn’t really up until that point. I was happy with my life. And then I think it was Dan

Paulson, he gave me a call—he was president of Wisconsin Farm Bureau [Federation] at that time—and said, “Ed, there’s an open seat here. We’d like to see if you’d consider running.” . . . I think Gary Tauchen might have called me . . . and encouraged me to think about it. At the end of the day, when I sat down, it was kind of like a conspiracy.

Brooks did not take the decision lightly. Before answering, he decided to “find out what the job was all about.” A key part of this process was conferring with Representative Gary Tauchen and his staff member, Craig Arrowood. Most importantly, he consulted his wife, Barbara. Asked if the decision to run was a “family decision,” Brooks replied, “Oh, it had to be.” He continued to describe Barbara’s role in his political career:

See, she’s been the First Lady in the town of Reedsburg all these years, so she’s pretty much in the loop. She doesn’t make decisions, but she kind of knows what is happening. She fields phone calls and relays them to me if they need a call back. But if she knows what the person is calling about, and she can resolve it, she does that. And she’s done the same as far as the assembly. We get calls at home because the biggest city in our district is where we live . . . If we get calls at home, she’ll talk to people, and take a message, convey the message to me, or nag me until I give them a call back.

In his first state-level campaign, Brooks faced primary challengers. By his account, he differentiated himself by focusing on his core beliefs: “It was just a matter of saying, ‘Here’s what I believe in. I believe in smaller government when possible.’” One of the most contentious issues during the primary race was a disagreement over state highway funds:

At the time, I think, the state had been raiding our highway funds. That wasn’t really acceptable. Eventually, we got the law changed, the constitution changed to say that, “If it’s in the highway fund, it stays in the highway fund.” At that point in time, it was not . . . I was accused of being in favor of raising taxes by one of my opponents. But if you really drilled down to what the answer was, I said that “if highway money went to the highway purposes, I could support indexing,” because I always felt that indexing was a decent way to keep up with rising costs of building highways and collecting revenue to do that. But he accused me of favoring gas tax increases, and I was—if it were qualified, so the money that went in, stayed in. It wasn’t a big hurdle to overcome that.

First session in the legislature

Brooks described his first session in the legislature as humbling. “First off,” he began, “it’s an awesome building,” especially from the vantage point of East Washington Avenue:

You’re kind of learning as you walk, more or less. Everything is new. We were in the minority then, so we didn’t have a lot of proposals of our own that were going to be advanced . . . The first term I think was probably a good learning curve.

That session, as in later sessions, Brooks mostly commuted to and from the capitol, rather than staying in Madison overnight:

If you drive fast, it's an hour and fifteen minutes. If you drive slow, it's an hour and fifteen minutes. There's no changing Highway 12. It's still an hour and fifteen minutes. I personally sleep better on my own pillow. I like to get caught up on my personal mail at home and stuff. So it just generally worked out that I would drive back and forth. Now, we would stay over if the weather was bad . . . or sometimes we would have—in those days—all-night sessions.

When it came to staffing, Brooks said he sought experience and maturity above all else. Terri Sue Griffiths had worked for his predecessor and met Brooks for an interview. She was not from a “rural setting,” but had worked for a rural legislator and knew the legislative process well:

I was looking for somebody who had been in the building, who was mature, and who would essentially keep me out of trouble. There are a lot of bills you can sign on to, but some of them, if you drill down, you probably don't want to. Bills can change after you sign on; that's a risk you take . . . Terri had been in the building. She had worked for Representative Steve Freese, when he was Speaker . . . and then she worked for Sheryl when Sheryl took over . . . But I hired her, and it was a good hire. She was with me for I think seven years and then she moved to the senate because they had more flexibility in their pay schedule. It was a bittersweet moment.

Later, Brooks added that Griffiths's experience in the legislature translated to “contacts on the other side” that helped him make progress on bills. Despite her help navigating the legislature, some circumstances caught him off guard:

I come from a rural district, which is always competitive. Other [legislators are] in non-contested seats, and they will help you campaign—which seemed really thoughtful. But then after the election, you find out that they would like your support so that they can run for one of the positions in the caucus . . . The conflict comes maybe when both candidates have been there helping you, and you're a first-term person. You kind of have to look at their background, at their resume, and that sort of thing and decide who you're going to support for leadership.

Asked about being in the minority during the 2009–10 session, Brooks answered, “I was an old enough person to understand that life isn't necessarily fair, and you don't get everything you want.” He characterized the dynamic of that first session, 2009–10, as follows: “Liberals wanting to spend and conservatives not wanting to.” Against that backdrop, he described his first experience of the budget process as “frustrating” because the budget seemed to “[come] out of a dark closet” with respect to taxes:

It was frustrating because . . . it was not what I signed up for, from the standpoint of raising taxes. So we did vote “no” on a lot of stuff. It wasn’t partisan; it was “this isn’t what we signed up for.” I think we were kind of vindicated later on when the next election, the legislature flipped, essentially. There was no redistricting or nothing like that. It was just that people of the state of Wisconsin didn’t like the direction that we were going. So they made the change, and the four of us that came in our class of ’08 or ’09—me, Ripp, Spanbauer, and Knodl—the four of us got a lot of fellow colleagues at that point because the numbers just turned around substantially.

Mentors

Representative Brooks identified several mentors, formal and informal, who helped him navigate his early sessions in the legislature:

Senator [Jerry] Petrowski was a representative at the time, and he was assigned as a mentor to me. We’re still good friends, even though he moved to the senate. But he would take me out to the DNR distribution center and get me loaded up on coloring books and these nice, little yardsticks that . . . are plastic but they’re adhesive on one side, so you can put them in your boat when you measure fish . . . So we stocked up on that because people like that stuff. So when we’re out in our district and see a gun shop or a bait shop, we’d stop in and say, “Would you like a few of these things for your customers that have boats?” He also took me over to DOT, where they have road maps, because again, people like maps. He was a good mentor. And again, if we had a legislative issue that Terri and I couldn’t figure out, we’d sit down with Jerry and talk [it] through.

Early on, Petrowski was “inspiring” to Brooks because the size of his district required hard work and energy. Informally, Representative Keith Ripp also became a mentor and confidante because, as Brooks explained, “our backgrounds were quite similar.” In an environment where “you have to be careful how you chose your friends,” Brooks said, “I always trust Keith.”

Committee work

Twice during the interview, Brooks referred to committees as “where the heavy lifting gets done.” (By comparison, he described floor sessions as “where the theatrics happen.”) He underscored the continuity of committee meetings, where “the issues were still the same” from year to year, regardless of which party was in the majority:

The committee is where you can talk things through, quiz the author, and if you think of something that maybe the author didn’t, you can ask if he’d be amenable to some amendments—things like that. The committee process—even in the minority—I didn’t feel was

unfair or anything . . . On corrections, one year later, or the next term, a lot of the players were still the same, except we were in the majority, they were in the minority, and the issues were still the same. Whether there's wearing ankle bracelets for people that have to be monitored, or whether it's for truth and sentencing or whatever . . . There were issues that remained the same . . . and the [players], we just changed roles.

In this setting, he noted, chairpersons exercise some “subtle” power, i.e., to hear or not hear bills, but primarily serve as mediators of discussions. Brooks added that he was “kind of naïve” about the bill process—especially how the “mechanics” varied from decision-making in local government:

Coming from town government, we take care of things usually in one night, and we know where we're at then. Here, you have a bill, and it's heard. Okay, then you have to talk to the committee chair to see if he'll give you an executive session. But in the meantime, you have to line up enough votes to pass because why have an executive session if it's not going to pass? In town government, you voted either up or down, and you're done. Here, you have all these supplemental steps, plus then you have to worry about the senate—and they're kind of unpredictable at times. [*Laughter.*]

Later, Brooks spoke in more detail about how his experience in local government shaped the questions he asked during committee hearings:

I always felt that being in town government kind of helped me with issues that would affect local government. Whether it be county, cities, villages, or towns—we knew what our shared revenue would be, or municipal aids—whatever the title you want to put to it, that sort of thing. I also felt that it gave me a little better understanding of some of the bills that were coming through, and allowed [me] to ask questions like, “How will this impact the village of Rock Springs or the village of Union Center? Or the town of Reedsburg?”

Brooks eventually chaired the Assembly Committee on Local Government. In this role, he said he established a “good working relationship” with various organizations like the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, the Wisconsin Counties Association, and the Wisconsin Towns Association. Here, he singled out the importance of inviting these groups to speak during informational committee hearings about issues of interest to them. It was a “good opportunity to tell us what their concerns were,” and he enjoyed their presentations.

Floor sessions

Brooks described himself as “generally a person of fewer words.” During floor debates, he said, “I'm not the first one to push my button”—especially if another member had already made the point he wished to make:

Redundancy is good in certain things, but in speaking it's kind of unnecessary. It's good to have backup systems of redundancy; if your power goes out, you should have a generator. But as far as saying the same thing that's been said three or four times before? There's not a lot of point in that—at least to my point of view.

He added that he often listened closely to others who, like him, were typically quieter, and mentioned Representative Gary Tauchen as an example. At the same time, he said he also admired and respected those who seemed more comfortable speaking “on the fly.” Here, he singled out Speaker Robin Vos and former Representative Peter Barca for their ability “to capture what they want to convey.” That said, he was skeptical that floor speeches influence the way members vote:

I don't think floor speeches happen a whole lot that change votes. There might be an instance or a couple times when somebody comes with a new fact that makes a difference, but, by and large, things are pretty well determined beforehand. It's not any disrespect to authors, or anything like that. It's just the way things work.

Although floor debate sometimes becomes acrimonious, the atmosphere in the assembly parlor is quite different: “All the anger has been left on the floor, and people are cordial.” As Brooks described it, the parlor is a space to meet constituents, answer phone calls, or share a meal with colleagues:

It's a different atmosphere. I mean, all the “What's the matter with you people? Why are you doing this?”—that seems to disappear when you go back in the back room. You dine together, you talk about family, you talk about other stuff, but politics generally are left on the floor—which is good. It should be.

Brooks emphasized the importance of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) in curtailing long floor sessions that lasted late into the night. To this end, he contrasted floor debate during his first session with floor debate later on:

Floor debate was essentially unlimited, and a lot of it was useless. Again, it's theatrics . . . If we didn't have Wisconsin Eye, we'd get done in a couple of hours. But there are people that [think], “Here's our opportunity to get up and show how we're advocating for our people.” Well, again, this is their opportunity, but really if they wanted to be serious about it, they would've acted in committee when it could've been dealt with more readily, because that's where the heavy lifting gets done . . . After we got the memoranda of understanding, we kind of knew what the boundaries were as far as, “We should be out of here by ten [o'clock].”

Before MOUs were implemented, Brooks commented, legislators might sometimes stall on “bad bills that you didn't want to pass for the ten o'clock news,” or rush on other bills “to make the six o'clock news.” MOUs put an end to that behavior, and allowed Brooks to “get home safely” on snowy evenings.

Constituent contact

According to Brooks, communicating with constituents was one of the most important—and time consuming—aspects of his job as a legislator:

Things happen in Madison, I do not deny that; you have committee meetings that you have to go to, you have scheduled appointments [when] you want to meet with constituents that are coming to Madison. But beyond that, you should be back in the district because that's where your constituents are. Also, weekend work too. I don't know if the general public realizes the time commitment if you do the job correctly. There are times when we're up very early in the morning because we have a radio broadcast to do or something like that. I think that some of my constituents just think, "Well, he just gets up and drives to Madison. That's all he does." No. There's a lot more work to be done in the district, and that's how it should be because that's where your electors are, that's where you find out what their issues are.

Later in the interview, Brooks joked that "every place I go, I'm on call because my constituents are there." He described people as "generally respectful"—even when telling him, "I don't like this, or I don't like that." Some interactions were particularly meaningful to him:

If I go for coffee at Greenwood's, I'm actually meeting with constituents. They might be talking about the golf course, or the meal someplace, or they might be talking about the Brewers or the Badgers. But it's a group of constituents. You can be approached anyplace. My wife and I went out for dinner in Wonewoc, and there were other people dining, and when we got up to leave, they thanked us. I thought that was neat because they didn't interrupt our meal or anything. They were gracious enough to say, "Keep [doing] what you're doing."

Other key interactions with constituents took place online; Brooks stressed the importance of contacting constituents with weekly or bimonthly e-mail updates. "That generates quite a bit of feedback," he explained. Many constituents considered these e-mails their "most popular source of information" about what's happening in the legislature.

Sometimes his constituents helped him develop legislation. Brooks described the origins of a "constituent-oriented" bill relating to the Reedsburg School District:

They had a threat called in that somebody was going to shoot up an elementary school. Well, they didn't think it was credible, but in a small community with children at stake, everything is credible. So they evacuated the schools, and the next day had all clear, but yet, I think, maybe eighty parents kept their kids home even though it was all clear. So it was a serious thing. They were able to catch the guy . . . and when they wanted to charge him, they found they could only charge him with something like a misdemeanor—something very

light compared to the cost. I mean you have the police department, and you have canine units, you probably have fire department to control traffic, you have to relocate kids . . . In the meantime, you have to keep the parents informed, so it is a big deal. It's not just some childish prank. The chief of police in Reedsburg called me, and we sat down. And there's a law in Minnesota—and, again, a lot of stuff we do is not original, it's based on stuff people do, we can claim it's original, but . . . they had one there that dealt with making it a felony if you call in a crime . . . And it became a higher level felony, say, if someone is hurt. Say there's a panic as they're evacuating, and someone became hurt or, heaven forbid, killed—then it became an even more serious felony . . . We worked with him, and since that time the amount of threats has been reduced. That's one example of legislation that came from our constituents.

Brooks also provided another example relating to semitrucks and roundabouts. Drivers were being ticketed for deviating from their lines in roundabouts, even though the length of their vehicles made staying in their lines impossible. In that instance, Brooks worked with trucking firms in his district, as well as with his colleague Senator Howard Marklein, who had also heard from constituents on this issue.

Sometimes constituents contacted Brooks with ideas that seemed unworkable. He stressed the importance of listening and carefully explaining an issue in those instances:

There are some people that put a lot of thought into things, but yet—probably because of my age, not wisdom—I know that they really aren't going to fly. There's too many other caveats that would come into play. But you're courteous, you don't get argumentative, but you would try to explain that, "Here's the other side of that issue."

Here, Brooks again singled out the role of his wife, Barbara, citing an instance when she listened to a constituent on the phone for nearly an hour as he talked through "a whole lot of issues."

Media

Asked how much attention he pays to the press, Brooks answered "a lot," and expanded on his relationship with journalists:

By and large, I respect the press. If they ask for a recall or something, I will return their call, and generally, I don't have an adversarial view of them. They're doing their job—or trying to, and my job is to convey to them what my thoughts are. If I don't do that, well, I guess that's on me . . . Sometimes they may editorialize a little bit—and it's a news article—but beyond that I have no issues. Locally, we want to cultivate the press. We want to be responsive if they have a question. If they want to do an article on something that we voted on, or something that's happening, we try to respond to them so that they can be timely in their job too.

After his office newsletter, Brooks said, print media and radio were the next most effective means of reaching constituents. (As an aside, he mentioned that he preferred print to electronic media, and said “we probably could [have a bird] because we have a lot of newspapers in our house that we could use in the bottom of a bird feeder.”) He noted that when his office sent out a press release, a number of “engaged” radio stations in his district would use the release or call his office for a live interview:

We have markets in Reedsburg, Richland Center, and Mauston, plus we do a once-a-month call-in with Adams-Friendship radio station, which kind of takes in the northern part of Juneau County. And the guy there that we talk to actually is a constituent; he lives in Camp Douglas. We’ve knocked on his door several times over the years. No, we have what I feel are decent relationships with our media people, whether it be print or audio.

Brooks stressed the importance of Wisconsin Eye, calling it a “good service” that allows people who live far from Madison to participate in the legislative process:

I had a friend who, for health reasons, was laid up, and there was a hearing with the DNR on deer hunting or something. He’s a big hunter, a sportsman, and so I said, “Dan, why don’t you watch Wisconsin Eye?” He did. He had a good experience, and he saw a lot of people testify that he knew . . . Part of it is enough outreach so that people understand it’s available.

He added that he hoped more cable companies throughout the state would carry Wisconsin Eye.

Supporting rural interests

Throughout the interview, Brooks emphasized his support for rural, agricultural communities as a key part of his legislative mission. “There aren’t a lot of aggies in there,” he said of the capitol, referring to legislators who are also farmers: “We sometimes struggle to get the recognition that we need because there are unique issues to rural [places] that urban [places] do not have.” As he explained later in the interview:

Rural areas are suffering. Rural schools are suffering. We don’t have the broadband that we need . . . We need education, which kind of ties into broadband.

Along with Representatives Travis Tranel and Romaine Quinn, Brooks “weeded through” some of the issues facing rural areas, and the trio decided to launch the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. To start, they drafted about eight bills separated into four categories. Then they asked other rural legislators to join them, and about twenty-five other legislators signed on to the “larger consortium.”

One thing that we had in the first group was the loan forgiveness for teachers in rural areas. Again, it was patterned after Milwaukee—they have trouble getting and retaining

teachers for a different reason than we do, but in rural areas we have the same thing. We can't compete, say, with Fox Valley or Madison or probably La Crosse [or] Eau Claire. We can't compete with them, [but] we [can] give them some loan forgiveness and they have a better quality of life in our area. They can do hunting and fishing and bike riding . . . We have those opportunities, and this was one way we could kind of exploit [them] by offering loan forgiveness to a young teacher.

Brooks also described the Rural Wisconsin Initiative's work to address problems relating to medical residencies in rural areas, especially a lack of specialists in women's health. While he and his colleagues made progress, "I don't think we're there yet."

Bipartisanship

Brooks discussed how a staff member, Terri Sue Griffiths, helped broker cooperation between his office and that of Senator Julie Lassa. Lassa helped Brooks by supporting one of his bills, and later, he repaid the favor:

What goes around comes around, because she helped us get our bill done at that point. And I think—probably [during] her last term—she had a bill that was called to her attention by her husband, who's . . . maybe the city clerk for Stevens Point . . . There are different publication requirements for certain actions that towns, cities, and villages do. It was confusing because some things require, like, a ten-day notice and other statutes require a fifteen-day notice. It was a simple bill, but we took the assembly lead and testified with her to get that straightened out so that there was consistency . . . So, I was able to pay back a debt, if you will.

Later in the interview, Brooks remarked on efforts to reach across the divide between Republicans and Democrats, as well as the divide between rural and urban legislators. In the course of that discussion, he described giving a tour of his district to Representative Jill Billings:

When we spend time with other people from different environments, we can show them what's unique about our territory. When Representative Billings came down, we went to a grain load-out facility [in Rock Springs] because that's important to my farmers . . . We toured a grain load-out, we got to go to a hog facility because neither of us had been in a hog facility for a long period of time, or ever (because they [hogs] are sensitive to disease). So we toured, [and] our former large animal vet gave us a tour because he's in the hog business also. We went there, and we went to some dairy farms, and she got to hear about the issues that a person who is increasing his herd to become a CAFO had been going through . . . We got to go to a goat farm and hold a goat, visit neighbor kids. But it gave her insight into things that she would not encompass in her 22 miles . . . We have to do more of that in the future.

Brooks added that Representatives Adam Jarchow and Evan Goyke had done something similar, with each touring the other's district.

Staffing

Brooks said that the most effective staff members are those who relate well with constituents. During his time in office, he said he received “a lot of compliments” from constituents who visited his office in the capitol and found his staff members to be helpful.

Over his ten-year period in the capitol, Brooks said he had hired only four staff members, who all served him well. He briefly described longtime staff John Flynn, who left the office to serve in the military in the Middle East, and Jeff Schultz. Brooks commented on the humbleness of staffers. “Staff will tell you that legislators should take credit for everything, and that's not fair.” In his own experience, staff members like Schultz developed many of the core ideas for projects like the Rural Wisconsin Initiative.

Balancing work and family

Brooks stressed the importance of being able to return home after a day at the legislature:

I was able to get home most evenings. So we could get caught up on the day's stuff instead of having to wait till the end of the week or something . . . I empathize and sympathize almost with some of the legislators that are from a couple hours away, where there's not a lot of discretion, because if you go home the same day, it's like four hours on the road . . . I understand why they would come down and do as much in Madison in one visit as they can. But in our case, we're able to go home pretty regularly at night and get caught up on the day's activities at home, so we didn't have [a] big backlog of things to do when we got home at the end of the week.

He concluded by once again paying tribute to his wife, Barbara: “She's a good lady. We've been together—well, married actually because we're too old to just ‘be together’—it'll be 52 years this September.”

Running—or not running—for other offices

Asked if he ever considered running for the senate, Brooks replied “not at all.” He went on to describe Senator Howard Marklein as “a good match for the district” for the following reasons:

Howard is a tenacious, tenacious campaigner, but also a good person, as far as getting to the far corners of his district and hearing what people want and that sort of thing. I like my district. To triple the size didn't appeal to me.

Brooks liked his district so much that—before his battle with leukemia—he never considered not running for his assembly seat:

I enjoy what I do. I've been fairly well received by the people . . . And when I go out in my district, people are friendly. They seem to trust me, and are confident when they talk to me, and that sort of thing, so it never really occurred [to me] that we did not want to do this.

Later in the interview, Brooks also made a case for term limits in both houses of the legislature:

I realize perhaps I'm very, very old now, but I always kind of believed in term limits . . . There's a learning curve involved, certainly, and the first couple years, first couple terms, you're picking up a lot of things—as far as how to do things, but also what hasn't worked in the past, and why do it again unless you can make some substantive changes that are going to make it work? So I've kind of always believed in term limits, maybe 12 for the assembly, if you need them there, for the [senate] maybe go to two six-year terms, three fours for the assembly.

Looking ahead to life after the legislature, Brooks said that he would miss the work but would not stand in his successor's way:

I'll sleep in. I won't worry quite so much about what the weather is. If it's bad weather, we'll just stay home. [I'll] pet the neighbor's dog a little bit because it's the grandkid's dog. They live across the road, so he comes to visit when they leave . . . I think we'll stay involved too. Again, we aren't going to come down and haunt our successor . . . I don't look to be a familiar character in the capitol. But we'll follow it. It's part of our environment right now . . . We'll miss it, certainly.

Reflections on politics

Brooks differentiated himself from others in the capitol who considered politics as a kind of “chess game”:

The capitol is full of political experts. I mean, there's kind of a subculture there. I'm a farmer, I don't get into what happens . . . It's like a chess game: if this happens, that happens, then will that happen? I don't get into that because I go back to the district and talk to real people. I don't speculate on what's going to happen.

He also emphasized that he tended to look at all issues from both sides—sometimes to the frustration of others:

My staff sometimes gets critical of me because as a farmer or a businessman, I always look at both sides of an issue. And so when I say, “Well, it was a bad bill but there were some

good things in it”—that gives my staff fits. But that’s OK, I’ll keep doing it; we’ve only got a few months to go!

By his own account, Brooks took this approach with respect to the Foxconn bill considered during the 2017–18 legislative session:

I truthfully don’t recall how I voted in Foxconn . . . But I think Foxconn is a good investment for the state. They have to earn the money they get back in tax credits. Beyond that, yes, it’s a good deal for them, but they still have to earn it. And if we can get 13,000 employees . . . that’s kind of what we’re looking for. We want to grow the state—and for eight democrats to essentially come out and say they’re going to try and sabotage it, or change it or get out of it, I think was kind of disheartening. It shows maybe a lack of vision on their part because Foxconn has lived up to what they said they were going to do. They’ve expanded throughout the state. They’ve gone to most corners of the state, and are opening up operations there, which involved maybe a few hundred to more employees.

In the course of discussing Foxconn, Brooks remarked of former Governor Scott Walker: “I don’t agree with everything that he does—highway funding is one—but, by and large, he’s part of my ‘brand.’”

Asked to speculate on what the legislature would look like ten years into the future, Brooks reflected on civility in state politics. He argued that relationships between legislators in the capitol were civil, but that campaigns had become less so:

I don’t think we are fairly portrayed in the media perhaps. We do get along better . . . So I don’t think it’s necessarily fair to think it’s quite as toxic. But [if you look] at the campaigns, that contradicts that. I’d thought perhaps after the primary election there might be a grace period before we got into the heat of the gubernatorial battle, but no. It’s out there right away, and so I guess I wouldn’t say it’s toxic, but it seems to be relatively uncivil, certainly. And that—that I would like to see changed.

He ended the interview by reflecting on how grateful he was to serve in the capitol:

You’re talking to a guy who went to a one-room school. I don’t know of anybody else that probably has that experience . . . It’s kind of humbling out of 5.7 million people that you get to go into this place. You have a reserved chair. And when you get there long enough, you get to pick where the chair is.

Conclusion

Representative Ed Brooks passed away on April 23, 2019. In the days following, his colleagues paid tribute to him as both an individual and a public servant. Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke mourned “the most decent, honorable man I’ve had the chance to

meet in politics.” Representative JoCasta Zamarripa said that he “served with integrity and cared deeply about his constituents,” and Representative Beth Meyers called him “a champion for the people of his district and rural Wisconsin.” Senator Howard Marklein remembered Brooks not only as a colleague, but also as a friend and mentor who shared a “deep commitment to promoting rural Wisconsin in the legislature.” Speaker Robin Vos offered condolences to Brooks’s family on behalf of the assembly, and Governor Tony Evers ordered the flag to be flown at half-staff on the day of the funeral, April 29, 2019. ■