Lawmaker an aspiring lawyer

Hastings, a decorated Iraq War veteran, close to getting John Marshall degree

BY ANDREW MALONEY
Law Bulletin staff writer

State Sen. Michael E. Hastings, D-Orland Hills, is a West Point graduate, a decorated war veteran, a former school board vice president with a master's degree in finance and, at age 32, the youngest member currently serving in the Illinois Senate.

But for all his accomplishments, there's at least one more thing Hastings aspires to do — become an attorney.

Just a few classes shy of earning his law degree, Hastings spoke with the Daily Law Bulletin about his military service, gun control and what he's learned during his first few months in the legislature.

Law Bulletin: You're the first Iraq War veteran to be elected to the General Assembly. You've cited the leadership experience you gained in the military, but is there one specific lesson you learned during your service that best applies to your current role?

Hastings: I think it's one word — patience. You have to have patience when dealing with everybody, because some people may not be as informed on certain topics as other people.

So you have to be patient with people and work with them.

That's the same thing we did overseas in Iraq. You listen to people, you get their needs and you can make life better.

LB: So, you were a West Point graduate, a Bronze Star recipient and have a graduate degree in leadership and finance. Why did you decide to attend The John Marshall Law School, and what is your student status there?

Hastings: For one, I always wanted to be a lawyer. I always wanted to go to law school. John Marshall downtown is a great school. It has a lot of different opportunities for a lot of people.

But I'm only 18 credit hours from graduating. It's almost bittersweet that it's almost over.

The legislature obviously writes laws. And as a lawyer, you use the law on your clients' behalf. And I couldn't think of a better way to hone my skills as an attorney than by serving in the legislature. (John Marshall) was just a natural fit.

I can tell you, when law school is over, I'll get a lot more sleep. Definitely a lot more sleep. I don't recommend anybody running for the state Senate and going to law school and working at the same time.

People ask me, “How do you do it?” Well, I'm not married, I don't have any kids. I can allocate my time.

But for anyone else I would recommend heavy doses of Prozac. (laughs)

LB: You've been in the Senate now for a few months — what's the most surprising thing you've learned or observed during your tenure there so far?

Hastings: That's a great question. The most surprising or interesting thing? I'm just intrigued by procedure. Just the procedural way a bill becomes a law. To see it live, to see how you can actually influence policy, has just been the most interesting, interesting thing.

The legislature really is a representation of every single race, gender, ethnicity, you name it. It's democracy in action. It gets me fired up. We have some extremely, extremely bright people. Highly educated. Not everyone has to have a Harvard or a West Point degree.

You know, everyone talks bad about the Illinois legislature. But rest assured that the education level is there. The solutions are there, it's just a matter of pulling everyone together to get it done.

LB: You said last month that you were disappointed by the governor's budget speech — what did you find fault with?

Hastings: I talked to his staff because, you know what? I don't like talking bad about anybody. I guess my quote was that I was more disappointed by what I didn't hear. The $400 million in education cuts that were in the budget weren't in the address.

I know teachers right now are at the forefront. Their pensions are at the forefront. As a school board member — if you cut $400 million, you're about to break the backs of some school districts.

And there's a lot of (schools) that are having some tough times. So cutting education? Is that the way to go? I can think of a few (other) areas where we could find some money.

But I'm not going to sit there and say something and not provide solutions. I had some ideas and I think the governor's budget staff was more than receptive.

LB: You were part of Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon's working group on firearms legislation. Nationally, the U.S. Senate could take up gun control sometime soon. Where is the debate on concealed carry in Illinois headed at the moment?

Hastings: First of all, I own three firearms. I own a pistol and a couple rifles. And obviously with the past 10 years, 11 years of my life, I'm extremely qualified to speak on weapons use, and I shot every weapon, up to a rocket.

Where the debate lies ... for one, I'm a pro-conceal-and-carry guy. And we need to make laws for the safe and effective use (by) firearm owners.

There are certain areas where I don't think you should be able to carry firearms, like a bank.

The House debated over locations, the cost of licensing, the training required ... I think there's four or five different gun bills out there.

But I'm cautiously optimistic about conceal and carry. I'll support a conceal-and-carry bill. No doubt.

LB: You came out in support of same-sex marriage earlier this year. How difficult of a decision was that?

Hastings: When I make my mind up, it's made. I made a conscious effort, ran a couple different polls. And you know, in the end, this decision strikes at the heart of religion, and it also changes, I guess, the traditional family dynamic.

But the guy I served overseas with who could pull the trigger just as I could — why should I afford him lesser rights than me? I'm not for that one bit. I want to make sure that someone, for instance, can go visit their loved one in a hospital if they're dying.

But the other thing is, who am I to tell someone else who to love? It's not my business.