



THE CAUCUS

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OUT OF ADVERSITY

Bryan Cutler's political career has been shaped by family tragedy and a rural community that nurtured him. Meet Pennsylvania's new House majority leader

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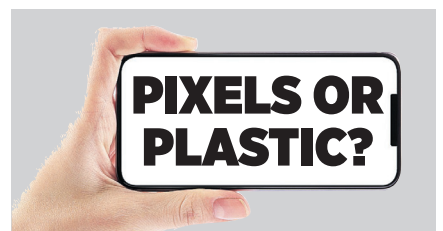
Every year during this season of giving, politicians and lobbyists converge on New York City for the Pennsylvania Society gathering. **PAGE 4**

THE INTERVIEW



Bryan Burhans once chose hunting over football, which eventually led to his becoming executive director of the state Game Commission. **PAGE 6**

SPECIAL REPORT



More than a dozen states are considering technology that allows drivers to carry their license information on their smartphones. **PAGE 10**

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THE MAN FROM PEACH BOTTOM

Bryan Cutler's school teachers said he didn't work well with others. Pennsylvania's new House majority leader is out to prove them wrong

» SAM JANESCH

Bryan Cutler is sitting in his cluttered corner office in the Capitol on the day after he was named to the second-most powerful position in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. He's rattling off the names of all his school teachers as if they're the ones who just elected him. One in high school helped him overcome his fear of public speaking. Another made him a better debater.

His elementary school teachers, he said, naming them one by one, taught him "the value of hard work" after they had written things like, "doesn't work well with others" and "couldn't work quietly" on his report cards.

"My personal favorite was, 'Doesn't know when recess ends and class time resumes,'" the 43-year-old state lawmaker said with a laugh, recalling decades-old comments with his near-photographic memory.

Cutler's colleagues and friends have their own descriptions of the man who is now the highest-ranking House lawmaker from Lancaster County in nearly a century.

Cutler, they say, is humble, bright and deeply rooted in the community. From his family's two centuries in Drumore Township, a rural, agricultural swath of southern Lancaster County, to the health tragedies that prompted his neighbors to rally around his household when he was a teenager, Cutler is a product of that community.

It's what led him to challenge an unpopular incumbent from his own party when he was a young X-ray technologist with no experience in politics, and it's what drove him to actively seek a statewide leadership role in the dozen years since.

And now, as a soon-to-be seven-term legislator selected by his House GOP colleagues to serve as majority leader, he's bringing those southern Lancaster County roots to the inner circles of the Capitol in Harrisburg.

FAMILY TRAGEDY

Long before Cutler gave politics any thought, he knew he wanted to become a lawyer.

An attempted murder trial was taking place in Lancaster County, and a seventh-grade Cutler was shadowing an assistant district attorney for a day in court.

The lawyers' back-and-forth and the "formality of the courtroom" fascinated the young Cutler.

He remembers the thrill of the attorneys showing jurors the rifle in a plastic evidence bag, and he remembers being "terrified" while sitting directly behind the defendant.

Cutler would eventually earn his law degree from Widener University when he was 31, but the prospects of getting it

at all had become far from certain.

When he was 15, his mother became terminally ill and was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, the common name for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. A few months later, his father was diagnosed with the same thing. The odds that a couple would be diagnosed with the disease was about 1 in 250,000, Cutler said.

Cutler's father, Gary, died two years later, in 1993, when Cutler was a senior at Solanco High School. His mother, Joyce, lived until 1999.

"It hit the community as just a total shock," said state Sen. Ryan Aument, who grew up a quarter mile down the road from the Cutlers and went through school two years behind Cutler with Cutler's younger sister, Karen.

Aument recalled how well-known and active Gary and Joyce Cutler were in the community — how they would come into their classrooms in second

and third grade to show their collection of arrowheads.

"To see how Bryan and Karen came through that experience, through their teenage years, the responsibility thrust on their shoulders as caregivers, and they both have turned out jewels of the community," Aument said.

Cutler said it was clearly a formative time — when extended family and the church helped cut firewood, plow snow and cook "more food than you know what to do with."

"It's easy to be accepting in a situation like that when you have that kind of social safety net around you — because, while it's certainly very tragic, it's also comforting to know you have friends and family like that," Cutler said.

Cutler said his strong faith also played an important role; he is a member of Wrightsdale Baptist Church in Peach Bottom.

Ultimately, the support he got through his parents' illnesses inspired a deep, unwavering desire to give back.

FROM X-RAYS TO LAW SCHOOL

After graduating from Solanco High School, Cutler and his high school sweetheart, Jennifer, married and remained in Lancaster County. She became a registered nurse, and he became an X-ray technologist after earning a two-year degree through what is now the Pennsylvania College of Health Sciences.

The career move was part family related, as his mom and grandmother were nurses, and his parents' illnesses pushed him toward health care. It was also part chance; he befriended an X-ray tech while getting several scans himself for high school track injuries.

A few years later, Cutler went back to school after working second and third shifts at Lancaster General Hospital, earning a bachelor's degree in health care administration when he was 26. He was promoted to a management position in the radiology department, where he oversaw all the components not related to direct patient care — from billing and charging to outpatient registration and the room full of folders of X-rays.

Meanwhile, he said, he and Jennifer decided they didn't want to leave a community his family had settled in as Quakers in 1800. So they bought his childhood home — nearly 11 acres that used to be part of his grandfather's dairy farm. Their three children — Cheyanne, 15, Caleb, 13, and Drew, 10 — along with their own chickens, sheep, ducks, dogs and cats, would come later.

At 28, Cutler returned to school again — this time for that law degree that had been on his mind. He quit his management gig and worked part time again as an X-ray tech. The photographic memory, he said, came in handy when he began studying case law (and later the fine details of legislation for floor debates).

But by his third year of law school, he began setting his sights on another, much larger, role.

BUDDING POLITICAL LEADER

In 2005, the incumbent in the 100th Legislative District covering all of Lancaster County's southern end was Rep. Gibson C. Armstrong, son of the influential state senator in the area, Gibson E. Armstrong.

That summer, Rep. Armstrong voted against a controversial legislative pay raise but accepted the increase before later returning it to the state.

The pay raise — which was later repealed — spurred criticism of Armstrong and other lawmakers. But even before that flare-up, Cutler began looking at the seat because of his desire to give back and what he says were feelings among residents that the district deserved better representation.

Cutler and others interviewed for this article declined to be more specific



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about frustrations with Armstrong.

Aument, who had by then returned to southern Lancaster County after serving in the Army, also was considering running. The young duo teamed up for the 2006 election.

“We planned a campaign without having decided who was going to be the candidate,” Aument said. In the end, he said it was the “deep connection between Bryan and southern Lancaster County,” especially after the community had rallied around his family during the illnesses, that made him decide Cutler was the better candidate.

Aument became the campaign manager.

They blocked the powerful Republican Committee of Lancaster County endorsement from going to Armstrong and won the primary by 15 points; Armstrong was among numerous lawmakers whose careers were ended amid outrage over the pay raise.

“Reforming the culture in Harrisburg was central to the message of that campaign,” said Aument, who served as Cutler’s chief of staff before later winning another state House seat and serving alongside his friend in Harrisburg.

‘HE NEVER SAT STILL’

Cutler won the 2006 primary on a Tuesday in May and graduated from law school the following Saturday.

An amateur triathlete who completed a half Iron Man and once rode his bike 162 miles from Quarryville to Ocean City, Maryland, in eight hours — in mostly pouring rain — Cutler has a hard time sitting still.

And that was evident from his first days in the Capitol.

On the floor, where seats and tables for the 203 members are aligned in long rows, he sat in a middle seat next to Rep. David Hickernell, of Elizabethtown, and Rep. Katie True, who preceded Aument in the East Hempfield-area House district. Aument represented before being elected to the state Senate.

“That was the worst seat he possibly could get because he drank a lot of water. He was very healthy, and he was running at the time,” True recalled. “He’d be all into looking at the bills and he would be up and down, out of that chair, and I finally said to him, ‘You really need to get an aisle seat.’ He never sat still.”

Cutler quickly became known for doing his research and being direct and honest with his colleagues. He was level-headed and calm, compromising but could show a stubborn streak.

Not one person interviewed for this story could name a time they’ve seen him lose his cool.

Rep. Seth Grove, a southern York County Republican, was among many who said Cutler was personable, strategic and commanded respect on both sides of the aisle. He focuses on solving problems, Grove said, rather than the partisan divide that bogs down so many debates in Harrisburg.

Rep. Frank Dermody, an Allegheny County Democrat who will be opposite Cutler as minority leader, said through a spokesman that he and Cutler have worked constructively in the past and will do so again. “Rep. Cutler approaches his work thoughtfully, and I respect the ability and success he’s shown,” Dermody said.

Even Rep. Cris Dush, the brash Indiana County Republican who ran against Cutler in the closed-door major-



STATE REP. BRYAN CUTLER

» **Age:** 43

» **Residence:** Drumore Township, Lancaster County

» **Family:** Wife Jennifer, children Cheyanne, Caleb and Drew

» **First elected:** 2006

» **Leadership positions:** Majority whip since 2014

» **Education:** Solanco High School; Lebanon Valley College, B.S. in health care administration; Lancaster General School of Radiology, X-ray certificate; Widener School of Law, J.D. with certificate in health care law

» **Previous positions:** Manager of support services, diagnostic x-ray technologist at Lancaster General Health

ity leader election this week, said he did it not because he wanted to run against Cutler, but because he wanted to give the caucus a different option in terms of styles.

“I’ve been one to step into the middle of protests and that kind of thing,” said Dush, who drew national attention earlier this year when he moved to impeach four Democratic state Supreme Court Justices because of the redistricting case.

He continued, “Bryan has been the kind of person that steers the discussion in a different way. But he’s been very effective in the way he does things.”

Andrew Oltsman, a childhood classmate of Cutler’s who now works as a patent attorney in Harrisburg, described the lawmaker as “very tempered and thoughtful.”

“He’s one of those folks you wouldn’t expect to be in the Legislature,” said Oltsman, who described himself as probably the “least political person” Cutler knows. He said that’s helpful for Cutler because it gives him a break — a chance to go mountain biking or play strategic board games with friends and not talk shop.

ON THE ISSUES

Out of the post-pay-raise generation of reform-minded legislators, Cutler has remained a reliably conservative voice in the Capitol while also supporting bipartisan reforms.

He’s championed issues surrounding hospital licensing and accreditation, merit-based selection of statewide judges and harsher penalties for lobbyist disclosure violations.

The latter, which increased the daily and maximum fines for lobbyists who don’t file quarterly reports, was signed into law earlier this year. It was a decade-long effort on Cutler’s part and not without concessions.

According to his original bill in the 2007-08 session, he wanted to increase the \$50 per-day late fee to \$250. The maximum fine would have increased from \$2,000 to \$10,000.

But the final version of the bill kept the \$50 per-day fine for the first 10 days, while increasing it to \$100 if the report is still late from days 11 to 20 and up to \$200 per day after 20 days. The maximum penalty was set at \$4,000.

On the topic Cutler is perhaps known best for on a statewide level — establishing merit-selection of appellate judges rather than elections — he’s built some support over the years but isn’t so sure about its future.

He introduced it this session with Montgomery County Democrat Madeleine Dean, who was elected to Congress in the elections this month. It was the fifth time he introduced it and only the second time it was voted out of committee.

But Cutler says the support “crossed

both caucuses in a very unusual way,” with mostly the backing from moderates. And with the most recent election, it seems to him and others that both Republicans and Democrats in Harrisburg have shifted a little more to their ideological extremes.

In managing that shift, Cutler will face some clear and immediate challenges.

He’ll be at the center of state budget negotiations with Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf during what will likely be the return of bitter spending debates. Wolf hasn’t offered his 2019 budget priorities yet, but if they’re anything like previous years of proposed tax increases, minimum-wage hikes and a natural gas severance tax, Cutler said he doesn’t see much new interest from his caucus.

He’ll also have to manage the divide between himself and almost the entire rest of his House GOP caucus, including Speaker Mike Turzai, on one of the most prominent issues today.

Extending or extinguishing the statute of limitations for child sexual abuse cases came into focus again this summer with the revelations of systemic abuse within Pennsylvania’s Catholic dioceses.

When the bill passed the House overwhelmingly, 173-21, Cutler was one of the few votes against it.

He has been firmly against the controversial provision allowing a two-year window for individuals past the current age limits to bring suits against their abusers. Cutler said the measure is unconstitutional and, if passed, would mean the state would be able to apply new laws retroactively in other cases, too.

“I have a very narrow concern on the constitutionality and the retroactivity, and I think you can address that and fix the problem,” Cutler said. “That bill just didn’t do it.”

Asked whether he thinks the caucuses can find that fix in the first few months of the new session, Cutler said he’s hopeful.

Sitting in his office, he turns to his hospital licensing bill framed on the wall, noting it took three decades to get that issue over the finish line.

“I’ve got a pretty good record so far being able to work through tough issues,” Cutler said. “It’s just a matter of sitting down and plowing through the issues and figuring out where people can be.”

As for where Cutler is ideologically, many believe it’s closer to the conservatism of Turzai than the outgoing moderate majority leader Reed.

Reed, for example, offered a government reform proposal this summer that would have made three major changes that have gained some bipartisan support — open primaries for registered independents and third-party voters; a redistricting reform commission; and limits on committee chairmanships.

Cutler said he has supported committee chair limits in the past and would

do so again. He said he’s not a fan of open primaries because he believes “the individual parties have the right to pick their individual candidates.” And he’s open to a redistricting commission but thinks it’s vital for the Legislature to have a voice and vote on the maps.

“He’s certainly in the conservative part of his party,” said G. Terry Madonna, director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster. “The problem he’s going to face now is, as a leader, he’s going to have to figure out how to reach compromises in the caucus and then figure out a way to deal with the Democrats.”

Cutler and Turzai, speaking at a post-leadership election news conference, did not directly address a question about whether they were more philosophically aligned than Turzai and Reed.

The incoming majority leader said he wants to focus on agreements rather than disagreements.

MAJORITY LEADER

A flood of congratulatory messages and meeting requests were coming in, as expected, after Cutler was chosen for his new role on Nov. 13.

The fast-talking, quick-moving new majority leader was immediately tasked with starting to figure out new committee chair assignments and discussing what policy priorities the Republican Caucus will have in the coming session.

He was handling those essential new duties the day right after his selection.

But he was also at his 83-year-old grandmother’s house.

She lives “just over the hill” from him in Peach Bottom, and she had an issue with the sewer drainage field on her property being backed up. Cutler, dressed in jeans and a green sweater, was already on his way to Harrisburg, but he turned around to make sure it was taken care of before the professionals could come clean it up.

“None of it’s changed Bryan,” Aument said of how far both of them have come from their days together in Drumore Township. “In a real sense, I think we’re just two kids from southern Lancaster County who have known each other and been friends for a long time.”

Another one of those friends is Jake Smeltz. Now the outgoing chief of staff for Aument and the incoming one for Cutler, he previously worked for Rep. John Barley and Sen. Noah Wenger, both of whom have retired from office.

Before his career in the Legislature, Smeltz was Cutler’s schoolmate. They met in sixth grade and had every class together through the end of high school. In their junior year, they started a prayer club while also studying the Bible together at their homes.

“He was just this very bright, genuine person,” Smeltz said of Cutler, recalling one of his oldest and best friends — someone who had a “tough road” but a big heart and a sometimes eerie photographic memory.

“I can remember broad strokes of the movie and he’s quoting lines. We’ll talk about a vote that happened six years ago, and he’ll rattle off the vote total,” Smeltz said.

As for what lies ahead, Smeltz said it’s going to be an important time for Cutler, the county and the state.

“It’s a whole new world for him,” Smeltz said. “This is a moment. And it’s going to be a heavy lift.”