



Saul Anuzis comes to the aid of his party

By Paul Gargaro

University of Michigan-Dearborn “Legacy” Alumni Magazine

When University of Michigan-Dearborn senior Saul Anuzis told his hard-working immigrant father of his future employment plans as a staff member for the state house Republicans in Lansing, he wasn’t entirely surprised by the reaction.

“He thought I was planning to go into international banking, so he was pretty chagrined to hear my plans for a political career,” recalls Anuzis, who earlier this year was elected chairman of the Michigan Republican State Committee. “He’d worked too hard and too long to see me banging on doors and eating pizza every night.”

Yet by the time Anuzis had made this decision, politics – low pay, long hours and all – was the one clear career choice that truly inspired him. Politics, campaigning and networking provided the passion he was looking for in a career, despite his studies in economics. That passion was rooted in his own political involvement at UM-Dearborn, including his election as student body president following a spirited 1980 campaign against a fellow campus Republican. Anuzis, who was chair of the campus Young Republicans, ran as part of the revolutionary “Coalition of Students for Students” on a ticket that included Tom Lawton, chair of the school’s Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee, and Reggie Howard, who headed the school’s black students association, as his vice presidential running mates.

“I learned then that politics make strange bedfellows,” said Anuzis. “Despite the differences, our coalition came together and won. It also may have helped that we had a keg at the poll, and gave out free glasses of beer to our supporters.”

Anuzis’ unusual campus coalition reflects his early departure from what could be considered a classic Democratic, working-class pedigree. He was a member of the Teamsters as a young United Postal Service driver, and the son of Lithuanian immigrants, who came to this country a half-century ago following the Nazi occupation and eventual Soviet takeover of their country. His dad was employed for decades as a skilled electrician at the Fleetwood Fisher Body Plant on Fort Street in Detroit, and with his wife, worked hard to keep the Lithuanian spirit alive in their children. Growing up in Detroit, Anuzis spoke only Lithuanian until he was seven. He graduated from Bishop Borgess High School in Redford, and had little, if any, interest in organized politics when he entered UM-Dearborn. That changed, however, when a student group formed on campus in support of Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy’s run for the presidency in 1980.

"Kennedy represented everything I thought was wrong with politics," Anuzis said. "A group of us were sitting around the ROC ("Recreation and Organizations Center") one day discussing his growing support on campus, and decided to launch the Young Republicans to counter that support, and membership quickly increased."

Wendy Anderson was a founding member of the group, and credits it for inspiring several political careers, including her own.

"I'd guess we had about 200 very active members," said Anderson, who later worked on the legislative staffs of State Senator John Engler and State Senate Majority Leader Dick Posthumus, and continues to consult on political communications issues. "I think Saul's immigrant roots really instilled in him a sense of spirit, a need to give back, a need to change the world, and he brought that energy to the Young Republicans."

"When I look around, I still see so many members of that core who remain involved in politics."

Anuzis' campus political interests, and support for then-presidential candidate George H. W. Bush, victor of the state primary, culminated in his 1980 election as the youngest delegate to the Republican National Convention in Detroit. Anuzis went on to attend President Ronald Reagan's first inauguration, and he was elected third vice chair of the Michigan Republican State Committee. He served the MRSC for six years, including two terms as congressional district chairman.

In addition to the Young Republicans, campaign work, and his participation in campus government, Anuzis points to political science Profs. Bernard Klein and Helen Graves as pivotal in the development of his political interests. It was Graves' legislative internship program that helped set Anuzis and many of his college peers down their political path. As part of that program, Anuzis interned with Rep. Jack Kirksey, who went on to become mayor of Livonia.

"Every Tuesday and Thursday, I'd drive out to Livonia in my '67 VW," Anuzis said. "Jack drove a Gremlin, which was the better car, so we'd hop in that and head off to Lansing. Many of the people I met during that internship are colleagues who I continue to work with today. That experience was my professional foundation."

Nine months after joining the house Republican staff under the direction of State Rep. Posthumus, the Lowell legislator asked Anuzis to manage his 1981 campaign for the state senate. In exchange, Anuzis earned free room and board in a basement bedroom on the Posthumus farm. Posthumus won that race, and went on to become senate majority leader, where he appointed Anuzis as his chief of staff. In that role, Anuzis enjoyed the opportunity to share with college interns the lessons he had learned as a UM-Dearborn legislative intern. As part of his welcome address to each new intern class, Anuzis would present each student with an empty Rolodex. Their success, he said, would be measured on how well they filled it up.

"One of the great lessons I've learned is that it's not so much what you know, but who you know," Anuzis said. "So much of what I've done over the years is related to the people that I've met along the way. Just as important as it is for young legislative interns to build a great Rolodex, it's equally vital for students to stay in touch with their classmates over the years. The value of the relationships I formed in Dearborn has been revealed again and again over the years."

While in Lansing, Anuzis cultivated his interest in business and long-standing passion for Lithuania into a small, part-time import/export business. Taking advantage of the time difference with Eastern Europe, Anuzis managed the budding enterprise via telex machine and fax late at night and in the early morning. That experience, combined with the passage of federal legislation that paved the way for increased competition in the telecommunications industry, ultimately led to Anuzis' full-time immersion in the private sector. Anuzis and

business partner Bruce Yuille were among the state's first 10 operators to be licensed as Local Exchange Carriers. With that license, Anuzis left politics and launched with Yuille Coast to Coast Telecommunications in 1991. Success soon followed, and in 2000, the partners sold their 125-person business. The following year, they launched Quick Connect USA, a Clarkston-based telecommunications company that offers local and long distance telephone service, VOIP, internet and data products to residential and small businesses across Michigan. Anuzis has taken a two-year leave of absence as chairman of the company to fulfill his leadership obligations with the MRSC.

"It's hard work," said Susy Heintz-Avery, a former MRSC chair, Wayne County commissioner, and Anuzis friend since their days together as UM-Dearborn students, legislative interns and Young Republican members. "Traveling from one end of the state to the other demands enthusiasm, endurance and an ability to communicate with a very broad spectrum."

Heintz-Avery said Anuzis was a central player in the rise of the "UM-Dearborn mafia," in Lansing, referring to the moniker Gov. Engler jokingly gave to the close-knit, vocal group of university lobbyists, legislators and staffers at work in the capitol.

"He'll be a terrific chair," she said. "Saul was one of the stars to come out of UM-Dearborn. You could see that from the very beginning."

Anuzis, a Delta Township resident, said he looks forward to the challenges of the next two years, but has no long-term plans for a return to the political arena, even as an elected official. Unsuccessful campaigns for state representative in 1984 and 1986 taught him that his best talents are best applied behind the scenes. As MRSC chair, he said he will spend the next two years recruiting potential political candidates, "fundraising and firing up the troops."

Married to Lina, whom he met on a Lithuanian Ski Club outing to Montreal, Anuzis is the father of four boys ages 10 to 16, a Scoutmaster, an avid Harley-Davidson rider, and an active advocate of his parent's homeland as honorary consul to Michigan for the Republic of Lithuania. He has also served a gubernatorial appointee to the Michigan Jobs Commission and the Michigan Export Development Authority.

"My early experiences at UM-Dearborn gave me a heightened appreciation for the value of lifelong associations, while my parents' immigrant experience gave me a unique perspective on the incredible freedoms and opportunities we enjoy as Americans," he said. "I think my dad would now appreciate that I'm putting these important lessons to good use."

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