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Passion for politics brings native son back to Tri-State

Underwood capitalizes on Chambers' departure

By **MARK TRUBY**
The Herald-Dispatch

CHARLESTON — The morning that Mark Forest Underwood's world was turned on end by an earthquake, he knew it was about time to return to Huntington.

"I was lying in bed about 5 a.m. and I saw my dresser fly across the room," Underwood says. "I thought if that's not the big one, I don't want to be here when it happens."

It just as easily could have been the day he was working out on a StairMaster and the O.J. Simpson slow-speed Bronco chase passed by his health club or the time a dozen fires were set within a few blocks of his apartment during the Los Angeles riots triggered by the Rodney King verdict.

It was getting a little hairy in La La Land so Underwood came home to West Virginia. And he spent the next two years getting reacquainted with the more deliberate pace of his hometown.

But the tranquillity didn't last. He decided to thrust himself into the rough-and-tumble world of West Virginia politics, which can spin rookie lawmakers around like a force-five tornado — even those who are used to natural

Underwood file

Age: 33.

Occupation: Huntington lawyer with a private practice.

Experience: Democrat elected to the West Virginia House of Delegates in November. Bachelor of business administration from Marshall University. Law degree from Pepperdine University.

Family: Single.

disasters.

In November, the Democrat surprised the field by finishing first in the race for the House of Delegates' 15th District, ahead of incumbents and fellow delegates Margarette Leach and Arley Johnson.

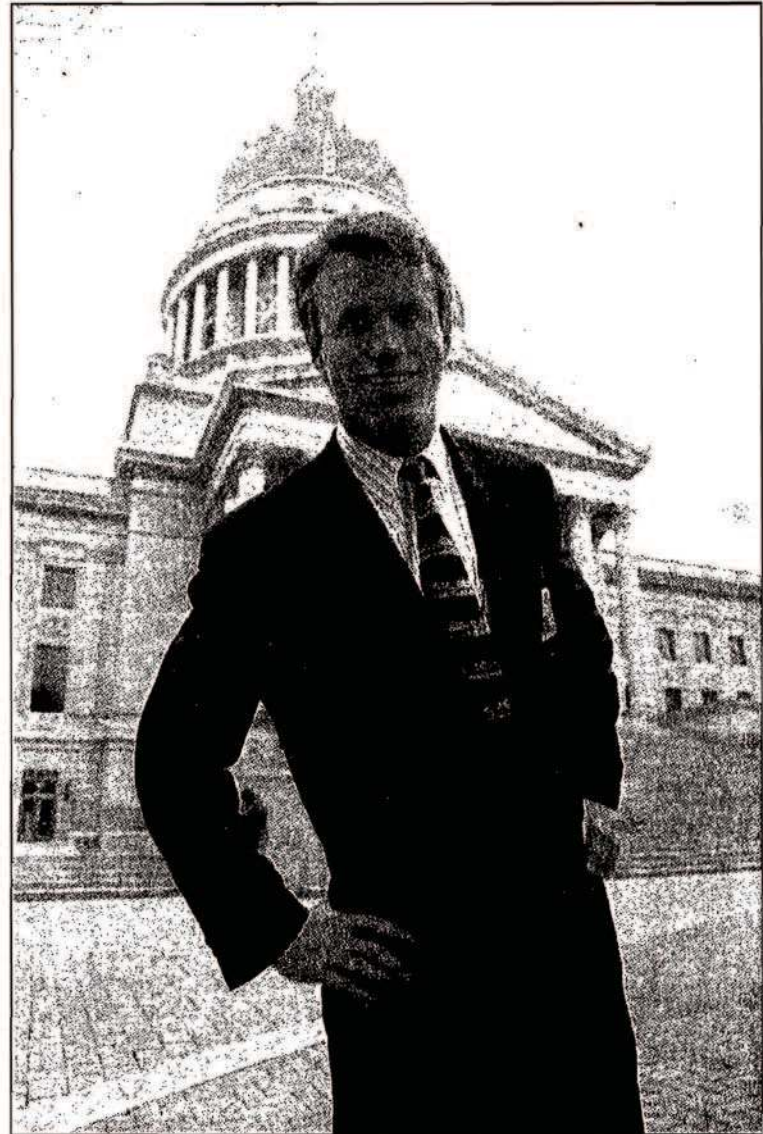
Despite his Melrose Place appearance, Underwood, 33, didn't go to Los Angeles in search of the bright lights. He considered himself an economic refugee. After graduating from Marshall in 1986, he discovered that a college degree didn't guarantee a good job in Huntington.

"It was booming in Southern California during the Reagan defense buildup," said Underwood, sitting in a cramped state Capitol office he shares with three other freshman delegates. "The economy was going crazy."

So he enrolled in the Pepperdine University School of Law and graduated in 1989. Sure enough, a job awaited him with a prestigious 300-attorney firm in Los Angeles.

He soon found himself in the middle of million-dollar product

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Bob Bird/The Herald-Dispatch

In November, freshman delegate Mark Forest Underwood finished first in the race for the West Virginia House of Delegates' 15th District.

Underwood comes home

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liability lawsuits defending Suzuki in the Samurai rollover cases. His firm tried cases against Johnnie L. Cochran Jr.'s law office, the firm that represented Michael Jackson in a child molestation case.

But five fast-paced years as a California lawyer were enough. He returned to Huntington where the job market had gradually improved and joined practice with lawyer Dick Fredeking.

"I was glad to be home," he says. "There is something special about living in a place with people you know and people who take an interest in your life. You don't get that in L.A."

An all-Southern Conference pole vaulter at Marshall and a three-sport standout at Huntington High, Underwood was perhaps best known as an athlete in Huntington.

But the grandson of former Cabell County Commissioner Forest "Spike" Underwood came home with a new passion: politics.

When former House Speaker Chuck Chambers, D-Cabell, announced he was leaving the Legislature, Underwood didn't hesitate.

"I saw Chuck Chambers' retirement as an opportunity," Underwood says.

From there he launched an ambitious campaign in which he spent \$81,000 — nearly three times as much as any other candidate in the 15th District, according to the Secretary of State's office.

"I wanted to run a first-class campaign because I think that says a lot about the type of job you will do,"

Underwood says.

Before he knew it, he was standing in House chambers in January taking the oath of office.

"You don't stop along the way and think about what it's going to be like when you get here," he says. "It was almost a flashback to when I was 10 years old and my grandfather was sworn into office. And there I was (in January) watching other children in the House chambers."

While some say freshman delegates have as much clout in state politics as the average Charleston taxi driver, Underwood says he won't fall back on that excuse.

"The people didn't elect me to sit around for my first two years," he says. "They have expectations and so do I."

He served notice with a few Perry Mason-tough questions during one of his early House Judiciary Committee meetings.

Underwood has already mapped out some specific goals in education, taxation and economic development. It's typical of the goal-oriented, self-reliant aspects of his personality.

"That's one of the reasons I liked pole vaulting," he says. "There is always another height and a direct measurement of your accomplishment. It's like wrestling, you get all the recognition or all the blame."

Indeed, that craving for independence led him to split with Fredeking & Fredeking just after Christmas and open his own law office in Huntington.

He will have to alter his approach somewhat at the Capitol, where success between the high ceilings and marble floors can be difficult to measure and dependent on compromise.

"It will be a new experience," Underwood said. "But I guess it's fair to say this is in my blood."