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Gazette photo by CHRIS DORST

Underwood makes an impact

By Jack McCarthy
STAFF WRITER

On one hand, Mark Underwood is just another freshman delegate, learning the Statehouse ropes and hoping to have an impact someday on state affairs.

On the other hand, Underwood is an ambitious lawyer who, at just 33 years old, has raised eyebrows as someone to watch in the Legislature.

The Huntington native returned home from Los Angeles to practice law and pursue politics two years ago. Politics beckoned when House Speaker Chuck Chambers resigned last year. Underwood took on two well-known politicians, spending a total of \$90,000 to win the primary and the general election.

Now he is waiting and watching, and getting good grades from his elders in the House of Delegates, said Speaker Robert Kiss, D-Raleigh, and Judiciary Chairman Rick Staton, D-Wyoming.

"He has the tools to be a key policy-maker a few years down the road," Kiss said. "He's capable, hard-working and has a good background."

"He's done a good job learning

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the ropes," Staton said, pointing out that Underwood sits in Staton's old seat at the far end of the Judiciary Committee conference table, known as the leprosy seat.

Kiss and Staton paid him a compliment by appointing him to the powerful Judiciary Committee in his first term.

In 1986, Underwood left Huntington after graduating from Marshall University with an undergraduate degree in business. "There were no jobs in West Virginia," he said in the cramped office he shares with three other delegates.

He graduated from Pepperdine Law School in Los Angeles and practiced corporate defense law for five years before coming home.

Why the return?

"There's really something that can be said about the place that cares about you," he said. "No matter how long you're in a place like Los Angeles, you'll never have the friends and family like you have in

West Virginia."

When Chambers resigned, Underwood took up the race for the seat in a big way. He spent about \$45,000 of his own money and an equal amount in contributions.

"I spent that much because I was committed to running a professional campaign," he said. "I believe the way you run a campaign reflects your personality and how you will do in office."

Underwood beat former Cabell County Commissioner Jim Morgan in the primary and former Delegate Chuck Romine in the general election.

Although he was a business major at Marshall and is a lawyer well-versed in the corporate world, Underwood could not get the endorsements of the Chamber of Commerce in either race.

He did pick up the blessing of Chuck Chambers, the West Virginia Education Association and the Affiliated Construction Trades Council.

"There are tons of teachers in my family — my parents, grandfathers, sisters. I will go to bat for education," he said, explaining the

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WVEA's support.

Labor's endorsement "came from my willingness to listen to their issues," he said.

Underwood also enlisted scores of high school and college friends and acquaintances he made while working as an undergraduate for Rep. Nick Joe Rahall, D-W.Va.

Underwood also found himself in the public eye when he represent-

ed Mountaineer Title Loans, a Putnam County company that used car titles as collateral for loans. He had to defend the company from a lawsuit by Attorney General Darrell McGraw, who said it charged exorbitant interest rates.

Underwood declines to talk about the case because it remains in litigation.

He says he is watching and learning the process at the Legislature. But at the same time, he's planning his own agenda.

"I've got some ideas I'm working on," he said. "Stay tuned in the next couple of weeks."