

# The activist chair

As DFL party head, Ken Martin is bucking some longstanding traditions



PHOTO: KEVIN FEATHERLY

Ken Martin, DFL party chair, asserts that a party's main aim is to win elections. "Sure, we have values and a platform and things we stand for, but our job as a party is to win elections — to elect people who share our values."

BY KEVIN FEATHERLY  
Special to Capitol Report

Some people think that DFL Chair Ken Martin saved Rebecca Otto's job.

Of course, State Auditor Otto must win a general election in November to keep that job more than a few more months. But some believe she will have the opportunity to compete in the November general election, at least in part, because of Martin.

Mike Hatch, a former DFL chair who employed Martin as co-manager of his 2006 gubernatorial campaign, is one such observer. "I think Ken can take credit for Otto's victory," Hatch states.

By bucking tradition and choosing sides in an intra-party primary squabble, Hatch says, Martin may have saved Otto from an insurgent challenge by moneyed former DFL House Minority Leader Matt Entenza.

"Traditionally, over the last 15 years, the party chair pretty much has not been spouting off during primaries," Hatch says. "They have a neutral hand in things. Ken was much more of an advocate."

Entenza spent some \$700,000 trying to break back into politics. He put Otto on the defensive over gay marriage and polling place restriction, and placed "Dump Otto" signs on Iron Range lawns. He even made inroads with some labor unions against the incumbent, and some prognosticators thought Entenza might just win.

He didn't come close. Otto trounced Entenza with 81 percent of the vote, despite pledging to spend no more than \$400,000 on her primary and general election contests combined.

Otto thinks Martin stepped up on her behalf because Entenza's challenge offended him. "Democrats were offended, frankly," she says. "He said, 'Not on my watch.' And he meant it."

In sharp contrast to his Republican counterpart, state GOP Chair Keith Downey, Martin, 41, has made a career in behind-the-scenes party politics.

He has worked as a field organizer, and DFL political director during the 1998 election cycle that elevated Jesse Ventura to governor. He has been a fundraiser and campaign strategist both for individual candidates and for causes, leading the 2008 effort to pass the pro-environmental and pro-arts Legacy Amendment, for example.

He was a key figure in the production and dissemination of a 2010 independent expenditure ad that may have helped tip the scales toward Gov. Mark Dayton in his narrow victory over Republican nominee Tom Emmer.

In 2011, Martin was elected party chair. Before long, he drew down some \$725,000 of inherited party debt. At last report earlier this month, the DFL had \$98,000 in outstanding operating debt, compared to \$832,000 in debt for the Minnesota Republicans.

In another break from tradition, Martin was not content to let things rest after Otto's primary victory a few weeks ago. The next day, he took the unusual step of ripping Entenza publicly, accusing him of "blind ambition" and of trying to buy the election. Entenza, Martin added scaldingly, has no future in the DFL.

"Usually you don't shoot at the loser afterwards," Hatch says. "I don't think [Martin] likes to leave a lot of survivors

on the battleground afterwards."

## The Wellstone effect

Martin grew up Eden Prairie, the son of an old-school conservative Republican father and a politically unaffiliated but progressive-minded mother. One of his earliest memories, he says, is marching with his mom in support of the Equal Rights Amendment.

He knew little of party politics until his high school received a 1990 visit from upstart U.S. Senate candidate Paul Wellstone. The diminutive, fiery Carleton College professor captivated Martin.

"Here is this bushy-haired college prof that no one really knew, but who was just full of energy, was sort of a loud-mouth and agitator," Martin recalls. "I just fell in love with the guy."

That visit, Martin says, is what got him thinking about the importance of politics. It set his career in motion.

After enrolling at the University of Kansas, Martin became a committed Democratic activist. In 1992, he organized college campuses on Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma for the Clinton/Gore ticket — his first paid political job.

To run through his entire curriculum vitae would take up the rest of this article. Suffice it to say that Martin has been really never been anything but a political professional.

A few highlights of his career: He ran statewide campaigns for secretary of state candidate Buck Humphrey (2002) and gubernatorial candidate Hatch (2006). He ran the Minnesota for Kerry campaign in 2004. He ran the Clean

## The Martin File

**Name:** Ken Martin

**Age:** 41

**Job:** Chairman, Minnesota DFL

**Grew up in:** Eden Prairie

**Lives in:** Eagan

**Education:** Eden Prairie High School; B.A., political science and history, University of Kansas

**Family:** Married to wife Jennifer O'Rourke, a deputy chief of staff to Gov. Mark Dayton. Two sons, Sam, 11, and James, 9.

**Hobbies/interests:** Martin: "I love to fish, I love to spend time with boys and wife. I love sports, especially basketball." He coaches his boys in youth sports in baseball and basketball.

**Lesson learned:** Martin recently read "The Political Brain," by Drew Weston, a psychologist who studied the 2008 national election. What it taught him: "Democrats need to better understand how the brain works and processes information. They need to use value propositions more, try to appeal to the heart and values, as opposed to statistics and reason. That is why Republicans have been more successful as messengers than Democrats."



# Martin

Continued from page 25

Water Land and Legacy Amendment campaign in 2008. He steered clear of the Obama for President campaign that year because he had earlier helped Hillary Clinton in that race.

He says he was asked to run Mark Dayton's 2010 campaign for governor, but turned Dayton down to work instead for Dayton's ex-wife, Alida Rockefeller Messinger. At the time, she was launching an independent expenditure group, WIN Minnesota.

That group, under the Alliance for a Better Minnesota banner, ran a devastating independent attack ad against GOP nominee Tom Emmer, highlighting Emmer's previous DUI arrests and accusing Emmer of being soft on drunken drivers.

"We played a pivotal role in getting Mark Dayton elected," Martin states flatly. Martin was later called in to manage the resulting Dayton-Emmer recount.

He ran for DFL party chair to replace the outgoing Brian Melendez, Martin says, at Dayton's request. He handily won election, but took the job unaware of the party's desperate financial straits.

A big part of a chair's job is fundraising, he says. But donors are not so keen on making gifts to a party to pay down its debt.

"I was completely floored," he says. "When my comptroller gave me the final report, I sank down in my chair and said, 'What did I get myself into?'"

## Party-building time

He stuck it out, and over time Martin canceled that debt. What's more, Gov. Dayton says, he has built a united DFL that is strong and confident going into fall elections in which the governorship,



PHOTO: KEVIN FEATHERLY

When Ken Martin was elected chair of the Minnesota DFL, the party was \$725,000 in debt. A big part of the DFL chair's job is fundraising, he said, but donors are not so keen on making gifts to pay down party debt.

the DFL House majority and U.S. Sen. Al Franken's seat are all up for grabs. Martin has the party in good, competitive shape, the governor says.

"He is very good with strategy," Dayton says. "He has very good political judgment, and he is very good on the operational details — which is really the unglamorous but crucial part of political parties."

Otto agrees. "What marks his tenure

is that he is a very astute businessman," she says.

"He gets the finances," she says. "He understands politics and relationships. He understands managing expectations. And he is a very strong communicator." She says she is grateful that Martin was at the switches when Entenza challenged her incumbency.

Dayton says Martin is doing a "tremendous job." "He restored the fiscal integrity of the party," Dayton says. "He has provided the means for that party to do what it needs to do — to elect and re-elect candidates all over the state."

As chair, Martin says, his eyes never stray far from that prize — winning elections. That, he says, is what parties exist for.

To some, that is a controversial statement. Martin recounts a conversation he once had with one party loyalist, who he declines to name, back when he was running to become DFL chair.

The activist expressed surprise that Martin even wanted the job. Why, he asked. Because, Martin was told, "You are a campaign manager, that's what you do. But elections are just a small part of what we do. We are a movement."

"I said, 'No, we're not,'" Martin recalls. The party's job is to win elections, plain and simple, he says.

"Sure, we have values and a platform and things we stand for," he adds, "but our job as a party is to win elections — to elect people who share our values, share our concern for the future, have a similar vision on how we move it forward."

Martin's hero and mentor, Sen. Wellstone, used to say that unless you are in politics to win elections, you are — to borrow a family-friend's euphemism — simply making water in the breeze. Martin buys into that idea wholeheartedly.

"Otherwise," he says, "all we are doing is agitating."

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