

Olson leaves footprint across Minnesota

By William Blazar

David Olson left an indelible mark as president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce these past 23 years. He truly was one of the greatest champions for Minnesota. The tributes that poured in following his untimely death July 16 underscored his tenacity to help businesses succeed in this state and hire more Minnesotans.

David made grassroots participation central to every aspect of our organization's work. He crisscrossed the state regularly, connecting with businesses of all sizes and types. He was as comfortable talking with a business owner on Main Street as he was addressing the directors of a Fortune 500 company.

Some of his deepest personal and professional relationships were with our local chamber of commerce partners. Local chambers were his roots. Prior to joining the Minnesota Chamber, he began as a staffer at the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce, and, then, excelled leading the Burnsville Chamber of Commerce and the TwinWest Chamber of Commerce.

He never forgot where he received his start. The resources and time he offered personally, and that provided by other Minnesota Chamber staff, will not be found at any other state chamber in the country.

If local chambers had an "ask," David responded. He was often a facilitator for local chamber board retreats. He was happy to jump in his car to speak at a legislative breakfast or board meeting. He was a mentor to local chamber leaders across the state and the country. He accompanied a Minnesota delegation on an annual trip to Washington, D.C.

The impact of his interactions was evident at his funeral as chamber leaders from International Falls to Winona came to pay their final respects. Other regions were represented as well including North Dakota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Washington, D.C.

His insistence on listening to member concerns – and then engaging employers and employees at the Capitol – was evident both in the Chamber's organizational strength and legislative accomplishments. In 2012, our 95-percent member retention was recognized as the highest among state chambers for the fifth consecutive year.

The Minnesota Chamber delivered many legislative priorities for businesses, and local chambers were always key partners under David's leadership. Significant achievements included workers' compensation reform, the "Vote Yes" campaigns for transportation funding, and this year we repealed the sales tax on business-to-business transactions.

Other organizations sought David for his expertise in shaping and advancing public policy. In recent years, ensuring a skilled workforce for Minnesota employers became a high priority for him personally as well as for the Minnesota Chamber. He served six years on the Minnesota State Colleges &

Universities Board of Trustees, including as chair from 2007-10. His tenure was marked by new initiatives to better align postsecondary offerings with workforce needs.

David had an uncanny ability to bring people together for setting strategy and solving problems. He had a great combination of ingenuity, persistence and humor – and, most importantly, was able to turn that into action and accomplishments.

He loved our state. He worked every day to make it better and loved being engaged in anything and everything that would make our economy stronger.

The Minnesota Chamber and our network of local chambers – the statewide business community – are stronger than ever today. That's testament to David's leadership and the foundation on which we intend to continue building. His sights were set on helping our economy change and grow. That vision is ours. With local chambers as partners, we will make that reality.

William Blazar is interim president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce – www.mnchamber.com.