

Profile: Mike Hatch

The DFL gubernatorial candidate was shaped by a family that lived and breathed politics, and by the merchant marine.

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Mike Hatch had barely buckled his seat belt when Kari Erickson pulled away from the Lexington in St. Paul, steering with one hand while passing him a cell phone with the other. "You need to return this phone call," she said.

"This is the 'why am I an angry bastard' call?" Hatch asked with more relish than reluctance.

Erickson, the spine of his bare-bones staff, nodded as Hatch punched in the number.

"Hey," he began, his answer unfurling like a banner. Hatch, who was first elected as attorney general in 1998, doesn't duck his combative reputation; he claims it -- although what some call anger he redefines as passion.

"Have I yelled at a few executives?" he said. "Yeah. And I'm proud of it. I'd do it again. It's good to have a reputation of being tough. It actually helps me.

"When I go into negotiations, they may not push so much because they know I'll push back."

Throughout this explanation, he slipped Erickson a series of driving directions -- take a left here, right at the second light -- without missing a beat. In a tight race for the governor's office, there's no time to waste. From the Capitol to the State Fairgrounds to the Lex, Hatch knows the best back-street routes. It's a sense of direction that wasn't always evident.

Seeking relevance

Hatch, 57, grew up in Duluth, where his father sold heavy equipment to mining companies. He was a so-so high-school student who became a ho-hum college student. After three quarters at the University of Minnesota/Duluth, he dropped out, finding classes irrelevant. "It's not a failure to recognize when something isn't working," he said. "I think that's a lesson in life."

He joined the U.S. merchant marine in 1967 and began working on the ore boats that docked on the toughest sides of some tough cities. In Milwaukee, he got rolled, learning that it's best to throw your money on the ground and "run like hell." In Cleveland, he was aghast to see its polluted river, which infamously ignited some months later. In Detroit, he witnessed a riot -- fueled by race, poverty and the Vietnam War -- that left 43 dead and hundreds injured. It was enough to send him back to UMD. After two more quarters, though, he dropped out again, still seeking relevance.

He returned to the ore boats, only to dock in Chicago on April 4, 1968, the day the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The city erupted in riots. Looking back, Hatch says now, his life as a seaman resembled the movie character Forrest Gump, who serendipitously kept finding himself in the midst of history-making events. "I started waking up to what was going on in the world."

Hatch's seaman's career came to a close when he shoved a ship's officer after the man spewed something about black people and Bobby Kennedy. "And that," Hatch said, "is when I became a Democrat."

The activist gene

Mike Hatch was raised a Republican, although he notes that the 1950s GOP "was more

about civil rights than the Democrats [were]." One afternoon in 1960, he was swept along with his sister's sorority to picket the local Woolworth's as part of a nationwide protest against the company's segregated lunch counters.

"I remember being in the back seat with all these petticoats," Hatch said, laughing. The manager explained that there were no black people in Duluth to discriminate against. But the moment stuck.

"It made a big impact on us," his sister, Susan Devine, said from her home in Sacramento, Calif. "It was almost inconceivable to us that people weren't able to sit at a lunch counter."

The activist gene had its roots in Battle Lake, Minn., where Hatch's grandparents settled after emigrating from Norway. His grandfather was mayor, and he became known for defending the town's only Jewish family after neighbors objected to them hanging laundry on the Christian Sabbath.

Twelve children were born in a clapboard house and each attended a university or a vocational school, the nine sisters cutting quite a swath as college-educated women in the 1940s.

Devine remembers that family dinners on the front porch were served with a side of political discussions -- debates in which their grandmother was front and center. "They were passionate discussions," she said. Activism was tangible, as well. Their grandmother was always knitting socks and mittens from every odd strand of yarn available, then piling the kids in the car to deliver the items to poor farm families. "The message was always that we needed to care for others less fortunate than ourselves," Devine said.

Sometimes, these people were within arm's reach. Hatch's mother and father both were alcoholics. His mother died in 1967 from the disease, and one of the reasons Hatch returned to earn his degree from UMD was to care for his father. Devine emphasized that their father always kept his job, always provided for the family. But alcoholism was a fact of life -- and a fact that, once acknowledged, gets little elaboration.

Hatch has said he thinks it's improper for politicians to parade personal details about their childhoods because it intrudes into the lives of siblings. These days, he candidly acknowledges his father's struggles, but stresses that his dad finally sought treatment, "and the last three years of his life, I got to know a great guy."

A houseful of history

A painting of the Battle Lake house hangs in the foyer of the attorney general's office. The house is still in the family, and Hatch is its chief caretaker. Emotions about the house leave him unexpectedly subdued.

"I know this sounds kind of odd," he says, "but that house is a grandparent to my daughters."

When this is later repeated to his wife, Patti, a smile flits across her face. Early on, she didn't grasp the fierce loyalty to a house that isn't even on the lake. But she now describes it as a sanctuary. Thick scrapbooks document each branch of the family. They still use their grandmother's china and crystal.

Then there are the steppingstones. Decades ago, Uncle Charlie, the oldest of the 12 siblings, decided that each family member should have a concrete steppingstone. But the tradition lost steam; stones fell into disrepair. One summer, Hatch resurrected the idea and began pouring concrete into forms; family members pressed their handprints into the

wet concrete and recorded their names and the date. The stones now wind their way around the house and through the gardens.

There are stones with paw prints, witness to the family's golden retrievers. One has a horse's hoof print. "History continues to be recorded there," Patti said.

A hands-on candidate

Mike Hatch inhales history. An offhand comment about the Capitol transforms him into tour guide, with insights into architect Cass Gilbert's psyche. Did you know that the colors of each wing's walls and drapes create a mood, such as regal red for the Supreme Court, populist green for the House? See that mural in the House chambers with the owl and the hourglass? It means that time runs fast, so wise people speak quickly.

Up and down the halls, Hatch points out such minutiae, sounding envious of Gilbert's control, for Hatch, too, likes to stay close to the action. Delegating work seems not to occur to him. Whether that's from being dutiful, or a workaholic, or a control freak, is hard to say.

Take the sight that greeted former Gov. Wendell Anderson in June as he drove down to the DFL nominating convention in Rochester. "About 20 miles out of town, I started seeing all these Hatch for Governor signs. They were everywhere, and I thought I'd hate to be one of the other candidates driving down here." Anderson cruised on, impressed with the size and effort of the Hatch organization.

Later, he learned that Hatch and a friend had placed each of those signs over Memorial Day weekend. "Mike personally went up to all those farmers whose fields lined the highway and asked if he could put up a sign," Anderson said.

Hatch's campaign staff is Lilliputian compared to what people expect of those pursuing a high-stakes office. Hatch often drives himself to events and is a hawk for keeping Patti's Pacifica SUV from becoming a rolling bin of brochures and empty water bottles. The dog hair is bad enough.

Bare-bones can take a toll. A reporter calling to follow up on an e-mail to the campaign's general address was told that it's probably in "a black hole" with thousands of other unread messages.

"Mike is very realistic, very frugal," Patti said. "He believes that people who have donated to the campaign want their money to be spent wisely."

Of dogs and daughters

The Hatches live in Burnsville, and Patti teaches third grade. Every morning at 5:30, Hatch walks 4 miles with his golden retrievers, Bella and Laddy. Every morning, no matter the weather. "It can be pouring rain and he walks," Patti said.

The walk is good exercise for a guy whose knees no longer can handle the racquetball court or the hockey rink. But mostly, the walk is his time to think.

As with most things he does, he thinks with intensity. "If I pass him on the way to school and honk, sometimes it doesn't even register," Patti said.

They have three daughters, Katharine, Elizabeth and Anne, to whom Hatch is wildly devoted. His devotion hit the headlines in 2004 when Elizabeth and Anne were charged with battery and resisting arrest after Chicago police said they fought with them outside a nightclub. Anderson, who is also a longtime Hatch friend, said they "could have settled it quietly, and it's not that they [the daughters] were perfect, but he thought there was an overreaction on the part of the police." The judge ruled against the prosecution, but only

after the misdemeanor case became a media scrum.

The Chicago incident showed Hatch at his most pugnacious, but adjectives differ, often according to party affiliation and agenda. Anderson would call it a sense of indignation. "I've never seen Mike go after anybody who is less powerful than him," he said.

The ghost of Hubert Humphrey

Hatch was grabbing a bite to eat at the Lexington, where he's a lunchtime fixture. The waitress mentioned that she wanted to put a Hatch sign in her lawn but found them hard to come by. Hatch told her he'd have a bunch sent directly to the restaurant. She beamed and through the swinging door of the kitchen could be heard telling the others, "Mike says he's going to drop off some signs!"

Hatch appeared not to hear, but launched into a story about Hubert Humphrey having lunch at the Minneapolis Club in 1964 after being elected vice president. A high-powered executive stopped by Humphrey's table to tell him that if the election had been determined by a vote of the people at the club, he'd never have won.

Hatch took a bite of coleslaw, pacing himself toward the punch line.

"And Humphrey went back into the kitchen and brought out the wait staff and told him, 'Yes, I would.' "