

Life of the Party

Saulius Anuzis was born to blue-collar immigrants, grew up in Detroit, and rides a Harley. So what's he doing running the state GOP? // By Jack Lessenberry // Illustration by Curtis Parker

His dad was an electrician from the old country who spent his career in the Fisher Body plant on Fort Street. Saulius "Saul" Anuzis was born in Detroit in the 1950s, grew up, joined the Teamsters, enrolled at U. of M.-Dearborn, but left after four years just shy of a degree.

Then he founded his own business, bought a big Harley motorcycle, and hugged his ethnic roots closely, marrying a fellow Lithuanian (Lina Alksninis) and giving their four boys Lithuanian names. He also encourages them to speak their ancestral tongue at home.

That's just the kind of man who was the bread-and-butter of the Democratic Party for decades. Forty years ago, a guy like that would no more have dreamed of voting Republican than of seeking to join Oakland Hills Country Club.

Yet Anuzis is the very visible, constantly in-motion chair of the Michigan GOP. When we caught up with him, he was busily messaging from his BlackBerry during a whirlwind tour of the Upper Peninsula, where he was asking GOP groups what they thought happened last November.

Past GOP chairs have often been multi-millionaires like the controversial Betsy DeVos, or patrician men like Mel Larsen, or policy wonks like Harvard-educated Spencer Abraham. Anuzis, however, doesn't pretend to be anything other than a bright, self-made businessman and political junkie who believes passionately in the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps ideology of Newt Gingrich's Conservative Opportunity Society.

As his blog tagline says, "That's Saul, folks!" Not only does he love to roar up to a big political dinner on his "hog," he got Dick DeVos to ride a motorcycle on a barnstorming trip Downriver last summer.

If that won DeVos any votes, they have yet to be counted. Yet Anuzis was just re-elected — without opposition — to a second term as GOP state chair. What makes that doubly unusual is that his party got badly beaten in last year's elections, losing the ticket's top races by near-historic landslides.



an element nearly lost in politics today. When U.S. Rep. Sandy Levin's son Andy moved back to metro Detroit to run for a Troy-based state Senate seat, Anuzis showed up at the younger Levin's new home (then still being renovated by contractors) with a "welcome" basket that contained a map of the Senate district and lots of helpful information about Michigan. Naturally, he just happened to bring reporters and photographers with him. The message: Andy's a carpetbagger who doesn't live here, and just wants political office.

Election result: While statewide Democrats swept the district, GOP nominee John Pappageorge eked out a surprising 722-vote victory. An unknown Green Party candidate rolled up a surprising 3,129 votes. Did the stunt make a difference?

Well, Anuzis won himself another two years of chicken-dinner fundraisers and the task of persuading someone to volunteer to be slaughtered by popular U.S. Sen. Carl Levin next year.

At home, Anuzis' wife, a lovely 43-year-

There's an element of merry prankster in Anuzis, an element nearly lost in politics today. ... Anuzis showed up at the younger Levin's new home with a "welcome" basket that contained a map of the Senate district and lots of helpful information about Michigan.

Normally, such resounding defeats are followed by a leadership purge. But Anuzis lobbied behind the scenes, arguing, "This was a national election. The voters were angry at the war. They punished Republicans everywhere.

"Look at what Republicans did accomplish. We held on to the state Senate. This was the only major state where we didn't lose any congressional seats."

There's an element of merry prankster in Anuzis,

old who shares a birthday with George W. Bush, sighs playfully. "Either Saul is home all the time or he is never home," she says.

But why, by the way, did this son of immigrants become a ... Republican?

Blame Teddy Kennedy. That's how Anuzis tells it. His family hadn't been political. His parents, refugees from ravaged Lithuania, met in a refugee camp in Germany after the war. When they first arrived in

the United States, they lived in a church basement in Minnesota. His father struggled to learn English and teach himself the electrician's trade from a set of books a priest gave him.

The elder Anuzis managed both efforts and got a job as a skilled tradesman at the Detroit Fleetwood Fisher Body plant on Fort Street. They bought a house on DaCosta Street, had two daughters and then, on March 6, 1959, Saulius came along, to be followed by another boy. "It wasn't the kind of home where you talked much about politics," Anuzis says. What he does remember is that his family voted against President Gerald Ford. They thought he was too cozy with the Russians. When Ford said, "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe," he was dead meat on DaCosta Street.

The next year, Anuzis went to college. Money was tight, so he decided to study economics at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. One day in 1980, he and his buddies were sitting in the school cafeteria and heard about a Teddy Kennedy for president club.

That, he says, made his skin crawl. "Maybe I didn't know yet what I was for, but I knew what I was against," he says. He saw Kennedy as a bloated aristocrat who had a free pass through life and thought he could get away with, literally, murder.

"A blonde in every pond," he says.

Anuzis and his pals took over student government with a reform slate, then founded the school's first-ever college Republican club. Two years later, he was working for Dick Posthumus. School? Well, uh, he says, "I just have to write one more paper and I'll have that degree. But every time I go to start it ..."

Anuzis left politics in 1990 to start his own telecommunications business. Today he is chairman of the Clarkston-based Quick Connect USA, which provides voice and data solutions for a wide variety of businesses.

The firm has been successful, judging from the beauty of his eclectic, rambling, added-onto 1932 home, on Grand River just north of Lansing's city limits. The family needs space; sons Matas, 18, Tadas, 16, Vytyis, 15, and Marius, "almost 12," all live at home.

The family motto, "Attitude is everything," is displayed above the kitchen door. It's a phrase Anuzis embraces so completely that he used to give his boys a dollar a day if they could recite super-salesman Zig Ziglar's Ten Rules for Success.

Anuzis knows his party needs a pep talk. "What happened is we lost our brand," he says. "The voters wanted to throw the bums out — and we became the bums." But he remains relentlessly upbeat.

"We need to embrace our principles, learn from our mistakes, and take back control," he says. Nobody really knows yet what will happen in next year's political wars. What is clear is that Anuzis plans to love every minute of it. ■

Lessenberry is a Detroit-area writer, political columnist, and Wayne State University professor. E-mail: editorial@hourdetroit.com.



McLain's Change of Tune Lacks Perfect Pitch

• Talk about throwing a curve. **Denny McLain**, the flamboyant pitcher who won 31 games for the 1968 world-champion Tigers and then served two sentences in federal prison, is at it again.

His recent autobiography, *I Told You I Wasn't Perfect* (Triumph Books, \$24.95), written with local sports journalist Eli Zaret, is filled with as many inconsistencies as there are in his controversial life.

McLain also wrote a book about himself in 1975, *Nobody's Perfect* (Dial Press), with Dave Diles. A comparison of the two books shows that, in a number of cases, McLain has pitched different versions of his own story. Guess we shouldn't be surprised; as his book titles confess: He's not perfect.

Here's a roster of McLain's "literary" change-ups.

In 1967, McLain was moonlighting as a bookie, working with a restaurant owner named Clyde Roberts. In the first book, McLain said he borrowed \$7,000 to get going. In the new book, he's revised his stats, saying he borrowed \$10,500.

In 1975, McLain recalled Roberts inviting him to start taking bets by saying: "Why should we keep losing our money like this? I know some guys who bet pretty good, and we could go into the *other* end of this business."

In the new book, he slips in a fast one. Roberts is quoted as saying: "Check it out. You're losing \$200 to \$300 a week on college and pro basketball. Since I know a lotta other guys who place a ton of action, why don't we start taking the action instead of giving all the money to the bookies?"

McLain also offers varying opinions on Al Kaline.

In 1975, McLain wrote: "It didn't surprise me, either, when Al decided to call it quits in 1973. Most truly great athletes know better than anyone else when the time has come to hang them up. Al has been a quality performer on and off the field...."

In his latest version, he's less charitable toward the Tigers' famous No. 6, writing: "As respectfully as I can say it about a Hall of Fame player, Kaline wasn't the most loved SOB in the clubhouse, and we did win the pennant without him [in 1968, when Kaline missed 52 games with a injury]."

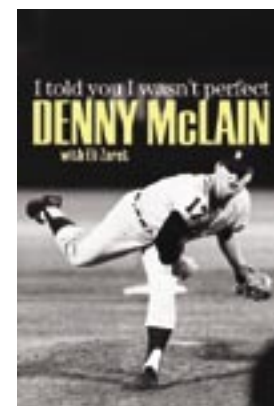
In 1970, while still pitching for the Tigers, McLain got into trouble for dumping buckets of water on two sportswriters.

In his first book, McLain described receiving help from teammate Joe Niekro. In the latest pages, the helper was identified as Tigers pitcher Joe Sparma.

In 1975, McLain remembered how one of his targets, *Detroit Free Press* baseball writer Jim Hawkins, had "just stood there" when he dumped the water. In 2007, McLain wrote Hawkins got soaked as he "sat down on the stool by my locker."

In the new book, McLain admits his fatal flaw is "twisting the truth to mean whatever served my mood of the moment."

At least he gets one pitch right over the plate. — Tom McCarey



"AS RESPECTFULLY AS I CAN SAY IT ABOUT A HALL OF FAME PLAYER, KALINE WASN'T THE MOST LOVED SOB IN THE CLUBHOUSE, AND WE DID WIN THE PENNANT WITHOUT HIM [IN 1968, WHEN KALINE MISSED 52 GAMES WITH A INJURY]."

— DENNY McCLAIN