

Mr. Speaker, Public Servant

Shawn Jasper '89 learned a lot about politics on his family's farm

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Growing up on his family's poultry farm in Hudson, New Hampshire, **Shawn Jasper '89** quickly learned about the pecking order. When new chickens are introduced to an existing flock, all the birds run around getting into scuffles and trying to establish

dominance. Within a few days, they sort themselves into a new hierarchy, and all remains peaceful until there's another challenge.

Jasper's surprise election as Speaker of the New Hampshire House of Representatives last year resembled a barnyard dust-up, but it took months for things to settle. The right wing of his own party repeatedly tried to oust him and reinstate the previous Republican speaker, Bill O'Brien, a Tea Party-affiliated legislator who led the often fractious, 400-member body in 2011 and 2012.

A genial man who primarily uses his Twitter account to wish his House colleagues happy birthday, Jasper has fended off O'Brien's challenges and smoothed a host of ruffled feathers. He has assigned many of his GOP colleagues to their preferred committees, allowed the Republican caucus to determine legislative priorities and then advanced the party's agenda as effectively as possible, given that the governor is a Democrat and the GOP does not have a veto-proof majority. "I try to make sure people are as happy as they can be: happy with their committee assignments, happy with the transparency of the operation and happy knowing that the leadership of the House is representing the majority," he says.

Jasper's dad stopped farming when Jasper was 12 or 13, instead renting out some of the farmhouses that covered the family's four properties. But Jasper wanted to try egg farming with up-to-date techniques, so he went to UNH to study agriculture. He left after a year to work in his cousin's poultry business, where he learned the skills to start his own, but he maintained ties with Alpha Gamma Rho, the agricultural fraternity. In 1983, Jasper, too, got out of farming and started converting the farm buildings to commercial real estate.

When his newlywed sister and brother-in-law offered to oversee the properties for a couple of years, Jasper leapt at the chance to return to UNH, where he lived in the fraternity house while earning a degree in applied business management from the Thompson School. "It really bothered me that I didn't have any degree at all," he says. "That was a good program to give me a good, solid base."

Jasper has been in public service since he was 21, often holding two positions at once, and he was just finishing up his first House term when he returned to UNH. By the time Republicans swept the 2010 elections, he had risen to House deputy majority leader, and was appointed by O'Brien to several important committees. But Jasper and O'Brien soon clashed, so the speaker removed him from the committees and demoted him. "He got so mad at me, he threw me out of his office," Jasper recalls.

Republicans lost control of the Legislature in 2012. When they regained it in 2014, Jasper opposed O'Brien's return as speaker, concerned O'Brien's refusal to compromise with Democrats — and even members of his own party — would paralyze the Legislature. "There are people in government who just don't believe in government at all," Jasper says. "I'm a conservative Republican of the old school: I believe in government, I believe it has jobs to do, and I want it to function as efficiently as possible in achieving those goals."

In the Republican caucus vote, O'Brien edged out another former speaker as the GOP's candidate. But in the House contest, enough Republicans defected that he failed to win a clear majority against the Democrats' candidate. Jasper threw his hat into the ring, the Democratic candidate bowed out, and the minority Democrats lined up behind Jasper, who won a majority in the third round of voting.

Since then, Jasper has used the power of the gavel to restore the historical dignity of the House, insisting that everyone speak and behave courteously, despite their ideological differences. "My biggest priority is to make sure the House functions as a respectful institution," he says.

He is also renewing his ties to UNH, where his daughter is a senior political science major. He'll assume a non-voting seat on the University System board of trustees, with the goal of holding down costs while ensuring that today's students are preparing for good jobs in state. "We've got to make sure there is a true partnership between our university and our business community," he says, "so there are good jobs in New Hampshire for our New Hampshire graduates."

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- WRITTEN BY:
[Katharine Webster](#) | freelance writer

PHOTOGRAPHER:
[Bill Truslow](#) | Communications and Public Affairs

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