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Political resurgence

BY JAMES CONMY
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From going door-to-door in Nanticoke asking people to vote to driving an elderly man to the polls, the new chairman of the Luzerne County Democratic Party believes in leading by example.

So attorney Mark Bufalino was on the Election Day front lines. When the West Pittston resident wasn't knocking on doors in Nanticoke or making sure Joseph Iacangelo got to vote, Bufalino was helping organize phone banks at the Operating Engineers building in Plains Township. Then, Bufalino and other leaders in the party gathered at the courthouse and monitored incoming election results.

The end result was victories for several Democrats, including the county party playing a part in electing the first United States senator from Northeastern Pennsylvania and wresting away a congressional seat from a traditionally Republican district. Bufalino, 36, labeled his first election since taking over the party in June as a success.

"I felt like we needed to get back to basics and re-engage the committee people," Bufalino said Saturday. "By making sure more voices are heard, it creates a feeling of involvement. I just wanted to reinforce the reality that every person in the party has a say and his or her opinion matters."

State Rep. John Yudichak barely knew Bufalino prior to his becoming the party's chair. The two really spent their first significant time together when they went door-to-door in Yudichak's district.

"Mark brings talent, energy and vision — qualities a leader in politics absolutely must have," Yudichak said. "I also think you have to be accessible and Mark has done that. He has opened the doors to the party."

Bufalino insists the credit should go to the party's committee members. Whether they knocked on doors, made phone calls or put up signs, they are responsible for the success, he said. Bill Vinsko, attorney for the party's executive committee, said Bufalino's accessibility has re-energized the party.

"The biggest change is the enthusiasm," Vinsko said. "Candidates are looking to the party for support, rather than working independently, which is going to naturally lead to greater unification."

No single person or group of people was responsible for the divide in the party during recent years, Bufalino said. The party needs to put the past behind it and move on, he said. Party members young and old will be needed to accomplish that goal, Bufalino said.

"Former chairs like Joe Mazur and Jim Bach," Bufalino said, "those guys have had immeasurable value to the party in the past, they continue to bring that value to the present and hopefully the future."

A key component of Bufalino's initial months of leadership has been his ability to perpetuate the party's philosophies and ideals, said Bill Riccetti, a Dupont resident and active member of the party's Third District. In the limited amount of time he has known Bufalino, Riccetti has been impressed with his dedication.

“Mark shows a lot of tact and diplomacy in dealing with various people across the party,” Riccetti said. “He’s really been a unifier.”

Bufalino’s next challenge will be this May’s primary election when a slew of Democrats will be seeking county and local offices. Key races include the new seat on the county’s judiciary, district attorney and maintaining the majority in the commissioners’ office.