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As dragons go, the one in Smyth, Tazewell counties is sweet for riders, businesses

By Amy Friedenberger

TAZEWELL -- Marcus Suikki veered his motorcycle off the road, climbed off the bike and lifted up his helmet.

"That's some intense riding! Whew!" Suikki told Phil Woods, who pulled up beside him. "I wish we had roads like this back home, I tell you."

Not too far behind, Wayne Lake slowed down his heavyweight Harley-Davidson on a curve crawling with a kudzu wall.

"He goes a little slower, but he rides that Harley like he stole it," Suikki, 46, said.

The three friends traveled from Canada just to ride this winding road in far Southwest Virginia. They took out their cameras and photographed the view from the overlook: mountain ranges and rolling hills dotted with barns and hay bales.

They enjoyed the views and the challenging curves of scenic Virginia 16 so much that they'd ridden it three times that day in June. For Woods, it was his third time making the trip, bringing a new person with him each time.

"The roads are fantastic, and the people are so nice down here," said Woods, who just turned 50 and was celebrating with a road trip.

The serpentine road between Marion and the town of Tazewell has been popular among a small number of motorcycle enthusiasts long before it received the name "Back of the Dragon" a few years ago. Now it's gaining attention as a tourism attraction, drawing thousands of motorcyclists and sports cars enthusiasts to the region each year. For the economically struggling county of Tazewell, the road has accelerated an enthusiasm among the community to revitalize.

**32 miles**

The road that twists and turns between Smyth and Tazewell counties has been there for nearly a century.

During the Great Depression, the federally funded Civilian Conservation Corps put hundreds of thousands of young people to work in the countryside to make sites like Civil War battlefields accessible and to clear the way for the Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway. CCC workers also built Virginia 16.

It's a 32-mile stretch of the byway that hugs the contours of three mountains. Four hundred sharp curves zigzag up and down, making drivers feel like they're on a roller coaster.

Back of the Dragon begins at Hungry Mother State Park north of Marion. Its terminus is in Tazewell, a town that once thrived from coal mining.

"You could come up Main Street, and there were all these retail stores, different places, furniture stores," said Pam Warden, the economic development director for Tazewell. "It was the same as every coal mining community. You would go to town and it was wall-to-wall people on the streets."

When coal declined, those stores closed and buildings became vacant. The people left, too. Tazewell County has about 42,500 residents, which is down 16% from 1980. About 4,200 people live in the town of Tazewell, which has lost 10% of its population over the last decade. Families fractured. A parent who loses a job finds work elsewhere while the other parent and children stay at home in Tazewell County. With too many young people leaving and an aging population, the area's birth rate is low and its death rate is high.

Larry Davidson developed a fondness for Tazewell from frequent visits as a child to see his grandmother. He grew up 20 miles away in Canebrake, West Virginia, where he came from a coal mining family. He enjoyed the thrill of being in the car on Virginia 16 on the way to Hungry Mother State Park in Smyth County, even if it made him carsick.

He left the area in 1967 to join the Air Force. He returned in 1977 to be a miner, but soon enlisted in the Army. He came back for good in 1999 and started teaching at a high school. In his free time, he rode motorcycles on Virginia 16.

"When I came back, I saw how devastated the area had been because of coal going out," Davidson said. "I thought, well, why can't we do something with the road?"

**New idea for old road**

Davidson, now 70, set out on his motorcycle several years ago with a dozen T-shirts in his backpack.

He talked to motorcyclists about what appealed to them about the road, and he quickly sold the T-shirts featuring a drawing of a vicious dragon.

"That gave me an idea that maybe we're onto something," Davidson said.

Davidson had been riding motorcycles for years, and he knew people who came to the area just for the road. But what if Tazewell marketed the road? Tazewell isn't on the way to a lot of places, so there really has to be a reason for people to visit this small town.

"I saw a community in dire straits from the decline in coal, and I wanted to see something lift it up," Davidson said.

In another mountainous area on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina, local entrepreneurs came up with the same idea. In the 1990s, they branded a similarly sinuous road "Tail of the Dragon." It features 318 turns in 11 miles, and it's become a tourist attraction.

Yet Virginia 16 has more miles and turns.

Davidson talked to local government officials and state lawmakers about the idea. He whipped up another T-shirt and went to Richmond to give it to then-Gov. Bob McDonnell.

In 2012, the state designated the road as Back of the Dragon. It's the only designated motorcycle route in Virginia.

"Initially, I was a little skeptical of the concept," said Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell, who patroned legislation for the designation.

There are more than 4 million miles of roads in the United States. Was this stretch of 32 really that special?

**Tourism driver**

Jamie Cartwright waves in 178 BMW sports cars ' valued at about $10 million ' to park in a gravel lot at the welcome center for Back of the Dragon in Tazewell.

"Mama driving! Love it! Love it!" Cartwright cheers at an older woman driving while her husband sat in the passenger seat. Cartwright came from working at the Pocahontas Exhibition Mine and Museum in that Virginia coalfields town to do marketing for Back of the Dragon.

Each year, the BMW Z-Series Car Club of America group picks a destination for its annual gathering with a thrilling road, and this June, it chose Back of the Dragon.

"This is just a remarkable area," said Kathy Desruisseau, who drove from Oklahoma with her husband.

Attendees crawled out of their cars and crammed into a trailer to buy T-shirts, hats and patches. They took pictures with a massive red and black dragon. Mostly middle-aged to recent retirees, they ate lunch catered by a local business inside an empty building that will soon serve as the new, spacious welcome center for Back of the Dragon.

In just a few years, the road's souvenirs trailer has outgrown the number of people passing through, an estimated 60,000 motorcyclists in 2017, according to data. That doesn't include sports car drivers.

"The thing that thrills me is, the biggest thing this shows is, we have an opportunity here that is phenomenal, because they're here looking at what God has given us," Davidson said. "The road is exciting, the road being named by the state, the road is technical, and they just love to come and love to enjoy that camaraderie and ride the road."

The Tazewell County Industrial Development Authority is receiving a $450,000 loan from the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission to go toward the new $1.6 million, 5,000-square foot welcome center. The commission, which doles out money from Virginia's portion of the national tobacco settlement, focuses its funding on projects to benefit economically depressed parts of the state.

The local goal is for a soft opening of the new Back of the Dragon Welcome Center in October and a grand opening in the spring.

"The success of Back of the Dragon is important, because our success as a community continues based on its success," Cartwright said.

While it's rare to have a large gathering such as the BMW group in Tazewell, it's normal to have motorcycles, Mustangs, Camaros and Corvettes cruising along Main Street. They don't just come from Virginia or the East Coast. They've had visitors from all over the country. Canadians come often. People put cars on ships from Europe so they can drive on roads like Back of the Dragon.

"Back of the Dragon has been a driver for people to be able to come in and have a tourist attraction," Davidson said.

Bard Scott and Al Roberts drove their motorcycles from Michigan to experience both Tail of the Dragon and Back of the Dragon.

"Michigan is pretty flat, so you've got to come down here for this kind of stuff," Scott said.

They paused at a rest stop along Back of the Dragon to look over a valley in Tazewell County.

"It's like a picture from Norman Rockwell," Scott said.

While a challenging road, Back of the Dragon has a safe reputation. In the past several years, no one driving the road for fun has died. The Virginia Department of Transportation sweeps the road weekly to remove gravel that's potentially hazardous for motorcyclists.

Rick Wood, who serves on Richlands Town Council, helped usher the BMWs into the parking lot. He later asked Davidson if he ever thought some T-shirts stuffed in a backpack would lead to this.

Davidson said no.

"I always had the thought if God opened the door, do I have the stamina and patience to step through it? The door has been opened, now what do we do. This is the key," Davidson said. "This is why it's so important that it takes all of us. This is not about me. This is about us as a community, us as Southwest Virginia, us as the state of Virginia."

**Community transformation**

Claudine Blankenship ran through that symbolic newly opened door. People were coming to Tazewell, and they needed things to do and food to eat.

She bought an old car dealership near the Back of the Dragon Welcome Center and turned it into a brewery, which her son owns and operates.

"The community is actually taking hold of being progressive and thinking beyond where we have been with the coal industry," Blankenship said.

Painted Peak Brewing is among several businesses that have opened or expanded during the past few years. Tazewell County Administrator Eric Young credits Back of the Dragon with the revival along Main Street.

"In the past, I wasn't convinced tourism was a way to go, but tourism is a means to an end, not the end," Young said. "If we want to attract employers, we need amenities, and Back of the Dragon has started to bring us restaurants and shopping."

Main Street, once lined with vacant buildings, has indeed transformed.

"I can tell you in 2012, you couldn't buy a soft drink on Main Street," said Todd Day, Tazewell's town manager. "Forget about a hard drink, you couldn't buy a soft drink."

The Front Porch on Main occupies a historical residence and is one of several new restaurants downtown. A former jail is now an inn. Two old banks turned into The Well Coffee Shop and Clinch Mountain Motor Works, which sells custom-built motorcycles.

As the executive director of Tazewell Today, a local initiative to revitalize Main Street, Amanda Hoops has organized festivals and events to encourage people to invest and take pride in their community. She and her husband, Tazewell's mayor Michael Hoops, moved back after living in urban and suburban parts of Virginia with a mission to help the region to which they are connected.

"Our goal is to keep pushing the town forward," Amanda Hoops said.

Some Tazewell residents push back when they're told the town's population is declining. The Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia projects Tazewell County's population will decline another 10% over the next two decades.

Still, they're starting to see some people move back to the area. Tiffany Catron, 31, went away for college and lived in various places before coming back to Tazewell. She has a new appreciation for what the town has to offer.

"I always thought Tazewell was too small for me," Catron said.

Tazewell is trying to build a lively community that encourages people to return home, or attracts new residents, said Dave Blankenship, Claudine's son who owns the brewery. The roadmap for change starts with Back of the Dragon.

"The brilliance of Mr. Davidson's approach was he understood what we have to offer," he said. "We may not have large corporate offices, but we do have natural beauty. When we started bringing more people here, we saw that trail of commerce and new businesses."

Surrounding areas also reap the benefits from Back of the Dragon. In nearby Burkes Garden, a high, mountain-ringed valley that's home to an Amish community, Mattie Schlabach says sports cars and motorcycles are passing through all the time to visit her store, Mattie's Place, for food.

The increase in economic activity has contributed to "growing pains," Day said.

Each new business increases competition among others for tourism dollars. People have increasingly embraced the sight of motorcycles rumbling through town. There's no hotel in Tazewell to accommodate the influx of tourists, so they travel outside town for lodging.

"We have a lot going on, so we got a lot of battle scars and bruises, a lot of growing pains," Day said.

Other localities in the coalfields have embraced promoting tourism around natural beauty as an avenue for economic development and boosting revenue.

Towns along the Clinch River, which stretches from Tazewell County to the Virginia-Tennessee border, have been marketing the region as an outdoor recreation destination, especially for kayaking and canoeing.

The Spearhead Trail System near the town of Pocahontas in Tazewell County offers more than 400 miles of trails that attracts all-terrain vehicle, dirt bike and mountain bike riders. The hope is to one day connect the Spearhead Trails with the Hatfield McCoy Trails in West Virginia. Trailhead Adventures in Bluefield offers Polaris vehicles for off-roading on these trails as well as ones that look like Batmobiles for Back of the Dragon.

"We have all these beautiful natural resources, and so we're taking this approach of creating ways for people to engage with the outdoors," Young said.

**Renewed appreciation**

Davidson drives Back of the Dragon five or six times a week, mostly to look for rocks, sticks or any obstruction that could be a hazard to motorcyclists. He flew planes in the Air Force, but riding a motorcycle is "about as close as you get to flying on a magic carpet," he says.

He rides his Ducati around the sharp switchbacks with ease. He looks into the woods to appreciate the blooming mountain laurel and rhododendron. He stops, as he always does, at a wayside that overlooks Thompson Valley, which he said provides a "$1 million view."

He'll stand there a while to watch motorcyclists stop, take in the view and breathlessly gasp "Wow."

"It renews me, through them, watching them take it all in for the first time," Davidson said.

Jody Olinger led a group of motorcyclists on her way to Saltville to participate in a motorcycle ride for a fundraiser. She's driven Back of the Dragon numerous times, but she still likes to pause at that overlook.

"People don't realize what's in their backyard," Olinger said.

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Rep. Denver Riggleman is being himself

By Amy Friedenberger

Some people can’t figure out Rep. Denver Riggleman.

They say he’s too far to the left, too far to the right or too libertarian. He votes with President Donald Trump a lot, but sometimes he votes against the president’s wishes. What’s up with him being in the House Freedom Caucus? Why did he officiate a gay wedding?

Anyone who thought Riggleman was just your ordinary politician hasn’t been paying attention when the distiller from Nelson County bigfooted into Virginia politics last year.

“There is nobody who can accuse me of hiding anything,” Riggleman said while sitting back in a chair at his office in Washington, D.C. “And you know, that has gotten me in trouble sometimes.”

He’s lost friends over his politics, but he’s gained some, too. Even for a 49-year-old whiskey distiller who used to hunt terrorists and often can be found with a smile on his face, getting knocked from all sides sometimes takes a toll on him.

“This first year has been one of the most brutal learning experiences of my life,” Riggleman said.

Riggleman, who represents an expansive swath of central Virginia, describes himself as a conservative “with a pretty mean libertarian streak.” He can be the most conservative member of the party and other times quite liberal, especially with civil liberties. Sometimes his positions are at odds with the party and conservative base.

His views have created some divisions among Republicans back home. But at a time when the Republican Party is playing defense, Riggleman and those who gravitate toward him believe his brand of politics represents the future of the party.

“I knew there’d be some pushback on some of these things, but I thought people would be like, ‘Listen, this is a freedom guy, and he cares that everybody can individually make their own decisions and believes in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and equal protection before the law,’ ” Riggleman said. “I thought they’d come around on that.”

**Lessons learned**

Riggleman’s mother provided a lot to him. She gave him his height: She’s 4 foot 11, and he’s 5 foot 7. She’s “tough as a pine nut” and worked hard through challenging circumstances.

Riggleman grew up in Manassas. His teen father left when Riggleman was 2 years old and his sister was less than 2 months old.

His mother moved her children back in with her parents. She worked at a car dealership and was a server at a restaurant.

“One Thanksgiving, to make us feel like we were doing well, she covered a cardboard box with a sheet and pretended it was a table,” Riggleman said.

A few years later, his mother remarried and together they had four more children. Her years of driving a school bus physically injured her, forcing her to go to Pennsylvania to get treatment with Medicare because of her inability to access health care in Virginia.

Denver and Christine Riggleman married in 1989 when they were both 19 years old and moved into her parents’ basement. Three years later, Christine got pregnant. In need of health insurance, Riggleman enlisted in the Air Force.

After three years, he won an Air Force Scholarship to attend the University of Virginia. He graduated in 1998 with a bachelor’s degree in international affairs.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, he deployed as part of the first bombing raids over Afghanistan. He left the military in 2003.

He worked as an Air Force contractor for a few years before he co-founded Analyst Warehouse, a contracting company specializing in counterterrorism and critical infrastructure analysis.

“We were able to do very good work and excel and explode in a very short time because of our work ethic,” said Thaddeus Shaw, who co-founded the company with Riggleman.

Riggleman — a white man — and Shaw — a black man who grew up in a black neighborhood and went to a historically black college — grew personally from working together.

“We shared plenty of stories about government-subsidized food and turning it into magic and how we learned how to hustle and be our only advocate and carve out our own space to succeed,” Shaw said.

Riggleman said that period — beginning with his military service — taught him a lot about people because he got exposed to all races, religions and sexual orientations.

“I try to judge each person individually and not as a group,” Riggleman said. “I don’t care what you worship. If you’re a good person, you’re a good person.”

**‘Politics chose me’**

Riggleman is usually behind the bar when he’s working at the distillery run by his wife. But at Beale’s Brewery in Bedford County one afternoon, he sat on the other side to ask about the owner’s troubles with the trade war as well as provide a little more background about himself.

“I did not choose politics, politics chose me,” Riggleman said. “I wasn’t involved with the government, the government got involved with me.”

A company acquired Analyst Warehouse in 2012, and a couple of years later, Riggleman and his wife opened Silverback Distillery in mountainous Afton. The bureaucratic roadblocks and red tape for things like outdoor lighting was maddening. At one point, Dominion Energy had a natural gas pipeline mapped through the distillery’s property.

This first motivated Riggleman to run for governor in 2017 as a candidate who would stand up to special interests and an intrusive government. The endeavor lasted only three months.

Then in late May 2018 freshman Rep. Tom Garrett, R-Buckingham, unexpectedly announced he was an alcoholic and would not seek reelection. The news triggered a hastily organized nomination event, which Riggleman won by one vote.

He defeated Democrat Leslie Cockburn a year ago in a competitive race. There was a bizarre moment that captured national attention when the Cockburn campaign tried to attack Riggleman for being a “devotee of Bigfoot erotica.” Riggleman once wrote a satirical book about Bigfoot as part of a joke among friends. It wasn’t published, but he put a chapter on the internet.

When Riggleman returns to the district to meet with constituents, he sees reminders of what drew him to politics.

“When they come to me and they need help, I see that they feel powerless just like I did,” Riggleman said.

He talked to a man recently who owns a shop in Amherst County that makes hunting bows, and the man told Riggleman how the Chinese stole his patents. Riggleman said Silverback experienced something similar, resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal bills to protect the company’s trademarks.

“When you have that knowledge of business, creating businesses, meeting payroll, signing the front and back of paychecks, you understand where people are coming from,” Riggleman said. “I’ve lived in the real world.”

**Spirited congressman**

“We lubricate politics here,” Riggleman said, laughing at the assortment of Silverback bottles on a table. “You want a mule?”

Riggleman is the gregarious guy you want to have a beer — or whiskey — with. That’s made him easy to work with, which has helped him navigate his first year in the House of Representatives.

“Denver has a knack for getting along with Democrats without sacrificing his conservative beliefs and principles,” said Rep. Guy Reschenthaler, a Republican from Pennsylvania who is also a freshman. “This makes him a good conduit between the parties. It’s his larger-than-life personality that allows him to float between the Democrats and Republicans.”

Rep. Drew Ferguson, a Republican from Georgia and the chief deputy whip, quickly identified him as someone who would be a valuable part of the whip team.

“He’s been able to reach across the broad spectrum of members, both Republican and Democrat, and build trusting relationships here quickly,” said Ferguson, who mentors Riggleman.

For someone whose job it is to gather votes in favor of the Republican position, he doesn’t always stick with the party himself.

Riggleman said one of the toughest votes he took was breaking from the party and joining seven other Republicans in a symbolic vote to condemn the Trump administration’s support for invalidating the 2010 health care law in its entirety.

“Preexisting conditions is something I’ve personally had issues with, and it’s something I think we need to protect,” Riggleman said.

He voted against this summer’s two-year budget deal — even though Trump urged Republicans to back it.

He’s also known for having a specialty in technology, electronic warfare and military intelligence. His knowledge has been useful in hearings of the House Financial Services, which he sits on, when questioning people from the Federal Reserve or technology companies.

“The very things I went through as a child, and what I’ve done as an independent human being, I apply those lessons learned to what I’m doing now,” Riggleman said. “Some of them are things I’m personal about, like drug addiction, poverty, rural housing, ease of loans for those in less fortunate circumstances.”

Wanting to see farmers succeed, he worked on getting Virginia included in a federal crop insurance program for industrial hemp.

“When he talks about central Virginia and representing his district, he does it with a passion,” Ferguson said. “I hope folks back home see that. He really wants to see fellow Virginians do well. He’s the real deal.”

One of Riggleman’s priorities has been fighting the opioid scourge, which has hit his largely rural district hard, including his family. His cousin died from a heroin overdose over the summer. He joined the newly formed Freshman Working Group on Addiction, which meets regularly to seek solutions.

“Denver’s interested in getting things done, and I’m interested in getting things done,” said Rep. David Trone, a Democrat from Maryland who has worked with Riggleman on various pieces of legislation. “He’s been a leader on the Republican side.”

**‘Battlefield of ideas’**

The thing about being as proudly independent as Riggleman is that sometimes people get upset when something shockingly abnormal happens.

Something like a conservative Republican officiating a same-sex wedding.

When Riggleman wed two men who volunteered for his campaign last year, it sent ripples through local Republican circles. Some thought it was cool. Others were fine with it, but they wondered what the heck he was thinking doing something that would upset the social conservatives.

“I’m a religious liberty guy, and I think that’s why I’ll anger some people because I always will err to liberty,” Riggleman said. “I despise anybody telling me what I have to do in a government way, and I think the true Republican nature is making sure that individual liberty is valued above all else, but also religious liberty, civil liberty. I think I’ve been very honest about those views.”

Some social conservatives — who had favored the Republican candidate Riggleman narrowly defeated in the nomination contest — set to work criticizing him on social media and blogs and launching censure efforts across the district.

“If you think I care, or you think I’m going to kowtow or you think I’m going to crawl on my hands and knees so some blogs like me or a couple committee members, people have another thing coming,” Riggleman fired back on a radio program with John Fredericks, a Trump supporter who has backed gay marriage for decades.

Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr. even waded into the debate, endorsing Riggleman amid the blowback, saying party activists were “attempting to exclude you and others because of social issues. I was told they are assuming that because you officiated a gay marriage recently, that you are not socially conservative.”

Riggleman’s been talking a lot these days about Republicans needing to be a “big tent” party if they want to survive.

Tanner Hirschfeld, a 21-year-old recent graduate of the University of Virginia, said Riggleman has broad support among young Republicans, which is important in growing the party.

“Young Republicans see people in our party so up in arms and angry about Denver officiating a wedding of two supporters who happen to be of the same sex,” Hirschfeld said. “It just shows a lot of people in our party are out of touch and really don’t have the best interest of the party at hand and care more about being ideologues than expanding the party.”

Bob Good, an athletics official at Liberty University, emerged with a primary challenge against Riggleman because he “betrayed the trust of the Republican conservative base.” Issues on his campaign materials include opposing abortion, supporting gun rights, securing the border and “defending traditional marriage.”

“We all could have a representative in the 5th District who reflects the values of the 5th District,” he said at his campaign kickoff last month in Bedford County.

Virgil Goode, the Democrat-turned-Republican who used to represent the same congressional district, encouraged the people to be proud of their conservative values.

“When Obama was running as president, he criticized me and he criticized probably everyone in this room. He said we believe in God, guns and the Bible,” he said. “In my opinion, that’s a great team to be traveling with. We have someone with the Republican label in Congress now from the 5th District, but I must say he’s [Riggleman’s] been a disappointment in my book on a number of issues.”

Goode hammered Riggleman on the issue of immigration, saying Riggleman’s support for foreign workers can eventually lead to increased legal immigration, and those people will vote for Democrats.

Riggleman is tough on border security, but he has supported legislation to increase visas allowing foreign workers to come to the United States legally and work for several months as well as guest visas for construction workers. Riggleman said a common complaint he hears from businesses across his district is the labor shortage and the owners’ requests for more foreign workers.

“They need to actually go out to the district, see what’s happening for themselves,” Riggleman said about his critics.

Riggleman said he has 740,000 people he has to represent, and he has to represent the entire district the best he can.

“What’s the worst they can do to me?” Riggleman said. “Send me back to my distillery.”

For those who can’t figure out Riggleman, he said he’s in plain view.

“People are looking for somebody who doesn’t look at this as a career, they’re looking for somebody who wants to serve, and will say how it is,” Riggleman said. “People don’t think there are politicians out there that are saying what’s really on their minds. I’m a little different in that I think that we really need to fight on the battlefield of ideas.”

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Sen. Stanley brings focus to school repair needs

By Amy Friedenberger

RICHMOND — Bill Stanley has a white dot on the right side of his face — just above his jaw line — as a reminder of when he stood up for people who needed someone to fight for them.

Stanley was a child in Virginia Beach, and after he got between a bully and some little kids, the bully then directed his attention toward Stanley, a little guy himself. The bully delivered a pounding to Stanley until an older child intervened. Wanting revenge, the bully aimed a slingshot at Stanley and shot him with lead shot that became lodged in his face.

“Dropped me like a bomb,” the now-state senator recalled during an interview at his Richmond office.

A doctor had to remove the small pellet. To this day, he wears that white dot like a badge of courage.

When Stanley shaves in the morning, he sees that dot and remembers that painful moment.

Then the Republican senator from Franklin County goes to work at the General Assembly, where he pushes legislation that he believes will benefit the people of Southside and Southwest Virginia, two regions that struggle economically and have residents who feel neglected by Richmond.

This year he pushed for criminal justice legislation to reform a system that sweeps up poor people or hands down unfair punishments.

“In some ways, I’m fighting for the people I represent,” Stanley, 51, said.

For seven years, the scrappy 5-foot-9 senator has stood out as the jokester of the Senate, where he’s the majority whip. His quick wit and gift of gab has served him well over the years, as a criminal defense attorney and as a lawmaker.

“He uses humor to get serious things done,” said Jeff McWaters, a former legislator, who used to sit next to Stanley in the Senate chamber. “He has that piss and vinegar going in him. He’s a tenacious legislator, so you don’t want to kill one of his bills without really thinking it through and giving him a good reason why you killed it, because he doesn’t like that.”

During this session, Stanley took up some of the biggest issues of his career. A leader on criminal justice reform, he fought to end the practice of suspending driver’s licenses when people don’t promptly pay their court costs unrelated to driving offenses.

After a yearlong examination of the commonwealth’s deteriorating public school buildings, he brought a package of legislation aimed at improving educational opportunities no matter where a student lives. Some proposals were more successful than others, but the fight isn’t over.

“I took some major hits this year, but it was worth it,” Stanley said.

**‘Willingness to think big’**

“Tomorrow can be better for the children who are sitting in crowded and crumbling schools across this state, tired and distracted from too little food and too much violence in their communities,” Gov. Ralph Northam said during his January 2018 inauguration speech.

Stanley heard that and thought, “Virginia has ‘crumbling schools?’”

The legislator formed a bipartisan panel of senators to tour schools across Virginia and develop ideas of how to come up with the billions of dollars needed to modernize the buildings.

They saw buckets collecting water in classrooms, decaying grout in the bathroom tiles and mobile units outside the building to hold overflowing students. They heard stories about rats scampering through hallways and tiles falling from the ceiling.

In Danville, Stanley met a boy who lives in a dangerous neighborhood, so he runs from his home to his school bus.

“Then he goes to a crumbling school that’s also harmful to him,” Stanley said.

He introduced three bills this session aimed at offering ways for schools to seek additional funding to build or upgrade schools.

The highlight was a proposal to put on November’s ballot a referendum that would ask Virginians whether they want the General Assembly to issue $3 billion in state general obligation bonds to go toward constructing or upgrading K-12 schools. Another bill would have created a fund to give school boards grants for repairing or replacing school roofs.

“I just have always appreciated Sen. Stanley’s focus and willingness to think big,” Sen. David Marsden, D-Fairfax, who co-patroned the roofs bill and served on the subcommittee.

Both of those bills died. Stanley chastised members of both political parties for not wanting to take up the issue, especially during an election year.

“We talked about from the beginning that in the General Assembly, big ideas usually take more than just one session,” said Sen. Glen Sturtevant, R-Richmond, a member of Stanley’s subcommittee. “This first session was really about getting the idea out there and getting people to recognize there is a problem that needs to be addressed, and then we have to have the tenacity to keep bringing it back in successive years and build momentum.”

One bill that did pass the General Assembly would make it possible for public schools with solar panels to sell their excess energy into the power grid. The idea is to give schools another way to build affordable schools.

“I am not one that gets emotional about bills, and passion and emotion are different things,” Stanley said. “And this year I probably got a little more emotional about it because it is a really bad problem, and it seemed like not many people wanted to do anything about it or even want to have a substantive conversation. So this is now a passion I will continue to fight for, and maybe it’ll take a few years to get something everyone agrees on, but we’ll get there.”

**A father’s wish**

Bill Stanley was born in Pensacola, Florida. His father was a U.S. Navy aviator, so the family moved around a lot, eventually taking them to Northern Virginia. The Stanleys have roots in Virginia.

When his parents settled in Franklin County, he attended Hampden-Sydney College with the goal of becoming a restaurateur. His father, by then-retired Navy Capt. William Stanley, had a different future for his son: lawyer.

“People say you can’t change the world, but if you change one person’s life, you’ve changed their world, and in turn, you’ve changed the world,” was one of the many sayings his father told him. He thought being a lawyer would enable his son to accomplish that mission.

A month after Bill Stanley graduated from college, his father died of cancer. Stanley went on to attend the District of Columbia School of Law. He also made a deal with his mother, Diane Stanley: if she finished her undergraduate degree and went to law school to fulfill her dream of being a lawyer, he would open a law firm with her.

“It took some convincing, because of course she thought I was joking,” Bill Stanley said.

While he was still in law school, Stanley talked his way into working for a swashbuckling attorney named Gil Davis. This led to Stanley becoming involved in defending Paula Jones in a sexual harassment lawsuit against President Bill Clinton in a case that rose to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Stanley practiced in Northern Virginia after he graduated from law school. When his mother passed the state bar exam in 1998, Stanley moved back to Franklin County to open a law firm with her. She retired this year.

A.J. Dudley, another attorney who would go on to become the commonwealth’s attorney for Franklin County, drew Stanley into local politics. Stanley served as chairman of the local committee and then was elected to lead the 5th District Republican Committee. When he launched a failed bid for chairman of the state Republican Party, Dudley endorsed him and included the slogan, “Bill Stanley thinks big.”

“I saw a trait in him that he still has with him very much to this day,” Dudley said.

When Republican Robert Hurt defeated incumbent Rep. Tom Perriello in 2010, Hurt left the state Senate and went to Congress. Stanley ran in the special election to fill the 19th District seat. In November 2011, after redistricting, he narrowly defeated a veteran Democratic senator in the 20th District. He won re-election in 2015 by a 16-point margin.

**Serious legislator**

When the senators are seized by a fit of the giggles, chances are Stanley’s behind the gag.

“Even though we’re doing a serious job, we’re human,” said Sen. Bill Carrico, R-Grayson, who sits next to Stanley. “He’s able to lighten the mood. I may be the more serious one, and he may be the more entertaining one, but he’s helped me be able to show a different side of myself just by sitting next to him.”

Stanley is part of what is known as the Raucous Caucus, a group of senators known for having fun in the formal chamber. Sens. Bryce Reeves, R-Spotsylvania, and Ryan McDougle, R-Hanover, are fellow pranksters.

Stanley and Reeves once wanted to see if they could toss a football across the room (they could). They’ve had quite a few footballs confiscated.

McWaters, who was in the Raucous Caucus, once played a prank on Stanley because he thought it was annoying how Stanley ate elaborate lunches at his desk on the Senate floor. He hid a mashed banana in his desk, and days later, Stanley discovered that was the reason for a bothersome swarm of flies. Stanley got his revenge by hiding cat food in McWaters’ desk.

A few years ago Stanley filled McWaters’ office with helium balloons the day McWaters’ bill to restrict balloon releases went to the Senate floor for a vote. Stanley opposed the bill, which failed.

“We were talking in much higher dialects once we got all that helium popping in my office,” McWaters said.

Jokes aside, McWaters says, make no mistake, Stanley is a serious legislator.

“He’s been a forceful advocate for criminal justice reform,” said Sen. David Suetterlein, R-Roanoke County.

Suetterlein said Stanley advocates for his colleagues’ criminal justice reform bills. Stanley backed Suetterlein’s bill signed into law last year that raised the felony theft threshold from $200 to $500.

Among a handful of legislation Stanley introduced this session related to criminal justice reform was a bill to repeal current state law that suspends the Virginia driver’s license of anyone who doesn’t promptly pay court fines or costs unrelated to driving offenses. This is something that affects 600,000 Virginians, some of whom Stanley says can’t keep a job because they lack a reliable means of transportation.

After a panel of lawmakers killed the bill, Stanley criticized a pair of tough-on-crime delegates for blocking criminal justice reform legislation and said they wanted to punish poor people.

“I’m not afraid to call people out,” Stanley said. “Because when you don’t, then what happens becomes perpetual.”

Another bill that died this session would allow people to challenge their criminal convictions on grounds that advances in forensic science now exonerate them or the forensic science technique has been discredited.

Some past bills that became law include one that prohibited children in pre-K through third grade from being suspended for more than three school days or from being expelled, except for drug and firearm offenses. He also had a bill become law stating that people convicted of simple marijuana possession for the first time would no longer be subject to an automatic six-month suspension of their driver’s license.

No governor has vetoed any of his bills.

Stanley has mulled a run for attorney general or governor in the past. He’s also floated congressional runs, but says he can better effect change in Richmond. For now, he says any political ambitions take a back seat to his family. He has three children, the youngest being 7 years old.

In the meantime, he’ll run for re-election to the Virginia Senate. And if he comes back, he plans to bring more audacious legislation.

“I take my lumps,” Stanley said. “But you just have to be bold, and I’ll either fight for what I’m passionate for all the way to the ground, or I’ll fight for it all the way to the governor’s mansion.”