



Mel Larsen, newly elected state Republican chairman, waves to the Cobo Hall crowd, flanked by party secretary Weldon Yeager of West Bloomfield Township. (Staff photo)

Larsen never stopped running

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Former State Rep. Mel Larsen has emerged as the messiah of the ailing Michigan Republican Party. Larsen, who was the only candidate for the chairmanship being vacated by William McLaughlin of Northville, was given the job by acclamation Saturday.

Even though he was unopposed, he ran the gamut of congressional district caucuses Friday night, campaigning for a job he was assured.

In his frantic race from one caucus to another, Larsen several times left his aides and wife running behind in a furious effort keep up. Wife Roberta finally gave up all pretenses of decorum, shedding her shoes in the middle of the race to the Renaissance Center's meeting rooms.

The Friday night campaigning clearly won over any Republican holdouts.

The earnestness of the Oxford resident's final foray and the simple, direct message of his short speech gave Republican regulars hope for the future.

"I REALLY want to be the majority party in this state. But we just can't mouth those words about being a majority party, we have to live it," Larsen said.

"We have to build the unity we need to start winning back those house seats, those local seats, those county seats."

But Larsen, a former Pontiac Catholic football coach, designed the speech to be more than a pep talk. The speech was designed to smooth the ruffled feathers of the party's conservative wing and ease the fears of progressives.

To the conservatives, who two years ago tried to unseat McLaughlin, Larsen promised open debate and "dialogue" and pledged that disagreements would be handled "professionally."

Conservative party members had complained that under the leadership of McLaughlin, who was hand-picked by Gov. William Milliken, the GOP was becoming too liberal and was sacrificing local races by focusing money and attention on electing candidates at the

top of the ticket.

To progressives, with whom Larsen had been closely aligned in the legislature, he promised to lead the campaign to sign up more blacks, blue-collar workers and Hispanics.

Two Wayne County GOP leaders said they had plotted in December to run a token candidate. They were unhappy that Gov. Milliken had not appointed more Republicans to Detroit and Wayne County judgeships.

However, in the end, there was no factional opposition.

INSTEAD, there appeared to be overwhelming support. Although Larsen did not pass himself off as a solution to the party's many problems, GOP regulars welcomed him as a breath of fresh air.

"Mel is the personification of unity and a broad base of support," said one convention delegate. Larsen began turning Democratic and GOP heads when he won a seat in the Michigan house in the heavily-black, traditional-

ly Democratic 61st district, which includes part of the City of Pontiac and Oakland, Orion, Addison and Oxford Townships.

Another convention delegate said Larsen "certainly couldn't be considered a Johnny-come-lately, riding the crest of a wave," he said. The Republicans' election fortunes have hit bottom in recent times, losing a number legislative and congressional seats.

"What he has done in the 61st district, he can do statewide," said an Oakland County delegate.

"His campaigns are among the most organized in the state," said a Highland Park delegate. "He can really fire up the troops. He's going to be one dynamic state party chairman."

A Detroit delegate said Larsen "understood and appreciated" the party's volunteers. "The volunteers are not well appreciated by the top levels of the party. But Mel is very well aware of them and how valuable they are," he said.

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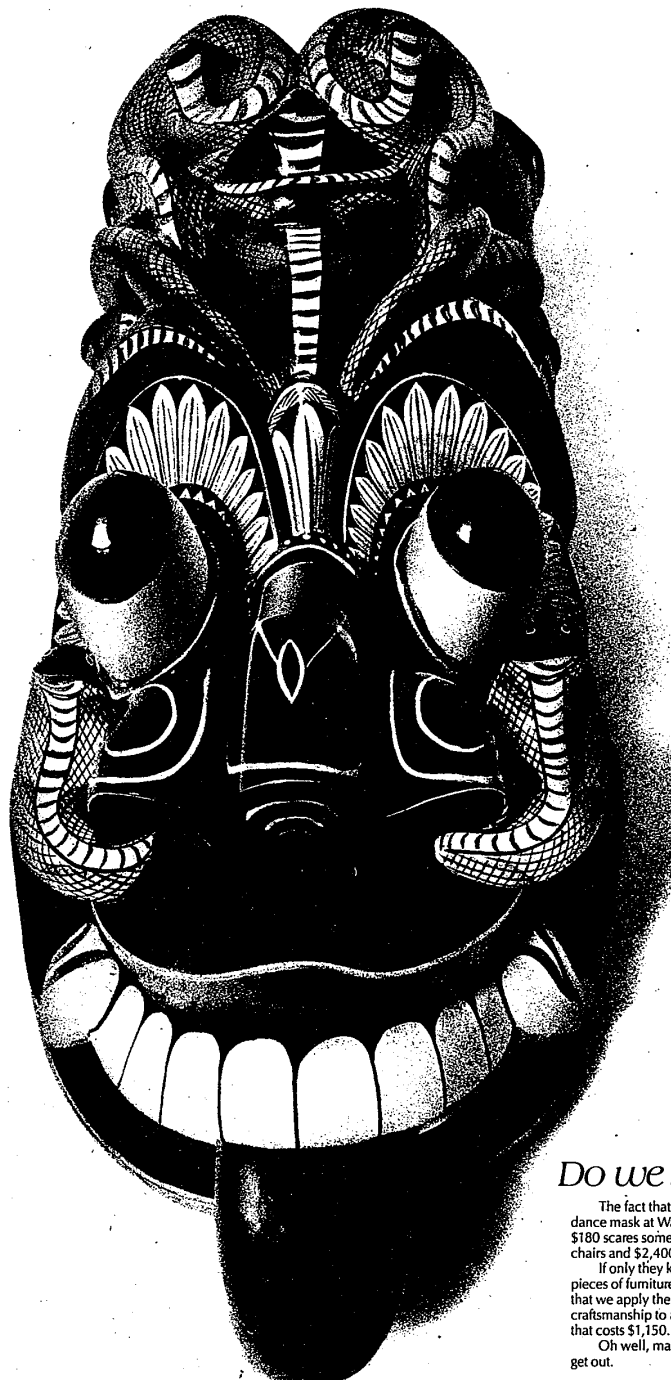
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