

She spins state appointment wheel

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

"When John Engler comes back from his road trips through the 83 counties," said Anne Mervenne, "he gives me a stack of business cards. He's his own best source."

Mervenne is director of appointments for the governor. In the Olds Tower, across the street from the Capitol, the former Birmingham resident heads a staff of seven.

They screen people for 300 state boards, commissions, committees and judicial vacancies. In 27 months, Engler has made a whopping 1,300 appointments.

"For those we probably have 13,000 names on file," Mervenne said. "For every appointment, there are 10 applicants — sometimes more, sometimes less."

"For the Natural Resources Commission, we have 100 people on file. It's a popular spot. For the Public Schools Retirement Board, you have to ask people to apply."

Six months crunch

Nowadays, Mervenne has a little time to herself, but at the beginning there were six months of 18-hour days, six days a week. Reason: Democratic Gov. James Blanchard delayed all appointments in election year 1990. "Blanchard didn't want to give (Senate Republican leader) John Engler the opportunity to reject any appointees. He (Blanchard) was so confident that he decided to wait until after the election to

make them."

A new winner, Engler found he had a year and a half worth of appointments to make in six months.

"It gave John Engler an opportunity to put his fingerprints on government much earlier than usual," said Mervenne. "It was an enormous headache for me personally — I should say, challenge."

Half the people who apply for appointments are self-starters. The other half are recommended by legislators, "close friends," people he meets on the road," she said.

In 20 years in the Legislature, Engler traveled every corner of the state, including Detroit and other urban cities. "He knows more than anyone I've met about state government. People think of him as from Beal City. No one gives him the credit he deserves," Mervenne said.

Sister Elizabeth

"I think I knew in second grade I wanted to be in public service," said Mervenne.

A big influence was the late Sister Elizabeth Girardot, IHM, who taught government, debate and forensics at Marian High School. Sister Elizabeth took her students to places like the Economic Club of Detroit where they lunched with Joseph L. Hudson Jr. and friends.

Mervenne's mother, Rosemary Ledwidge, campaigned for Gov. George Romney in the 1960s too.



Anne Mervenne

Four younger siblings are interested but not politically active.

After graduating from Marian in 1976 and Michigan State's James Madison College in 1982, Mervenne worked on an ill-fated congressional campaign, did a stint in Washington as an intern, then returned as a state Senate staffer. From 1984 to 1990, she worked for Sen. Doug Cruce, R-Troy, doing constituent relations, legislative work, political strategy, staff and budget.

"I was very content with Doug," she said, but just the same she threw her resume into Governor-elect Engler's pot. After working with Sen. Cruce and Engler on the regulatory budget, she was interested possibly in a place in the Labor or Commerce departments.

Before her resume surfaced, however, Colleen Pero, a top Engler aide, offered her the job of director of appointments. "I was totally astounded, totally flabbergasted, that I got this job," Mervenne said. "There's really nothing you can do to prepare for this job. It takes good instincts about people, self-confidence, trust in your own judgment, willingness to listen and work with others. This sort of is my life."

Meanwhile, Mervenne had her own political career, winning two terms on the Ingham County Board of Commissioners as a Republican in a marginally Democratic district. After redistricting, she didn't run for re-election in 1992.

"This job requires too much energy and concentration," she said. With Cruce, she would work months on a bill and see it pass in the Senate only to be neglected to death in the House. Engler's appointees get to do things immediately.

Search for quality

News people find that Engler doesn't give his college board appointees an agenda to carry out. Mervenne confirms that impression: "He looks for quality."

The two most important types of appointments are:

- Judicial.
- University boards. Engler himself reads alumni magazines searching for names for the 11 boards.

Fess up to sins if you apply, they ask

Suppose your name lands on director of appointments Anne Mervenne's desk, either because you wrote a letter or gave Gov. John Engler your card.

First you'll get a letter acknowledging your interest along with a two-page form and a request for a resume. The form will ask questions about charges of breaches of ethics, criminal charges and civil lawsuits.

It will ask about interest groups and trade associations who sup-

port (or oppose) you. "We definitely call legislators. Legislators have good input. They know many people that it's hard for the seven of us to know," she said.

You'll be asked about handicaps, ethnic heritage and party affiliation because some commissions require handicapper and bipartisan representation. There are the usual law enforcement and credit checks. Said Mervenne: "I'd rather read about it from them than in the Free Press."

Few appointees have had trouble over background: the head of the unemployment office and a Natural Resources commissioner (fishing violations). Other controversies have been largely over policies.

Engler does geographic ticket balancing for posts requiring it, like the Transportation Commission. Mervenne reports to chief of staff Dan Pero, but her appointments reports go directly to Engler, with copies to those who

need them such as the legal counsel.

"If they're all exemplary," she said, "I'll list them in alphabetical order. A lot of times, I'll have an A list, a B list and a C list. Every board is unique. Every applicant is unique."

Sometimes Engler will surprise her because he has a policy objective she isn't aware of, or he knows a lot personally about an applicant with a sketchy resume. She summed it up: "It's gratifying."

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