

PROFILE: MIKE HATCH

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Midway through a Mike Hatch press conference last year on pushy debt collectors, a band of nine floppy-eared puppies ambled through an open door.

The Democratic attorney general eagerly introduced them as the 5-week-old litter of his golden retriever, then leaned over and patted a few on the head. It was a rare view of the softer side of a politician known for his sharp edges.

Now locked in a heated race with an incumbent Republican known for his affability, Hatch is trying to keep his cool at the same time he embraces his tough-guy reputation.

"I'm not running for homecoming king," Hatch said. "I may not succeed in everything. But I tell you what, I'm not shy about pushing things and the public knows it."

He's groomed that image as the state's chief lawyer the last eight years, taking on some of Minnesota's largest banks, insurance companies, health providers and utilities. Along the way, Hatch got into scrapes with CEOs, judges and political power brokers. His intense style often gets results and praise, but he's been publicly rebuked for it, too.

"He's not worried if he has ruffled a few feathers," said top deputy Kris Eiden, a Hatch confidante for a quarter century. "He's certainly not a pushover."

Hatch developed that stiff spine by enduring his share of successes and struggles.

He was born in 1948 in Des Moines, Iowa, but he was raised in Duluth, the son of a mining equipment salesman and a stay-at-home mom. Alcoholism afflicted both parents, something Hatch acknowledges but doesn't dwell on.

Politics were part of the family fabric, His grandfather served as mayor of Battle Lake and was tight with Republican Knute Nelson, a 19th-century Minnesota governor and later a U.S. senator.

It took awhile for Hatch to catch the bug.

An admittedly average student, Hatch wasn't particularly goal-oriented. He tried college but dropped out.

The search for direction led him to the merchant marine. Sailing the Great Lakes in the turbulent 1960s was an eye-opening experience. He saw crumbling port cities. He saw riots. He was mugged.

"I woke up," Hatch said. "There was despair. I took an interest. I thought you know what, I'm going to do something about it."

He hitchhiked to Cleveland, called his father for help and returned to Duluth to give college another try. While family members said Hatch never lacked for passion, they detected a new determination. After earning an undergraduate degree, Hatch took on law school.

"My dad told me it was the proudest day of his life to see Mike graduate from law school,"

said Hatch's older sister, Susan Devine. "Mike did that himself. He worked his way through law school. He found a goal he wanted to achieve."

From there, Hatch proceeded with purpose. The young family man -- he and his wife Patti would ultimately raise three daughters -- balanced a budding law career with some behind-the-scenes dabbling in DFL politics. Before long, he made a name for himself and rose to state DFL chairman in 1980.

He was resolved to get a struggling party back on its feet. By 1982, the DFL's finances rebounded and Rudy Perpich reclaimed the governor's mansion for the party.

Hatch landed a spot in Perpich's cabinet as commerce commissioner, where he would regulate banks, insurance companies and other key industries. He vigorously embraced the role of consumer advocate, leading investigations and reaping attention for his hard line toward companies he felt were taking advantage of customers.

The clout he developed over six years in the commerce post made his political stock soar. But bad timing caused it to plummet.

Doubts over Perpich's effectiveness put some in the party on edge as the 1990 election approached. Hatch tried to tap into those concerns and launched a challenge to Perpich for the party nomination. It failed, and Hatch's standing in the DFL took a huge hit as well. He waged another stunted campaign for governor in 1994.

The climb back would take time.

Hatch put his energy into his law practice and carved out a niche for representing people and businesses upset with insurance benefit denials. He became a go-to lawyer for women battling cancer and in need of expensive, specialized treatment.

Eiden, Hatch's law partner at the time, said he poured his heart into the cases.

"The nights before those trials he couldn't sleep. He wouldn't be able to eat," she said. "Those really were life and death cases. Those cases weighed really heavy on him."

John Stanoch, a former Perpich adviser who later became a Hatch lieutenant, said the cases helped Hatch maintain a public profile. For Hatch, they put a human face on what he saw as a flawed health care system in need of broader change. That would be the underlying theme of a successful run for attorney general in 1998 and a hallmark of his tenure.

Hatch's conquests over two terms are many -- from scathing audits exposing wasteful spending at HMOs to new protections against heat shutoffs during winter for people struggling to pay their bills.

Those around him marvel at his work ethic.

"You could expect his light to be on before eight in the morning and you could expect that he was going to go late into the night," said Stanoch, the chief deputy attorney general in Hatch's first two years,

Hatch has similarities to a personal hero, Clarence Darrow, the famed defense attorney in the Scopes trial over the teaching of evolution in Tennessee. While Hatch is as slight as Darrow was broad, the two share a flair for taking on populist causes.

Hatch once told an interviewer of Darrow: "He got himself in a boatload of trouble every time he turned around."

Hatch's tenacity doesn't always go over well, either. On a couple of occasions, judges scolded Hatch for pushing limits -- once when he tried to force out a health company's board members and another time for antagonizing a judge presiding over a lawsuit he filed.

He makes no apologies.

"I'm not passive aggressive. I don't smile to someone's face and stab them in the back. If I don't like something I'll tell them," Hatch said, adding, "There are some people in this state who are not used to public

officials standing up to them."

It's a posture that has earned Hatch admirers like Joanne Hanley, a retired teacher from Rockford Township.

"He's fought battles that were very unpopular, politically and business-wise. He was fighting for a common good and I admire that," Hanley said. "I told his office last year that if he ran for governor I'd vote for him, but I wish he'd remain as attorney general. He's been a fine attorney general. He's a bulldog."