From Mercer County to the spotlight

BY DANIEL ARENS

Over the last two-and-a-half decades, one man born and raised in Mercer County helped steer the state through many changes and challenges.

This election year, Al Jaeger is once again running for the office of North Dakota Secretary of State. If elected, it will be his seventh term serving in that capacity, a position he has held since 1992.

Jaeger noted that his upbringing in Mercer County helped prepare him for the job he has held for so long. "I was born in Beulah, I graduated from Beulah High School," he said. "My dad bought a little tractor-mounted backhoe. When rural electric came to that part of the state, he actually installed nearly all the septic systems in that area, in the rural parts of the county."

Jaeger recalls helping with concrete delivery and other aspects of that work while he was in high school and college. He said that those early experiences taught him that details matter, and that when you do a job, you need to do it right. "I grew up in that sort of environment," he said. "It lends well to the job I do now, it really has a lot to do with details."

Jaeger went to college at Bismarck State University (then called Bismarck Junior College) and Dickinson State University. He spent three years teaching at Killdeer High School and then another two years at Kenmare High School before joining Mobil Oil as a marketing analyst in Fargo. After that, he operated a private real estate brokerage for 20 years until he decided to run for the Secretary of State position in 1992.

This year's election is a little different for Jaeger, since he is not officially running as a Republican, but instead as an Independent. However, the difference is a technicality. Once Jaeger decided to seek the office again, gaining the support of the state Republican Party seemed certain. Following the June primary election, the North Dakota Republican Party State Committee unanimously voted to give Jaeger a letter of support.

"It's past all deadlines to actually have been a candidate for the Republican Party on the ballot," Jaeger said. "But their letter of support puts them behind me."

In 2016, Jaeger considered not seeking reelection, a consideration that grew following his wife's passing. However, there were two major items that his office continued to work on that were priorities for him, and he said he wanted to see them through to conclusion. First is the implementation of new office technology called "FirstStop." Jaeger explained that this technology will be used to help streamline the state processes, notably for the online filing for business renewals in the state. "It's going to change how we work in the office," he said, adding that he anticipates the new program to be up-and-running within the next several months. "The other thing is that we need a new voting system. That's critical," Jaeger went on. He explained that all states upgraded their voting systems in 2002, but the technology used in that upgrade probably wasn't even current for that time. Now, Jaeger said that Microsoft would no longer continue to support some of the infrastructure for the current outdated voting system.

Jaeger said his office is working closely with a vendor who provided updated voting systems in other states, like Wyoming, South Dakota and Tennessee.

In all of these changes, Jaeger hasn't forgotten where he originally came from. "I'm proud of my roots," he said. "I tell people that the upbringing and education I received, unbeknownst to me, kind of prepared me for what I do today."

"Back in those days, I never imagined that I would end up where I am now," he added.

Story idea? Call Daniel Arens 748-2255