

# 'Happiest lawyer in Kansas City' closes long Senate chapter

By STEVE KRASKE  
The Kansas City Star

The conventional wisdom on Harry Wiggins was unanimous:

On Jan. 8, the day he officially retires from the Missouri Senate after seven terms and 28 years, Wiggins will become one miserable man.

"Everybody thought that Harry could not live without Jefferson City," said longtime state Rep. Hen-

ry Rizzo of Kansas City.

Just look at how he campaigned, Democratic insiders said. When Wiggins, whose district changed over the years but generally stretched from the Country Club Plaza to Grandview, ran for re-election, he stumped as if winning were the only thing in the world that mattered.

And look at how he worked in the Capitol, they said. He loved the his-

tory and all the arcane rules and the chaos and the ability of the place to do good. The lights burned in his fourth-floor corner suite until 10 or 11 p.m.

He's a lifelong bachelor, they said. The General Assembly is his *family*. What will he do?

Well, he fooled them. Fooled them big time. Wiggins pulled a switcheroo — a happy, and by all accounts, successful, career change

at age 70.

Jefferson City and that gleaming Capitol dome? Already in Wiggins' rearview mirror.

In March, Blackwell Sanders Peper Martin LLP came calling. Kansas City's second-largest law firm announced that Harry Wiggins, esquire, would begin work for the firm in June.

Wiggins couldn't believe his good fortune. "They want me?" he said

once. "Imagine that."

It's really not so hard to imagine. Wiggins knows lots of people. Important people. And he knows Jefferson City, a valuable asset in the legal world.

So Wiggins went back to work, this time as a lawyer. And these days he is one happy guy.

"Look at me," Wiggins said re-

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# WIGGINS: New career begins for state senator

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ently while sitting in a chair in his 11th-floor Blackwell Sanders office at 2300 Main St. with its view of Kansas City's downtown. "Why should anybody be sad? Just look at me. I'm the happiest lawyer in Kansas City."

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Public service is what Wiggins has been about since 1957. Back when he was an Army lawyer soon to be inspired, as were many Democrats, by the presidency of John F. Kennedy.

In 1961 a 28-year-old Wiggins was named assistant U.S. attorney for western Missouri. His appointment certificate, signed by then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy, hangs in his office today.

Six years later Gov. Warren Hearnes called. He asked Wiggins to head the state liquor control agency. Hearnes later praised him as the strongest liquor chief Missouri ever had.

In 1970, Wiggins took his first job at elective office — a seat on the former Jackson County court. He won, as he did all 16 of his races, to become a member of the last court before the county Legislature was implemented.

Before taking office, Wiggins went to Independence to meet with a former court member, Harry S. Truman, who advised Wiggins and the other new members to do their best. The rest, he said, would take care of itself.

On the court, Judge Wiggins took on a liberal cause — overcrowding in the county jail.

"I have said before and repeat here that human beings locked together like animals will act like animals," Wiggins said.

In 1971, Wiggins considered a run for state treasurer, the first of several times that he considered a bid for higher office, including governor, but then eventually backed away.

"I'm not different than any other human being," Wiggins said recently. "You're flattered when someone asks you about it."

His undoing, he said, was an inability to raise big-time campaign cash. "I never liked to ask friends for money."

In 1972 he broke with his fellow Missouri Democrats and endorsed George McGovern for

president and became McGovern's state coordinator.

Encouraged by friends two years later, Wiggins took his first shot at the state Senate, taking on two-term incumbent Republican Lem T. Jones. The district was said to lean Republican. Jones had a money advantage and was known as a hard worker — at least in the Capitol.

Back in the district, however, Jones did a minimum of campaigning while Wiggins went all out, knocking on doors nearly every day for four months.

He won — 20,917 to 14,608.

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In the Senate, Wiggins quickly earned a reputation for handling big loads of bills each year. He worked on property reassessments, Amtrak, children's issues, dormitory rates at the University of Missouri, rising hospital costs.

Some said he tried to juggle too many pieces of legislation, that he spread himself too thin.

"What kind of senator would I be," he said, "if I said to the mayor and the chief of police, 'I'm too busy?'"

Through the years he handled some major bills: the 911 emergency phone number for Missouri. The bistate tax authority for Kansas City. Both bills took years to pound into law.

He helped pass early childhood development screening that led to the Parents as Teachers program. He worked to separate the Kansas City library from the Kansas City Board of Education. He pushed for a statewide review of nursing homes.

He was, senators have said, the ultimate compromiser — always flexible, never locked into an unmovable position.

If one of his key bills was headed for defeat, he would pull the bill from the calendar and then work to make things right behind the scenes.

"He would rather do that than get beat on a bill," said longtime state Sen. Jim Mathewson, a Sedalia Democrat.

Wiggins also served for several years on the Senate's ways and means and appropriations committees.

Compromising was only part of Wiggins' legislative arsenal. The other weapon: his nice-guy image.



DAVID POLJAM/The Kansas City Star

In his seven terms in the Missouri Senate, Harry Wiggins never missed a roll-call vote. Wiggins will officially retire Jan. 8 and has taken a job with the law firm of Blackwell Sanders Peper Martin.

Wiggins was unfailingly approachable, unfailingly nice, friendly to Republicans, friendly to doorkeepers — friendly, friendly, friendly.

"Too nice, some said. Saccharine nice. So nice that after being attacked by a German shepherd while campaigning in 1986, he told a reporter that his love for dogs had not diminished one bit.

The demeanor worked when it came to passing bills and staying in office.

"Through the years Republicans threw all kinds of charges at Wiggins. He was ineffective. His health was failing. He was too liberal.

Wiggins would respond by hurling himself into campaign mode. He would show up day after day at 6 a.m. along Ward Parkway, waving at passers-by and handing out brochures.

And on Election Day, Wiggins would win again by 20 or 30 points.

The GOP never got close.

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The nice-guy demeanor paid off in another way. In April 1980, Wiggins was thrust into the role of Senate majority leader when the senator who held that post was injured in a car wreck.

For nine days Wiggins led the Senate through to adjournment, handling one of the most tension-packed jobs in the Capitol. When it was over, lawmakers from both parties praised him.

"What happened," one senator reflected, "was everybody had to be kind to Harry. He's gone out of his way never to anger anyone. Everybody was just paying him back."

The next year the Senate elected him majority floor leader.

Through it all, and all the way through September of this year, Wiggins maintained his record for never missing a roll-call vote. In October 1980, Wiggins gave up a chance to attend the second game of the World Series between the Royals and the Phillies in Philadelphia. Wiggins had to make it back to the Senate for a special session to fix a technicality in a hazardous-waste bill.

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Wiggins' office at Blackwell Sanders is a shrine to his career. Awards. Certificates. The silver platter the Senate presented him as a farewell gift. Letters — from Sen. Ted Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, former Sens. Jack Danforth and Tom Eagleton.

In scratchy handwriting, Eagleton wrote "Great speech" this year about an April address in which Wiggins extolled his fellow senators to remember "the sick, the elderly and the disabled" as they whacked away at the budget.

His office walls can hardly hold anything more. The senator plans to expand his family room to make room for other mementos — his baseball-cap collection, the framed photographs — that now sit in storage.

He is working behind the scenes on the push for another bistate tax for the stadiums. He's all for a new Downtown arena.

"Now's our time," Wiggins said of his city.

Harry Wiggins is home. "Time's up. It's over," he said of his Senate career. "You've got to keep looking ahead."

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