

Power broker isn't a label Collierville's Mark Norris wears comfortably

By Kristina Goetz

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Sitting on the broad, screened-in back porch of his pre Civil War-era home, state Sen. Mark Norris fiddled with his iPhone in search of Rudyard Kipling's poem "If." He couldn't quite remember the exact verse. Something about keeping your head about you in times of turmoil, trusting yourself when all men doubt you.

The poem hung framed in his father's boyhood bedroom and is now on the wall of his downtown law office. He reads it often. "Pretty good words to live by," he said.

But it has also become an anthem of sorts in his much-publicized political life.

For the past two years, Norris has been a dominating force at a pivotal time in Shelby County history. The Republican has supplanted two powerful West Tennessee Democrats — Jimmy Naifeh and John Wilder, House and Senate speakers who reigned over legislative politics for decades — as the Memphis area's most influential lawmaker. Norris is a polarizing figure, vilified or admired, depending on which side of the aisle you stand. His calculating, meticulous approach — along with the legislature's shift from a Democratic to Republican majority — allowed him to usher in controversial legislation after others had failed. Whether his ascendancy is because of his own maneuvering or a shift in the political climate — or a bit of both — he has emerged as arguably the most powerful legislator west of Nashville.

"When somebody says something like that on the news, that Mark is a powerful legislator, he and I will look at each other and we'll just go, 'Huh?'" said Chris Norris, his wife of 34 years, laughing. "It's a weird thing to hear somebody say. ... I mean we're talking about Mark, you know?"

Norris's name is synonymous with some of the most contentious legislation of the past several years — legislation that has stirred racially-charged accusations and rancorous debate over the balance of power between Shelby County suburbs and the city of Memphis. No political fight has been more entrenched than the one over a push to allow new school districts in the Memphis suburbs after the merger of Memphis and Shelby County schools.

U.S. Dist. Judge Samuel "Hardy" Mays struck down key parts of the law, concluding it applied only to Shelby County, in violation of the Tennessee Constitution. What will happen in the new legislative session is anybody's guess.

"It sounds to me like maybe there's some prospects for progress with the discussions that have taken place in the last month," Norris said. "I've done what I could to foster and facilitate those conversations."

This farmer-lawyer-legislator has come a long way to reach his current perch of power. From the night his wife cried herself to sleep when he asked what she thought about him going into politics. From his fight over a developer's plans to build a golf course across from his tranquil farm that gave birth to his political career. And from those prickly days on the Shelby County Commission when former Mayor Jim Rout was ready to give him a one-way ticket to Nashville.

Though as Senate majority leader Norris carries the governor's legislative agenda, he sees himself as more of a technician, the one who figures out how to get from point A to point C. And while he understands the significance of the school legislation, it isn't what he'd point to as the bill he's most proud of. That would be the effort he led to amend the state constitution to provide tax relief to senior citizens. Or maybe the designation of Tennessee's "west coast" as a national scenic byway. Then there's Electrolux, Mitsubishi. The Republican super majority — with Norris leading the charge — may have given unprecedented power in the state legislature to Shelby County suburbs for the first time. Critics contend his tactics have been unfair to the city of Memphis and have changed the rules of the game.

He sees things differently.

"I consider myself to be a Shelby Countian, a Memphian," he said. "I live in Collierville's reserve. I don't live in any municipality. I have a Collierville mailing address. But since 1980, my office has been downtown. My wife's family's business has been downtown. I think I have more of a sense of community than a sense of suburbia or that kind of thing.

"I also represent — I have for the last 10 years — literally the west coast of this state so I have all of Tipton County, all of Lauderdale County, all of Dyer County. I go almost, not quite, from Mississippi to Kentucky. So I have a broader perspective about a lot of these things. Suburbia, you know, I'm glad they feel they have more of a voice and a place at the table, but I hope there are a lot of people that feel the same way." (With last year's redistricting, which went into effect with the election, Norris's district now extends north only through all of Tipton County and parts of east Shelby County.)

Norris has been called reserved and cautious, measured and meticulous, ego-driven and suspicious. Even nerdy and predictable. But he's also been described as ethical to the letter of the law. Funny and fair-minded. Dependable and consistent.

Someone who likes to color inside the lines.

Shelby County Juvenile Court Judge Curtis Person, who sat next to Norris for eight years in the senate, found him to be comfortable in his own skin and unafraid of political consequences.

"I saw so many people come up to Nashville in my 40 years, and on the first day they were sworn in, they were so humble," Person said. "They were so appreciative of the people who got them there. And then a few months would pass, and they would change. They would become so impressed with their positions and themselves. ... And it all went to their heads. But I never saw that with Mark. Mark was the same person when I left there that came eight years before. He never changed."

State Sen. Jim Kyle, who has vehemently disagreed with Norris over legislation, called him lawyer-like "in the most positive sense," prepared in his remarks and articulate in the way a litigator would be.

"Every political organization needs a nuts and bolts person," Kyle said. "I had a guy once tell me something, one of our consultants ... that there's only two kinds of people in this world. There are salesmen, and there are engineers. (Lt. Gov.) Ron Ramsey is the salesman. Mark Norris is the engineer. He's the detail guy."

Kyle said Norris hasn't been as open to suggestions from people on the Democratic side as he'd like but sees that as part of his cautious nature.

"I truly believe that too often he thinks that you're trying to one-up, political upmanship, or to undermine, or that small tinkering would implode the whole idea," Kyle said. "It's more like our way is the best way. And I'll explain to you why it's the best way. But if you don't understand, I'm sorry."

State Rep. G.A. Hardaway said Norris's leadership in the senate was invaluable on the Electrolux and Mitsubishi deals (which provided millions of dollars in state incentives) as well as some work regarding the Regional Medical Center at Memphis. But a change in the legislature's makeup, including the addition of some Tea Party members, may bring out more statesmanship in Norris.

"They've got some extreme positions that the mainstream Republican Party doesn't endorse, can't endorse, because it's going to impact their relationships with business in particular, and commerce is what really drives them," Hardaway said.

"... He's not going to be able to go one way or the other all in. He's got constituency at home that are not party loyalists, and they can create problems for him. But there are resources and the organizational aspect of the Republican Party that he's got to have to move forward. So I'm confident he'll walk the fine line. He's a master at that."

Hardaway has a working relationship with Norris but is realistic about it.

"I think he respects me," he said. "I respect him. But I'm a realist. If I'm in a lifeboat and somebody's gotta go over, he'll tell me how much he loves me, and over I'll go."

Growing up, politics were a part of Norris's rural Ohio life long before he could vote. A cradle Republican, he remembers his parents talking about how terrible the Roosevelt administration was. Chuck and Libby Norris didn't like big government and thought the Democrat spent too much money. But young Mark Norris wasn't yet bent toward a career in politics. He wanted to be a lawyer.

In fourth grade he made placards out of old shirt cardboards advertising his services.

"Need help? Call a lawyer," Norris remembered writing. "I think it was something like that. I'm not sure where they are. I know my mother saved them."

More than party politics, Norris's parents instilled in him the importance of service. His mom was a volunteer nurse with the Red Cross. And he knew from the time he was a young boy the story of his father's military service in World War II: Chuck Norris volunteered, but the U.S. military wouldn't take him because he didn't weigh enough. So he flew for the Royal Canadian Air Force. But when the United States got deeper into the fight, he came home and trained in Liberal, Kan., to fly Liberator bombers.

Chuck Norris died of an aneurysm in 1964 when Mark was eight years old. His mother remarried in 1967 to Russell Whitmore.

Norris' mother and stepfather thought he'd outgrown the local school, and Whitmore offered to send him to Middlesex School in Concord, Mass.

Whitmore died of a heart attack in 1969, a week before Norris was scheduled to leave. His mother was a widow for the second time.

"I was very close to him," Norris said of his stepfather. "And all of a sudden he was gone. And mom encouraged me to follow through, so I did."

Middlesex prep school was another world. The students found him garrulous. He thought them serious. Then there was the dry wit as opposed to the knee-slapping kind. He was homesick until his junior year but was exposed to classes he never would have had in Ohio. He lettered in crew, "a starboard or bowman in a four."

After graduating from Middlesex and experiencing the East Coast he thought he'd try the West Coast for college, but it was "too weird." He decided on Colorado College, which was still out west but "coming back this way a little bit." It's also where his big brother had gone.

He met Chris Cowan from Germantown on her first day on campus. They were both science majors of sorts, his political, hers biology. She was a year behind him in school and unimpressed by his position as student body president.

"He had these little horn-rimmed glasses," Chris Norris recalled as she sat on the family's screened-in back porch. "He was Mr. Business. He carried his little briefcase around. Not cool. Not cool. He was very serious, and I was not in the mood to be serious. I was having too much fun."

Technically, Norris carried the briefcase to campus association meetings, not to class.

"But I didn't have a pocket protector," he offered.

"No, no you did not," she said. "Thank God."

But Norris grew on her.

"I knew I liked Mark because he could put on a suit and woo my grandmother, and he could put on a pair of blue jeans and ride a horse," she said. "And he stayed on my horse, by the way. And he has kept that all his life.

"He can put on a suit and go to the legislature. And he can meet and talk to and converse with all kinds of fancy people. And then he can also put on his boots and go to the Wolf River Café and sit down with a couple of his motorcycle friends or firemen or farmers. ... That's probably one of the things that made me decide I kind of liked the guy."

Norris likes to say it took every bit of four years to convince her to marry him. The first time he asked she was a junior. Maybe someday, she said. She had some living to do. By the third time, he was already in law school at University of Denver, and she was a senior. They were both ready for white picket fences.

He gave her the ring his father had given his mother.

After law school, Norris thought they'd build a life back in Ohio, but at the suggestion of his father-in-law, he interviewed in Memphis. He wanted to work at a relatively small firm with a big-firm reputation and big-firm clientele. He found it in Memphis. Today he works as special counsel to the law firm Adams and Reese LLP.

During the early years he and Chris lived in a little house in town. She worked as a paralegal, and he was the lawyer who carried a pager all hours of the day and night. In one of his first cases Norris defended the National Bank of Commerce in what he called the sterling silver suitcase caper. After the matriarch died, the family accused the bank of pilfering the silver that had been in the vault.

"In my opening argument I said to the judge: 'Just remember your honor, please, the butler did it.' And damn if it didn't turn out to be true."

Those who know Mark Norris best say he's the same man no matter what role he's playing — farmer, lawyer, or legislator. He takes as long to answer his wife about

whether they should poison trees coming up in the back hedge as he might his remarks on the Senate floor. And he's as fussy about planting seeds as the wording of a bill.

"The dirt's ready, mounded up, let's go plant," said Norris's eldest son Field. "So our idea of planting, mom and me, is just sticking the seeds in the ground as fast as we can. And here he comes, 'Woah! Woah! Woah! What are you doing?'"

"On the back of the pack of pumpkin seeds it says plant pumpkins at six-inch depth, seven inches spacing apart from each other. And he gets a yardstick on five acres. ... It took two days."

His controlled, thoughtful nature is what makes him good counsel, his wife said.

"He doesn't look at something for tomorrow or the next day," she said. "He's going to look at the ramifications of something immediate, a year from now, three years from now, five years from now, 10 years from now ad infinitum. ... Most people can't follow that. I think that may be something he's got that a lot of people don't have.

"I would say he'd be an excellent chess player if he played chess."

Even frivolity has a purpose, though. His idea of fun is to read a biography of Abraham Lincoln or split wood the old fashioned way with steel wedges.

Take the firetruck in the barn, for instance. Norris says it's for fire protection in the summer, but they've only used it to give rides for a cousin's birthday party. Or the cannon his sons bought him as a Christmas gift. It fits the historic nature of their home, Greenlevel, which was once a Civil War hospital. They fired potatoes out of it on Christmas Day.

"You can't peg Mark," Chris Norris said. "He's very, very conservative. He's fiscally conservative. You can say that about him. But the environment is important to him. Arts and theater are important to him. Education has obviously been important.

"And there's nothing he loves more than spending time with our sons."

As for Norris's ambitions, he says he knows people won't believe him when he says it, but he has no master plan. He could see himself as a judge. The governor's office interests him. Maybe something at the federal level. But that would mean he'd be away from home more than he already is.

"There are a lot of competing considerations," he said. "I don't have a game plan to be elected to anything else. Does that mean I wouldn't if the right opportunity came along? No. Governor would be a fantastic job because you have one job, but there's a multitude of challenges in it and opportunities to do things. ... "There are lots of people working right now to become governor in 10 years. I'm not. I think it would be a great opportunity to be a governor, but all these things are a total crap shoot. ... If you're really concerned

about public policy and public service, you take it as it comes to you. You're not born to do something. It's more like you're born to deal with whatever confronts you."

Norris worries more over what's in front of him — the opening of the new legislative session Tuesday and balancing Tennessee's budget — rather than how people will remember him. He doesn't have an answer as to where he sees himself over the next decade.

"I'm more like Forrest Gump," he said. "What's going to happen now? Oh, I've gotta deal with that. I just want to survive. And I want to help where I can and do as much good or prevent as much harm and make as few mistakes as I can."

What's in front of Norris are long drives across his district and back and forth to Nashville, listening to country music, conservative talk radio and the speeches of Winston Churchill. He'll talk to constituents and likely encounter the same intense debate over the same divisive issues he has for the past two years.



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