No. 142  U.S. Sen. Mike and Stephanie Johanns – September 2014

Stars filled the Press Club on Sept. 19. Not the outdoor variety visible through the 22nd-floor windows. The indoor luminaries were Nebraska’s leading Republicans who gathered to roast and toast Mike and Stephanie Johanns. Mike and Stephanie shared the Face on the Barroom Floor. And they shared an impressive political accomplishment — never defeated in their bids for public office. Mike, a seven-time election winner since entering politics in the early 1980s, is a former Lancaster County commissioner, Lincoln City Council member, Lincoln mayor, Nebraska governor, U.S. secretary of agriculture and U.S. senator. He is retiring from Congress in January 2015. Stephanie is also a former Lancaster County commissioner and later was a Nebraska state senator. She is a senior vice president with Verzion. Roasters and speakers included Gov. Dave Heineman and U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer. Prominent Republicans in the audience included Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert, U.S. Rep. Lee Terry, governor candidate Pete Ricketts and Senate candidate Ben Sasse — plus several current and former state senators.

Filling out the roster roster were longtime Johanns friends Jim and Lori McClurg, Allen Beermann and encoze Mary Maxwell. Heineman proclaimed “Mike and Stephanie Johanns Day” in Nebraska. And the governor got one of the biggest laughs of the evening when he announced that “the next lieutenant governor of Nebraska is Mike Johanns,” a position recently in the headlines after being vacated for the second time. Sen. Fischer revealed that one of Mike’s “vices” is an addiction to “The Bachelor” TV show. She said he managed to find time to watch eight episodes in a month. “Is it any wonder that we don’t get anything done in the Senate?” she joked.

Beermann, executive director of the Nebraska Press Association and a former Nebraska secretary of state, poked fun at what he said was a dull Johanns lifestyle. One night the State Patrol caught a peeping tom at the Governor's Mansion outside Mike and Stephanie’s bedroom window, Beermann said. “And the peeping tom was asleep!” Jim McClurg, president of Technological Development Resources Co. and a former NU regent, said the Johannses lead what could be described as “not an edgy life.” The best dig McClurg could dig up was: “I remember one weekend they didn’t make it to Mass.” Lori McClurg, director of operations and student affairs at UNL’s Raikes School of Computer Science, said that as mayor, Mike stirred the wrath of Lincoln’s youngsters when he cancelled Halloween because of a snowstorm. Artist Jim Horan’s Face on the Floor depicts Mike at the end of a yellow brick road leading from Lincoln to the U.S. Capitol. In the background are the Iowa farm boy’s agricultural heritage and the Creighton Bluejay of his law school alma mater. Stephanie is depicted at the wheel of a race car (she has competed in midget races) while getting a phone call from her Verzion employer. Purple prairie flowers in the foreground of the caricature represent the plant officially named after Stephanie. In concluding remarks, Mike thanked all in attendance and told them: “You will never be able to imagine how much fun I have had the last 30 years campaigning across this great state with Steph.” Stephanie added: “In all those years of campaigning together and serving in office, I would not change one single thing that we have done...But after all these years of public service, Mike, thank you for my life back.”

—Don Summerside reports