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Rep. Ritch Workman Determined Florida Will Have Tough Immigration Law

Conservative has father's principles, iron will

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Ritch Workman
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His name is a brief synopsis of the American dream, his life story an aspiration toward it, and he may be one of the chief arbiters of who gets to attempt it in Florida.

State Rep. Ritch Workman, R-Melbourne, is a staunch conservative who made headlines recently for stating his desire to bring a version of the controversial Arizona immigration law to Florida.

Workman was born in Canada and, at the age of 8 in 1980, moved to Florida from Belleville, Ontario along with the rest of his family. His father, David, was so incensed by the re-election of Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and his looming socialist policies that he moved the entire family straight to Florida two weeks after the election.

"My dad said that we would never live in Canada, we would never live in a socialist country," Workman said.

Having bought a house "sight unseen," David Workman proceeded to raise the American flag upon moving there and told his children, "You're Americans now."

David Workman's ultra-conservative roots were transferred to his son, and laid the foundation of the future politician's political philosophy.

"I think that's why I got into politics. It's 100 percent from my father's principles and his beliefs," Workman said.

His family's long and arduous journey to becoming citizens helped Workman form his current views on immigration.

"It was difficult to become a citizen. Dad came down on a work visa and earned a permanent resident status," Workman said.

It took him 10 years, which included two years in the U.S. Army, before he gained American citizenship.

"I know how hard my family fought to become citizens. It does not make me happy that others live here, enjoy our freedoms and don't follow the same rules my family did," Workman said.

As long as Workman fends off a challenge from Democrat Amy Tidd in the November election -- whom he defeated with 54 percent of the vote in 2008 -- he will push for an immigration bill resembling Arizona's law. He is vice-chairman of the House Roads, Bridges and Ports Policy Committee.

Arizona's law, which allows police officers to detain a person who cannot prove their citizenship or legal status, has drawn fire from liberal groups all over the country who insist it will lead to racial profiling, even though the law explicitly forbids profiling.

According to Workman, the negative national firestorm over the Arizona law and his support for it has not reached the Florida House.

"I have not had a single representative tell me I'm doing the wrong thing," he said, adding that representatives are lining up to co-sponsor his bill.

He has one staunch supporter in a high place. Workman was a backer of Florida Senate President-designate Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, when he was first elected to the House in 2000. Haridopolos said he is pleased to see another conservative coming up through the ranks.

"(Workman) is the kind of person you want to have in the Legislature, who is hard-working and because he's not afraid to express his opinion," Haridopolos said.

Workman's enthusiasm for the illegal immigration issue is unquestioned, but he is far from single-minded, focusing at once on the vast expanse of space and the minutiae of the state budget.

He gained statewide clout recently by forming the Space Caucus among fellow legislators, which now boasts 45 members.

Workman bemoaned the cuts to the space program in President Obama's budget, and said he is pleased to see statewide support for the preservation of the space industry.

"These people saw space as a Brevard County issue. I needed to teach the other 159 representatives that space was a Florida issue," Workman said.

The retention of thousands of jobs directly and indirectly linked to NASA and the space industry would certainly be a boon to Brevard, said Haridopolos, and he has been glad to see Workman get out in front on the issue.

"He really led the initiative for the Space Caucus this year, which was vital to secure the funding for the Kennedy Space Center and lead us through a hard time here in Brevard County," Haridopolos said.

Workman has had a tougher time getting legislators to find ways to cut the budget.

"While that's (budget cuts) happened a little bit, it's been disheartening to see how hard it is," Workman said. Florida's dire economic straits and budget shortfalls should be making it easier to find fat. But entrenched bureaucracies and a habit of government spending are making it difficult.

"On the citizen side, once you giveth," he said, "it is very difficult to taketh away, both in political and in human terms."

Gray Rohrer, who wrote this story special for Sunshine State News, reports from Satellite Beach.

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