

Geppert brings experience and passion to new role as head of Illinois Federation of Teachers

There's no place like home, and for Ed Geppert, Jr., president of the 90,000-member Illinois Federation of Teachers, home is the IFT. That's because for nearly 40 years, Ed Geppert has been a member and leader of the Illinois Federation of Teachers.

A wealth of experience

Although Geppert began his three-year term as IFT president on July 1, he previously served as chief of staff, secretary-treasurer, and as IFT assistant to the president for organization, supervising the field service directors who organize members and service locals across Illinois.

Geppert was a member of the IFT Executive Board from 1975-77 while serving as the president of the Cahokia Commonfields Federation of Teachers, Local 1272, located in the Metro-East area of Illinois across the Mississippi River from St. Louis.

After retiring from the IFT in 2004, Geppert was appointed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich to the Illinois State Board of Education, where he chaired the Audit and Finance Committee. He resigned his ISBE post when he began his term as IFT president.

Union from a young age

Geppert's passion for the union movement goes back to his childhood, when his father was the maintenance foreman in the Cahokia, Ill. schools.

"Dad taught me by example," Geppert said. "He believed firmly that the only thing workers can trust is their union and the members of their union."

After beginning his education career as a social studies teacher in his home town of Cahokia, Ill. in 1969, he joined the IFT and Local 1272. Geppert took on various leadership roles in the local,

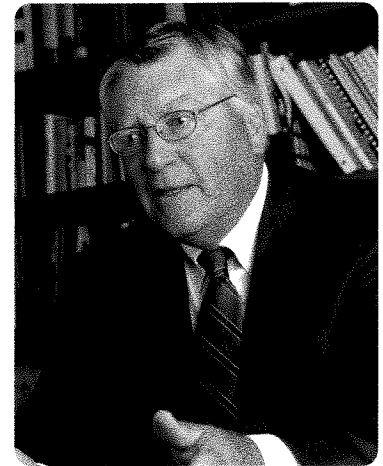
eventually becoming president in 1973. "At the first executive council meeting of the local, only one building representative showed up. I learned quickly that you have to go into the buildings and speak directly with your members to find out what they need," he admitted.

"We are like no other union in the state of Illinois in what we can offer our members in the way of services and staff. I'm committed to making sure that we do even more and we do it even better."

— Ed Geppert, Jr., IFT president

So Geppert worked to engage existing members and recruit new ones. What began as a local with 35 percent membership in 1973 became a strong, unified local with 80 percent membership just one year later.

The local's solidarity served it well when members were forced to strike in 1974 and again in 1975. The second strike was a lengthy, difficult one that resulted in six days in jail for Geppert and officers of the local. But Geppert says the experience only served to reinforce his faith in the IFT and labor unions. "We came out even stronger and more unified," he said. "We truly felt the meaning of solidarity."



Ed Geppert, Jr., IFT president

Completing the core mission

Nearly 30 years after that strike and now as IFT president, Geppert is looking ahead and combining his passion for the union with his extensive leadership experiences to focus on what he believes is the core mission of the IFT — servicing its local unions. He believes strongly in local autonomy, but knows that locals are most effective when they receive sufficient support from the IFT.

"It's up to the locals to make the decisions, but it is up to us as a state organization to make available the resources our locals need to make those decisions that will make them strongest," he said.

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Geppert believes that part of meeting the needs of locals and members is developing an even stronger voice for the IFT in Springfield and Washington, D.C. "We have to be part of the decision-making process at all levels so that we can impact how those decisions affect our members in their workplaces," he said.

Geppert also wants to revitalize the IFT's role in the AFL-CIO at all levels.

"We need to work closely with our brothers and sisters in labor. We would not be here without them and we have many common goals," he said.

Developing internal union strength through "organizational transparency," which he defines as clear lines of communication and access to all pertinent information among leadership to ensure that critical issues are addressed thoroughly and thoughtfully before policy decisions are made, is another goal. Geppert has already restructured IFT executive board committees and procedures to move toward that goal.

IFT pride

Though Geppert knows his agenda is broad and far-reaching, he firmly believes it is critical to the continued strength and success of the IFT.

With the assistance of newly elected IFT Secretary-Treasurer Marilyn Stewart (*see interview, right*) he believes the goals can and must be achieved.

"I'm pretty proud of this organization," he said. "We are like no other union in the state of Illinois in what we can offer our members in the way of services and staff. I'm committed to making sure that we do even more and we do it even better," said the IFT president. "We are their union. We are the IFT."

CTU leader elected IFT secretary-treasurer

Marilyn Stewart joins IFT President Ed Geppert at the helm of the Illinois Federation of Teachers as secretary-treasurer. The Peoria native began her teaching career at the Illinois School for the Deaf in Jacksonville, Ill. and taught deaf and hard-of-hearing students in Chicago public schools for 30 years before being elected Chicago Teachers Union, Local 1, president in 2004. She was re-elected to the CTU post in 2007 with 76 percent of the vote, and was elected by acclamation as IFT secretary-treasurer at the union's March 2007 convention.

The election of Stewart to the second-highest officer position in the IFT establishes a team of officers from two areas of the state with strong concentrations of IFT members-Chicago and the metro-east area just across the Mississippi River in southwestern Illinois. Those geographic regions are longtime IFT strongholds, and the officer configuration emphasizes the statewide reach of the union.

"I am honored to serve you as IFT secretary-treasurer," Stewart stated, "and excited about the opportunity to work with IFT local unions and members throughout Illinois."

Concerns are the same

"I come from the largest school district in the state, but the concerns I have as an educator and working woman are largely the same as any IFT member, whether they live and work in Galena or Christopher, Jacksonville or Chicago.

"We want the same things - safe and healthy buildings to work and teach in, adequate funding for education and important public services, decent compensation and a secure retirement," Stewart noted.



Marilyn Stewart, IFT secretary-treasurer

The Geppert-Stewart team will work to promote the core mission of the IFT. As secretary-treasurer, Stewart will also oversee the financial operations of the union, making sure that members' dues continue to be wisely and carefully used to provide top-quality services and support to the nearly 200 IFT local unions around the state.

Funding reform a priority

But she also plans to continue to raise her voice - as she has since her first day as CTU president - in support of funding reform in Illinois to end the structural deficit and make sure that education and public services are properly funded.

"We cannot do our jobs without adequate funding, and that is a message I will continue to take to elected leaders," Stewart promised. "Every IFT member must be part of delivering that important message, and I know we are up to the task."

"I look forward to meeting many IFT members in the months ahead as we work together to make the goals of the IFT a reality."