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## St. Paul's Mr. Plugged-In

P.R. maven gets the word out for variety of public, private clients



"I like working on things that really matter to the community," says Ted Davis, a media consultant in St. Paul. "My projects require a lot of people to talk to a lot of legislators about the importance of an issue." (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

**BY FRANK JOSSI**

Special to Capitol Report

Media consultant Ted Davis checked his calendar on a recent Wednesday. Lunch was at Town & Country Club and

featured a speaker he invited to the Midway Chamber of Commerce to discuss "buy local" campaigns.

From there he traveled to Washington Middle School for a town hall forum where some parents and teachers Davis invited spoke about the

potential impact of state cutbacks on St. Paul's schools. The rest of the week included a meeting with the Midway chamber, a new client proposal, a news release for St. Paul College and the completion of a project in which he shepherded a University Avenue auto

# Davis Award-winning public relations guru has adopted St. Paul as home

body shop through the maze of City Hall so it could avoid being rezoned out of existence.

The busy 47-year-old is among the most connected people in St. Paul. Attend any political event in the city with Davis and it seems he knows just about everyone. In part, it's a function of his gregarious personality, but just as important has been his background that spans stints with nonprofits, city agencies, the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce and the Convention & Visitors Authority.

"He's incredibly plugged-in, more so in St. Paul than anywhere else, and he's known in a broad spectrum of organizations — politicians, nonprofits — because of all the work he's done in government and by serving on a lot of boards," says Char Mason, co-owner of Mason Coleman Events and a collaborator with Davis on projects. "He seems to know everybody."

As a behind-the-scenes media operator, Davis has worked for many politicians, among them St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, City Council Member Pat Harris and Ramsey County Commissioner Rafael Ortega. Add to that list the St. Paul Public Schools, Neighborhood House/The Paul and Sheila Wellstone Center, the University of Minnesota, Ramsey County, Metro Transit and more.

"I like working on things that really matter to the community," Davis says. "My projects require a lot of people to talk to a lot of legislators about the importance of an issue using media relations, speechwriting and grassroots organizing

that motivates people to show up and state their case."

Recently, Davis worked closely with St. Paul Public School Superintendent Valeria Silva on promoting her restructuring plan, which won adoption by the school board. In the past year he served as the interim president of the Midway chamber and managed public relations for "Souvenirs," a movie filmed in the Twin Cities.

Heavily involved in community nonprofits, Davis has served on 12 boards and assists Harris with Serving Our Troops, a program providing a free steak dinner to Minnesota National

## The Davis File

**Name:** Ted Davis

**Age:** 47

**Grew up in:** Bloomington

**Job:** Owner, Davis Communications Management Inc., media consultancy

**Degrees:** bachelor of arts, University of Minnesota

**Family:** Andrea Casselton; son, Gus, 16; daughter, Alexandra, 11

**Odd job:** Street performer and fool, Minnesota Renaissance Festival



"If you want to make a difference, your point of entrance is politics," says Ted Davis, a DFLer to the core. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Guard troops stationed in the United States and overseas. During meals the troops speak through a video link to their families in Minnesota who are also receiving a free lunch at the same time.

“The troops either have teleconferencing or Skype that Ted has coordinated through local businesses — he’s made it easy and free for soldiers to come in and use those services,” says Lt. Col. Kevin Olson, Minnesota National Guard public affairs director. “Ted always stresses it’s a ‘family dinner,’ and the technology makes that happen.”

One of those assignments last year was to plan a 100th anniversary celebration for St. Paul College. Donovan Schwichtenberg, the college’s president, says Davis scheduled the speakers, created the program, managed media relations and made sure everything ran on time.

“He’s a very responsible person, very organized and very good at details — he leaves nothing out,” Schwichtenberg says. “He made sure everything got done and got done right.”

### Civic-minded

In almost three decades in public relations, Davis has been on different staffs and operated an agency with partner Blois Olson, a well-known media consultant now at Tunheim Partners. But for more than a decade he has been a solo practitioner who hires on contractors when needed.

His clients receive the equivalent of senior-level talent — such as Mason or former Macalester College communications director Doug Stone — without the overhead cost of an agency. “I’m able to tap high-level people with very specific skills,” he says. “I see myself as a trusted adviser who simply helps people tell their story.”

Despite having no true staff, Davis received the Donald G. Padilla Distinguished Practitioner Award from the Minnesota Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. The award recognizes an individual “who has

made significant contributions to the community and to the public relations profession, and who has demonstrated exceptional professional achievement.”

Public relations is less a science than a practice, but belief helps sell a story, Davis says. The Internet, social media and blogs have all played a role in fracturing messages and calling into question the vision of political and community leaders.

“In some ways the new media makes

“Ted is known in a broad spectrum of organizations — politicians, nonprofits — because of all the work he’s done in government and by serving on a lot of boards.”

—Char Mason of Mason Coleman Events

it easier to get to people, but you have to be comfortable not having control of the message and comfortable in saying that your story will rise out of the clutter,” he says. “You can build email lists, websites and a Twitter following if you want, but you have to be comfortable with your message. If you’re speaking with clarity, you’ll prevail.”

A St. Paulite and DFLer to the core, Davis didn’t actually grow up in the city or in a political family. The Bloomington native has an older sister and younger brother. His father, John, was an accountant and still does his son’s taxes while his mother worked as a secretary. Neither of them brought up politics much at all.

“If you want to make a difference, your point of entrance is politics,” he explained.

Upon earning a degree from the University of Minnesota in journalism and mass communications, Davis spent nearly three years doing public relations for a debt collection association while making his home in St. Paul. “I grew up in Bloomington, but I achieved

St. Paul,” he says with a laugh.

His longest stint followed, in the 1990s, when he worked for six and a half years heading up communications at the St. Paul Public Housing Agency. “That was a great job because I got to work in different neighborhoods and for an organization that was the best in the business,” Davis says. “When I was working there, the agency was selected the best housing agency in the country several years running.”

In the late 1980s he spent many a fun weekend as a street theater performer and fool at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival, an important gig, as it turns out. He met and married another performer, Andrea Casselton, who now leads the city’s information technology department. They have a son and a daughter.

His career path after the housing agency reveals an undeniable restlessness. Like a lot of media entrepreneurs, Davis embraces change, the more and faster, the better. His last job was managing communications at the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, a post he left in 1998 to start his own firm with Olson, with whom he parted ways in 2002.

Throughout his career Davis has been active in civic affairs. He served on the Highland Park and Macalester Groveland district councils and currently sits on a handful of nonprofit boards. An avid bicyclist and runner, he has completed nine marathons.

If there’s a unifying thread to Davis’ world it’s a love, in the end, for St. Paul. Don’t get him going on the charms of the city unless you want the conversation to be a long one.

“I love St. Paul, I really do,” he says. “I like it here because it feels like a community. I like the older houses, I like the sense of history, I think that you walk places that are meaningful. It’s a tight-knit community, but you can make a difference pretty quickly. It’s a cool place to live.”