



Debbie Stabenow's enthusiastic door-to-door campaigns have carried her from county commissioner to the U.S. Congress. But it's a long, bumpy road to the Senate.



by Michael Betzold and
Debbie Eisenberg Merion

On a Friday afternoon rush hour at the corner of Woodward and Nine Mile Road in Ferndale, a motley group of dignitaries has assembled to kick off the Woodward Dream Cruise. On a grassy median, a small portable platform on a flatbed trailer is groaning under the weight of two dozen politicians, mostly men, assembled three deep in no apparent pecking order—a drain commissioner rubbing shoulders with a city clerk, the county executive wedged between a congressman and a sheriff.

It's twenty minutes past the scheduled 5:00 starting time for the classic car parade, and Debbie Stabenow looks anxious as she stands in the middle of the front row of office-holders. Prominently positioned near the lectern, she is wearing a conservative black pantsuit and a liberal smile. The Democratic candidate for the United States Senate occasionally waves at the small crowd, which includes two staffers, four volunteers wearing Stabenow T-shirts, a couple of members of the media, and her son, Todd.

Congressman Joe Knollenberg, a Republican who represents Oakland County, tells the crowd that the Dream Cruise is now recognized by the Library of Congress, thanks to an act he initiated. When Knollenberg tells the crowd that "Spencer Abraham would join with me, I know, in saying . . ." Stabenow flashes a quick, broad smile at her staffers and volunteers. She is basking in the warm glow of her opponent's absence.

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Dream Cruise organizer and MC Ken Miller eventually tells the crowd he is calling upon a longtime friend to speak. "We lived together in Lansing for eighteen years," he says, and then, as the crowd titters and Stabenow's face registers mild shock and goes a little red, he corrects himself: "I mean, we *worked* together in Lansing for eighteen years. . . ."

Stabenow steps to the lectern, grabs Miller's hand, and shakes her head a little, telling Miller for the crowd to hear, "You got us in trouble there for a while." The moment, the gesture, and the remark are slightly awkward, but she has succeeded in making it clear he made a slip. Her voice bright and sunny, Stabenow gushes about the gorgeous blue skies; the "wonderful" cars; her son, who owns a classic car himself; the hardworking event organizers; and the prospects for a fun weekend. "I know it's going to be a wonderful, wonderful time," she wraps up, "so be safe and enjoy."

Stabenow sounds more like a local TV weathercaster than a congresswoman who has been stumping for votes ever since the previous Dream Cruise in August 1999. She doesn't mention, or even obliquely refer to, her campaign for the Senate, or her

opponent's absence from this kickoff.

If Stabenow lacks a killer instinct on the podium, though, she's deadly on the campaign trail. The formalities over, the candidate begins a circuit of the sidewalk tables around the edge of the open-air Woodward Avenue Brewery. A rail separates the tables from the sidewalk; Stabenow leans over it to shake hands and make small talk with the seated diners. A band on a stage inside the small restaurant and bar is playing loud oldies music, and cars are zooming by on Woodward, gunning their engines. It's hard to hear anything over the din, but Stabenow is undeterred. Her blue eyes dancing, she seems determined to shake hands and have a few words with every person at the diner.

Stabenow's greetings vary from table to table: "Hi, how are you?" "I'm Debbie Stabenow." "Do you guys have a car here or are you just having fun?" Usually she explains, "I'm running for U.S. Senate," but not always.

The diners' reactions vary: excitement, surprise, indifference, confusion. A woman at a table she's just left asks, "Is she a Democrat or a Republican?"

At one table of four, a man wearing sunglasses rudely greets her with a

thumbs-up and a “Go Spence!” Stabenow laughs and asks the others at the table, “Where did you pick him up?”

The singer in the band spots the candidate, waves, and yells, “Hi, Debbie!” as if she is a longtime friend. She waves back. The band is in the middle of “Cool Jerk.” The singer tells the crowd, “Look, there’s Debbie Stabenow! Debbie knows she’s cool. She’s walking around showing how cool she is.” Stabenow waves, and she swings her arms and hips in a little shimmy. If the Democrats were a small-P party, she would be the party animal.

The candidate gets to the end of the rail, turns around, hesitates for a minute, and explains, “I thought I was walking through the door, but I wasn’t. Where’s the door?” She backtracks, and on the way she stops to talk with the “Go Spence!” guy. “Did I get your vote?” she asks the man, smiling. They chat a little longer, and she moves on.

What did she say? He says, “She asked if I’d vote for her, but I said, ‘I don’t know what you stand for.’” he relates. “So she tells me. But she just gave me a memorized paragraph of stuff.” Despite her blandishments, Stabenow hasn’t charmed this staunch Republican into dumping Abraham for her.

Inside the bar, the band is even louder. Stabenow doesn’t leave until she’s shaken the hand of everyone there, from busboys to band members. Several people seem to know her, or to recognize her—or perhaps she’s just so engaging that people act as if she’s an old friend.

Outside the restaurant her son, Todd, a handsome young man with short, dark hair, is beaming with pride. He wears a campaign T-shirt with “Vote for my mom” on the front. He says the message is identical to one on a shirt he wore when he was four years old and his mother first ran for state representative.

When Stabenow has temporarily run out of people to meet, she is swept up by Ken Miller, her old friend and political crony, who asks her to go for a ride with him in his vintage purple roadster. She enthusiastically accepts, marveling out loud at the snazzy vehicle. When she returns a few minutes later, she is still raving about the car, and she tells her son, “That’s the car I want!”

It’s time to go to Pontiac for an appearance at another Dream Cruise event. Stabenow and her son have an awkward conversation about a couple of campaign signs that Todd has brought. She wants to know whether she can keep the signs and where she will see him next. Brimming with confidence when she worked the crowd, Stabenow now seems confused and indecisive—just an ordinary mother trying to clear up arrangements with her son, unclear about who’s in charge. When it’s finally settled, she jumps into a staffer’s car and speeds off.

Downtown Pontiac is sizzling with barbecued ribs, revved-up hot rods, and hearty partyers. Smiling and laughing, Stabenow plunges into the crowd, putting campaign stickers on babies and old men, hugging and nuzzling supporters, and giving another enthusiastic impromptu speech that doesn’t mention her candidacy.

One young woman in the crowd relates her concerns about a toxic waste dump, and Stabenow looks pained and shakes her head mournfully. Naked emotions play on her face like scenes on a big movie screen.

To a supporter who complains that her Republican neighbors just don’t get it, Stabenow confides, “I’ve been telling people the economy is like this big feast at this huge table, and the challenge is how many people can we seat at the table.” In fact, it’s the same analogy vice-presidential candidate Joe Lieberman made during his speech at the Democratic national convention a few days previously.

Stubbornly grassroots

In 1974, fresh from getting a bachelor’s degree and a master’s in social work from Michigan State University, Stabenow ran for her first public office, winning a seat on the Ingham County Board of Commissioners. Though pregnant with Todd at the time, she visited almost every home in the county.

“I’ve been working with my mom since before I was born,” Todd observes, and he seems genuinely proud of that fact.

His mother was born in Clare in 1950 and graduated from Clare High School in 1968. She was the first woman and the youngest person ever to chair the Ingham County board. In 1978 she again used the house-to-house approach to win a seat representing Lansing in the Michigan House of Representatives. She soon became the first state representative to give birth to a child while in office; her daughter, Michelle, is now twenty and a sophomore at Michigan State.

Stabenow was a state representative for twelve years and a state senator for four more. She’s a single mother, her marriage having ended during her long Lansing career. She left the Michigan Senate to run for governor in 1994 but ended up losing the primary and then accepting the lieutenant governor spot on the Democratic ticket, which was broomed by John Engler.

Washtenaw County voters were first exposed to the Stabenow phenomenon in 1996, when she took on Republican incumbent Dick Chrysler in the Eighth U.S. Congressional District. Typically, 90 percent of congressional incumbents win reelection, but Stabenow knocked on 70,000 doors in the district—and knocked Chrysler, a prominent ally of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, into political retirement.

State representative John Hansen says he’ll never forget going door to door in Chelsea with Stabenow in 1998, when she was seeking reelection to Congress and Hansen was running for state office for the first time.

“She’s incredible on the porch,” Hansen recalls. “When she knocks at the door, you’d better come out and talk to her, because she’s a very insistent person. She’s so gregarious, and she makes a lasting impression on people.”

Hansen says his most indelible memory is working the opposite side of a street in Chelsea and watching as Stabenow approached a home where a newly returned bow hunter was hosing down a deer in the bed of a pickup truck.

“Debbie went right up like it was the

most natural thing in the world,” Hansen recalls. “And they were so thrilled that she was there that the whole family came out and they took pictures of her with them and the deer in the pickup truck.

“She just fits in. She’s so much fun to be around. And I’ve never met anyone with more energy.”

“She would love to meet every voter face to face,” Todd says. “Unfortunately, you can’t do that in a Senate campaign.”

Smelling blood

When Stabenow announced her plans to run against Abraham last year, political pundits pricked up their ears because of

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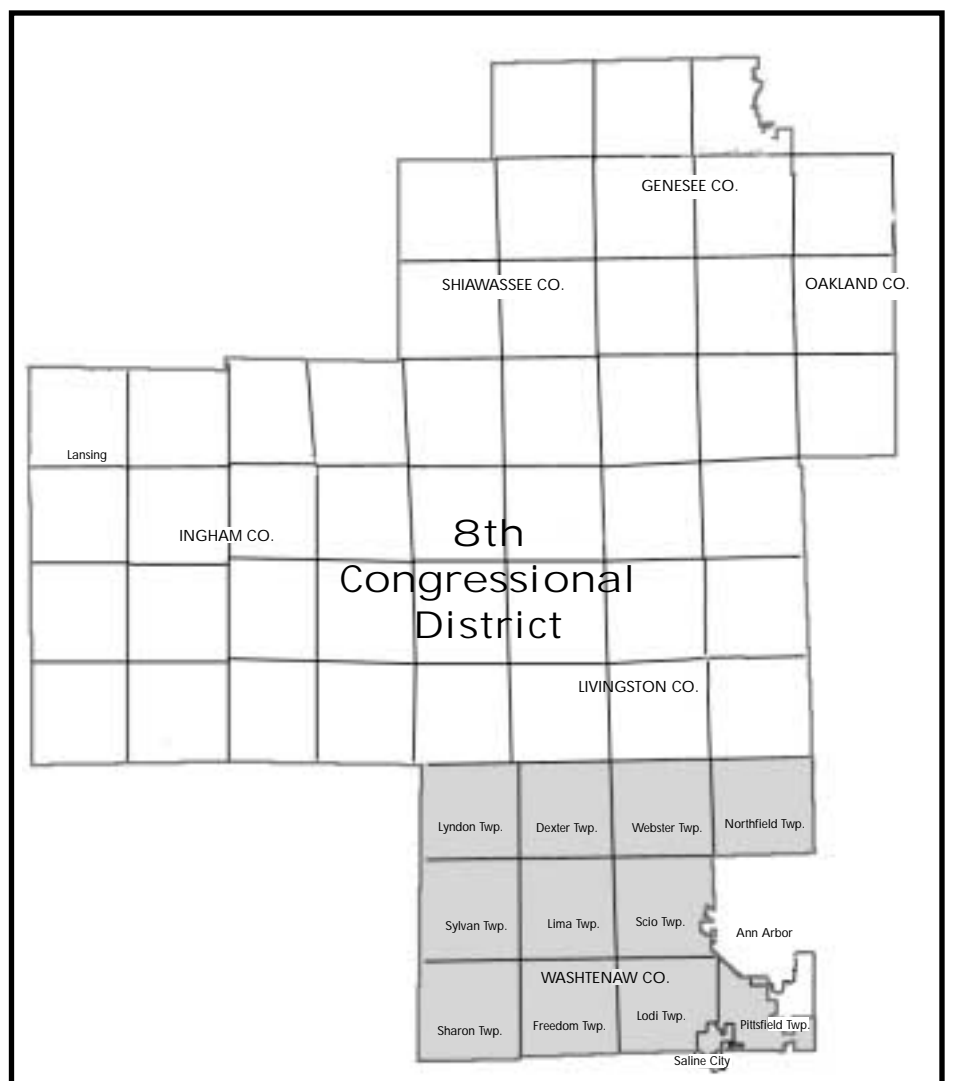
Just one year later Stabenow launched another long-shot campaign against an established incumbent. This time she wants to become Michigan’s first woman senator.

At the Dream Cruise Todd was asked whether his mother really is as enthusiastic about meeting people as she appears to be.

“Her favorite thing to do is to go door to door,” Todd replies with a can-you-believe-it look. “That’s how she was so successful early on. People still come up to me and tell me about how she talked to them for twenty minutes on their front porch, and now twenty years later they’re volunteering on her Senate campaign.

his status as a particularly vulnerable Republican. Abraham “is probably the weakest incumbent in the country,” according to MSU political science professor David Rohde. “He was not an elected office holder before he became senator, so he didn’t have a part of the electorate committed to him who can serve as a bedrock of support—that’s an advantage that Stabenow has. And his lack of experience gives him less of an ability to expand on that support as an incumbent.”

It’s unusual to find a weak incumbent. Smelling blood, the Democratic Party and special interest groups began pouring



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One analyst calls Spence Abraham “probably the weakest incumbent in the country.” But by mid-September he’d built a formidable lead over Stabenow.

money and attention into Stabenow’s campaign. The Republicans and their supporters responded in kind, and by late summer the race had become one of the most expensive in the nation. Though Stabenow had raised \$4.8 million, Abraham had an even more formidable \$8.1 million war chest.

But Stabenow has powerful friends: Bill Clinton flew into Detroit in August 1999 to speak at a \$10,000-a-plate fund-raiser for her and other Democratic senatorial candidates around the nation. This August she was given a prime-time speaking slot at the Democratic national convention. Shortly after the convention, an EPIC-MRA poll found her nipping at the incumbent’s heels, with support from 43 percent of voters compared to Abraham’s 48 percent.

Stabenow’s love of grassroots politics has taken her into the biggest race of her life. However, it remains to be seen whether it can carry her all the way to the U.S. Senate—especially when the Republicans are playing hardball. Abraham has used his war chest to unleash a volley of negative TV ads branding Stabenow as “Liberal Debbie”—a takeoff on Little Debbie cakes. Abraham’s “Liberal Debbie” website also compares Stabenow to Hillary Clinton in an effort to harness some of the conservative backlash against the first lady.

By mid-September Stabenow had lost ground in the EPIC-MRA poll. Abraham’s support had fallen slightly, to 44 percent—but Stabenow’s had dropped to 32 percent. Meanwhile, the number of voters calling themselves undecided had soared from 9 to 24 percent.

“It’s likely that the media blitz by Abraham, who has spent a considerable amount on TV, much of that portraying Stabenow in a bad light, has moved the ‘undecided’ category up to twenty-four percent—mostly at Stabenow’s expense,” explains EPIC-MRA principal John Cavanagh. “He is carving into what was weak

support for Stabenow and moving them into undecided.”

With time running down toward the November 7 election, it’s make-or-break time for the ebullient congresswoman from Lansing. If she’s to have a chance, says Cavanagh, “Stabenow has to get out and define herself the way she wants herself defined, rather than have Abraham tell everyone what a nogoodnik she is.”

Getting personal

Although Abraham is a Republican, his background would fit a Democrat. He grew up the grandchild of Lebanese immigrants, and his website boasts that he is the son and grandson of autoworkers. His parents also were small businesspeople, owning a five-and-ten-cent store in Lansing.

Like Stabenow, Abraham attended Michigan State University. The first in his family to get a college degree, he went on to Harvard Law School. While he was Republican state chair, John Engler was elected governor and Republicans gained control of the Michigan Senate. In 1990 he started working in Washington for the Bush administration as deputy chief of staff to vice-president Dan Quayle.

When senator Don Riegle retired in 1994, Abraham ran for the open seat. Riding the magic carpet of the Republican Revolution, he beat then-congressman Bob Carr by 55 to 45 percent.

At forty-eight, Abraham and his wife Jane have three young children—seven-year-old twins Betsy and Julie, and four-year-old Spencer. A picture on Abraham’s website shows Abraham with his family at Tiger Stadium; in a family portrait on the website, everyone is wearing denim and the kids have American flags sewn onto their shirts and dresses. Besides their Michigan home in Auburn Hills, the Abrahams have a home in Falls Church, Virginia. “I go back and forth with my family pretty much every week. Otherwise, I wouldn’t see them, because when I’m in

“Anybody would conclude that the attacks against us have been far more personal and far more ugly than anything we’ve done,” says Abraham.

Michigan, I’m on the road,” the senator explains.

Although Stabenow also commutes to D.C., she likes to emphasize that she comes home every weekend to Lansing, where she shops for groceries, goes to the dry cleaners, attends church, and volunteers in the community. “I live here,” she says. But her aides say she hasn’t been home much during the last year because she has been campaigning all across the state.

At a Plymouth street fair in early September, Abraham and Stabenow stand three blocks away from each other, pressing the flesh. Stabenow’s red hair is ablaze above her black pantsuit, and she still looks fresh after hours in the hot sun. Only when there’s a lull in the crowd does she manage to sneak a hand into her pocket, quickly apply lipstick without a mirror, and slip it back again.

Even a passing encounter with Stabenow at one of these events is not soon forgotten, and therein lies the strength of her campaigning. “Glad-handing” is the traditional term for such political behavior, but it is insufficient to describe Stabenow’s meet-and-greet technique. Stabenow is not glad, she’s overjoyed. And “handling” is a more appropriate term for what she does than “handing.” She is more than a handshaker; she is a shoulder grabber, a hugger, even a knee feeler.

Stabenow gives a new definition to the phrase “up close and personal.” A reporter-candidate conversation takes place nose to nose, inches apart.

Aides for both candidates are keeping close tabs on the location of the media and the other candidate via small black cell phones glued to their ears. After an aide for Abraham notices a reporter interviewing Stabenow, he invites the reporter down the street to interview his candidate.

Although Abraham is dressed more casually than Stabenow in polo shirt, Dockers, and boat shoes, his manner with the reporter is more forced than hers. He sits down in a sea of empty chairs six feet from the reporter, and he seems antsy, as if he were trying to be two places at the same time. (In fact, he’s due at a Hispanic picnic in Whitmore Lake.)

Abraham points out that he began his negative ads against Stabe-

now only after a fusillade of negative ads had been released against him by special-interest groups.

“Look,” he says, “I’ve had over one million dollars in ads run against me, before we even did an ad, attacking me, by these anti-immigrant groups. My opponent sat back and didn’t utter any significant protest. These people put ads in the paper comparing me to Osama bin Laden [the Islamic terrorist accused of killing dozens in the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa]. I’ve had people run the most scurrilous kind of stuff about us.

“I think what we’ve done has been tongue in cheek. Look at the website of the state Democratic Party that compares me to Richard Nixon. I mean, give me a break. Anybody would conclude that the attacks against us have been far more personal and far more ugly than anything we’ve done.”

A snarky campaign

It’s probably true that interest groups for both sides have made the dirtiest attacks. Abraham is referring to an ad by an anti-immigration group called the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which attacked Abraham after he sponsored legislation to allow more high-tech workers into the country. Stabenow, on the other hand, has been indirectly linked to the Ku Klux Klan in a pro-Abraham ad sponsored by Americans for Job Security, a Virginia-based pro-business group.

Bill Ballenger, editor of *Inside Michigan Politics*, calls the tone of the campaign “snarky.” “It hasn’t been virulently nasty—the way it could get and still might get,” says Ballenger. “There have been a lot of snarky comments volleyed, particularly by Abraham, but it hasn’t been as intense as it can be, because Stabenow hasn’t had the money to compete.”

Stabenow has the financial support of labor, not deep-pocket big business, as Abraham does. “Frankly, we’ve got enough rich people representing the oil companies, the tobacco companies, the insurance companies, the drug companies in the Senate,” she says, jabbing at many of Abraham’s contributors. “I’m going to be there representing the working people.” She adds that she is taking no money from tobacco companies as a matter of principle, and she says drug companies and insurance companies aren’t contributing to her campaign. (Actually, Stabenow has received some money from insurance companies, though far less than Abraham has.)

As of early September, Stabenow was getting hammered by Abraham’s negative ads and insisting she would not respond in kind. “The scary thing for me about politics today is that there’s no accountability,” said Stabenow. “He’s able to put whatever he wants on an ad, and it doesn’t have to have any relationship to the truth.

“I have a choice as a candidate, and my choice is not to reciprocate. I’m not going to lower my campaign to that level,” she said.

But in late September Stabenow began running TV ads that portrayed Abraham as



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a foe of education. Abraham, meanwhile, continued to attack Stabenow but also added positive images of himself as a family man and hard worker.

As of press time, the two candidates have agreed to debate face to face at the Detroit Economic Club in Cobo Arena on October 23. Until then voters are left sifting through ads from both sides that essentially tell less than the full truth. On the subject of prescription drugs, for example, one of the main issues of the campaign, both candidates have been less than forthcoming about the full details of their plans.

Half-truths about drugs

Striking the same populist chord that Al Gore sounded at the Democratic convention, Stabenow has made the cost of prescription drugs a major theme of her campaign. Abraham has been forced to respond with his own bill to help consumers beset by high drug costs. It's a complex issue, though, and one that politicians have been discussing for years—so it's unfortunate the candidates have chosen it as a way to differentiate themselves in one-line ads.

The plan Stabenow supports to provide drugs to seniors (H.R. 4770) might be nicknamed "50 percent off." In her plan, all enrolled seniors would get their prescriptions at half the price that nonenrolled individuals pay, and there would be up to \$2,000 coverage the first year of the plan. Abraham's bill (S. 2836) is more like "Buy a lot, get some free." Low-income individuals (people making under \$16,700 a year) would get their drugs for free—but only after they'd picked up their first \$1,200 in drug costs for the year out of their own pocket. If you're not poor (making over \$33,000 a year), your benefits would kick in only after you'd first paid a \$5,000-a-year deductible.

Finding the truth about prescription costs under these plans is one bitter pill. For instance, an often-run Abraham commercial claims, "Debbie Stabenow's plan charges a six-hundred-dollar fee."

Stabenow disagrees: "There's no six-hundred-dollar charge," she says. "You

pay twenty-five dollars a month." Asked where the \$600 number came from, Abraham explains, "The Stabenow plan is three hundred dollars a year when it starts and benefits are limited. When benefits are phased in fully, the cost will go up to six hundred dollars a year."

They were both right, and they were both wrong, because neither was telling the whole story. Debbie Stabenow never mentioned that \$25 is the monthly fee only for the first year of the plan. After that, it can and probably will go up according to a complex formula in the bill. And Spencer Abraham never mentions, when interviewed or in his commercial, that \$600 is an estimate that the Congressional Budget Office put together when asked to guess what a year's premium will be in 2009.

Just as no one knows how much Stabenow's plan will eventually charge per month, there is no certainty that either bill will be passed just because one candidate who supports it is elected. And it's not as though these are the only two bills—there are currently more than twenty-nine different bills relating to Medicare and prescription drug coverage before the House of Representatives or the Senate. Each bill differs in who is covered, premiums charged, type and amount of benefits, and where the cash to pay the benefits will come from in the national budget.

The politics of personality

If Stabenow and Abraham debate, there will probably be no big surprises—their ideology falls pretty much along party lines, says MSU's David Rohde. Besides prescription drugs, some of the primary issues are abortion rights (she's pro-choice, he's pro-life), the school voucher proposal that will be on the ballot in November (both say they're against it, but Abraham adds that he does "have respect for people pushing the voucher proposal," and he supported a voucher program for Washington, D.C., in 1997), and the estate tax (she wants it reduced, he wants it eliminated).

Other issues their campaigns have been raising are the minimum wage (she sup-

ports raising it by \$1 over two years; he says the increase could take longer), classroom accountability and teacher tests (they're both for them), the environment (Stabenow is more environmentally conscious than Abraham), and gun laws (Stabenow supports antigun measures more often than Abraham).

The Abraham campaign tag of "Liberal Debbie" obviously stings Stabenow. "You know, my opponents like to attack me as a liberal," she says, "but my values actually are quite conservative: respect, hard work, you gotta pay your bills, respect your elders, family values. I'm liberal in the sense of being pro-choice and caring about people, but my values are very traditional: family, hard work, faith.

"I'm really a moderate Democrat fiscally," she continues. "I really believe strongly in balancing the budget.

"I think we needed to change welfare and I support welfare reform. One of the biggest things I've done in welfare is child support reform. We saved six hundred million dollars in welfare costs in Michigan over the last few years because moms didn't have to go on welfare because their child support was paid. Welfare reform is not only moving people into work but making sure they have quality child support, making sure they have access to health care."

But whatever her stands on issues, Abraham's ads have portrayed Stabenow as "Liberal Debbie" to millions of Michigan voters whose only impressions of the Senate race come from television. One on one, Stabenow is a better politician than Abraham, who "is not particularly charismatic," notes CNN political correspondent Stuart Rothenberg. But the received political wisdom is that statewide races are decided by images and television ads, not by face-to-face interaction—and so far, Abraham seems to be winning that contest.

If President Clinton is a slick expert in people skills but accused of shallowness and hypocrisy, and Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore can seem wooden, Stabenow occupies a middle ground in the Democratic up-with-people parade—possessing all of Clinton's enthusiasm but, seemingly, little or none of his guile. She can be compelling, but she can also be awkward. She still has the folksy quality of a neighbor you might chat with over a back fence, and has none of the pretension you might expect from a candidate for the prestigious U.S. Senate.

All this makes most people she meets feel at ease. Whether it's enough to defeat a well-funded incumbent in a statewide race remains to be seen. Like the Dream Cruise, Stabenow's pound-the-pavement electioneering style could be seen as an exercise in nostalgia, as out of date in this media-dominated, focus-group-driven campaign era as a VW Beetle or a Ford Thunderbird.

Then again, aren't they selling Beetles and Thunderbirds again? ■



Dianne Byrum



Mike Rogers

The Byrum-Rogers race: who'll fill Stabenow's seat?

With Debbie Stabenow running for U.S. Senate, her Eighth District congressional seat is up for grabs, and by all accounts the race is very close. "It's essentially a dead heat," says John Cavanagh, a principal at EPIC-MRA, a Lansing polling firm. At press time in late September, Cavanagh's polls showed Republican Mike Rogers with 42 percent of the vote and Democrat Dianne Byrum with 40 percent, with a margin of error of 5.7 percent. The Eighth Congressional District includes most of Washtenaw County plus Livingston and Ingham counties (see map, p. 26) and is split about equally between Democrats and Republicans.

Stabenow is supporting Byrum. "She's working hard, she's bright, and she's right on the issues—education and health care," Stabenow says. This is politics in the new-girl network, and Byrum has already shown her support for Stabenow by dropping out of the U.S. Senate race. "I believed I could beat Spencer Abraham," Byrum said. "I still believe that, but I'm a realist, and I know if Debbie gets in, we have the same support base—and she has the Washington connections."

Like the Senate race, the Eighth District vote pits a Democratic woman against a Republican man. And one topic is getting most of the attention. "The only issue my opponent talks about is prescription drugs, prescription drugs, prescription drugs, prescription drugs," says Rogers.

Financially the congressional race is relatively even: by late summer Byrum had raised \$1,187,972 and Rogers \$1,242,804—huge amounts by U.S. House election standards. The race is considered one of twelve key House contests in the nation, because the Democrats need only seven seats to win back a House majority.

The price to win the Eighth District seems to keep going up and up: in 1996 Stabenow spent \$1.5 million to defeat the incumbent, Dick Chrysler, and in 1994 Chrysler won after spending only \$357,000.

Politically, it's a race where both opponents are "more moderate than their parties," says Michigan State political science professor David Rohde: he observes that Byrum's Democratic colleagues tend to be more liberal than she is, and Rogers's Republican colleagues are more conservative than he. But the two candidates still are clearly aligned with their parties, says Rohde: "Byrum is noticeably a Democrat. Rogers is noticeably a Republican."

Both candidates are experienced politicians. Byrum, forty-six, is currently state senator for the Twenty-fifth District, which includes Lansing and East Lansing in its northwest corner. Byrum has held three public offices: Ingham County commissioner for eight years in the 1980s, state representative from 1991 to 1995, and state senator since 1995.

Byrum lives in Onondaga, just south of Lansing, on a farm that has been in her husband's family for four generations. She and her husband also run three True Value hardware stores, the first of which they opened in 1983. They have two children, Barbara, twenty-two, and Jim, eighteen.

"My husband thinks I'm nuts" to run for Congress, Byrum told the *Washington Post*, "but we're empty nested now and I want to spread my wings."

Byrum grew up in Leslie, where her father ran a gas station. He died when she was seventeen, and Byrum's mother took over and ran the station while bringing up three children. Byrum attended Lansing Community College and graduated cum laude from Michigan State.

Like Byrum, Rogers is a state senator, is a moderate, owns a business, and has a son and a daughter. He is thirty-six, lives in Brighton, and is in his second term in the Michigan Senate. He represents the Twenty-sixth District, which includes the counties of Clinton, Shiawassee, and Livingston. He's the youngest of five sons and was introduced to politics by his mother, the executive director of the Brighton Chamber of Commerce.

Rogers and his wife, Diane, have a son and a daughter in preschool. Rogers has a bachelor's degree in sociology and criminal justice from Adrian College; he also attended the U-M in army ROTC. He served in the army and as a special agent for the FBI. With his brothers, he now owns a Brighton-based home construction business, E.B.I. Builders, Inc.

Rogers has moved up quickly—he's the Michigan Senate's majority floor leader. But he hesitated about running for the U.S. House until majority leader Dick Armey reassured Rogers and his wife that they could still have a family life. Rogers says that if he's elected his wife will stay in Brighton with the kids and he'll travel back and forth to D.C. "I've told my brother who works at the Pentagon to clean out [his] basement," Rogers told the *Washington Post*, "because I will be staying there three nights a week."

Though Byrum lives on a fourth-generation farm, Rogers won the endorsement of the Michigan Farm Bureau. According to Bill Ballenger, editor of *Inside Michigan Politics*, "Rogers is a very good candidate, who has run a smoother campaign" than Byrum.

But Byrum still has a number of things going for her, says Ballenger. Her state senate district is contained entirely within the Eighth Congressional District, so all of her present constituents will have the opportunity to vote for her for Congress. Half of Rogers's current district, on the other hand, will not see him on the ballot in November.

The Eighth District race, unlike the battle between Stabenow and Abraham, is still in the "feel good" stage, says David Rohde. "Each is running relatively soft biographical ads," he says. Will it get down and dirty? It might not, because Rogers's website contains a "Commitment to Run a Positive Campaign." "Some say the way to win is to trash your opponent and to scare voters with misinformation," Rogers says on the site. "That is what's wrong with politics today. I want to earn your vote because I have a record of getting the job done and I have an optimistic vision for America's future."

Right now, the two candidates are running neck and neck. What could sway the election? "It could be almost anything," says Rohde. "Debates could make a difference, if one makes a mistake or gets a break. The presidential race could be influential, even though it doesn't usually have an effect on a U.S. House race."

—Debbie Eisenberg Merio