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State senator uses dedication to reach goals

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Sen. [Kwame Y. Raoul](#) doesn't shy away from showing his emotions.

Whether he's choking back tears during a debate on medical marijuana or yelling in opposition to the collection of DNA samples in felony arrests, Raoul isn't afraid to stand up on the Senate floor and say exactly what's on his mind.

"I think when your presentation is too calculated you have less emotion. We [lawmakers] tend to be calculated when we are concerned about the political game from what comes out of our mouths," the Chicago Democrat said. "There are a lot of votes I've cast and things I've said that will garner me no political gain, but it's true."

Raoul, who was appointed in 2004 to fill the seat left vacant by Barack Obama's departure to the U.S. Senate, said he has no plans to play down his bluntness, saying, "I think people appreciate a politician who tells the truth even when that truth is something they don't want to hear or they disagree with."

His colleagues in the Illinois Senate say they are grateful for Raoul's passion because it adds "refreshing honesty" to a process that keeps many lawmakers tip-toeing the line between their beliefs and political security.

"He'll make the tough decisions and won't vote because it's politically popular," said Sen. John J. Millner, R-Carol Stream. "I may not always agree with him, but he is a passionate individual who speaks to his beliefs and you have to respect that."

Millner, who serves on the Criminal Law Committee along with Raoul, said he has so much respect for his fellow lawmaker that despite being a member of the opposite political party, "I would endorse Kwame for office."

Though he has gained the support of many of his lawmakers since joining the Illinois General Assembly six years ago, Raoul's journey into the world of politics wasn't without its bumps.

Raoul, 45, grew up in Chicago, the son of Haitian-born immigrants. His mother was a

homemaker and his father was a physician, a career that Raoul briefly aspired to be growing up.

Not grasping chemistry or biology during his high school days at the University of Chicago Lab School, Raoul considered becoming an architect before deciding to attend the Illinois Institute of Technology to study engineering.

Two years later and bored that his studies required "one right answer for everything and only one way to get there," Raoul transferred to DePaul University intent on studying business.

But an American politics course taught by a professor who encouraged debate quickly made Raoul realize that he wanted to get into politics and the law.

After graduating with a degree in pre-law and before attending law school, Raoul took a job as a part-time collector. He hated it.

"I remember calling a woman who said she couldn't pay her bill because she had cancer and I said, 'OK, That's fine,'" he said. "I couldn't be as mean as they wanted."

He stayed at that job until he was fired for showing up to work late. Raoul said he had been demonstrating at city hall that day, which was around the time city leaders were discussing who should become mayor in the wake of Harold Washington's death.

Shortly after getting fired, Raoul took a job as a quality auditor for a company that bought packaging for McDonalds. He learned more about foam cups than he ever wanted to, spurring him to follow his dream to law school.

Raoul, who describes himself as a maniac on the basketball court, went to Chicago-Kent College of Law with the goal of becoming a sports agent. But like many of his other career aspirations, that specific one didn't last long either.

After internships with Baker & McKenzie LLP and a small labor law firm, Raoul graduated in 1993 and started his legal career with the Cook County state's attorney's office. Four years later, he went into private practice with [Lionel Jean-Baptiste](#), a fellow Chicago-Kent grad and Haitian.

By 2000, which was when he started working as a senior attorney with the City Colleges of Chicago, Raoul already learned a few lessons on how tough the political process can be.

He unsuccessfully ran for alderman shortly after law school, a few years later and again in 1999. Despite the losses, Raoul wasn't discouraged by the process.

His dedication must have worked because after Obama won the U.S. Senate seat in 2004, Raoul was urged to throw his name in the hat to fill the state Senate vacancy. There were other qualified candidates, but it was Raoul who was appointed to represent the 13th District, which includes Hyde Park, Kenwood and other neighborhoods along the lakefront.

Excited and nervous, Raoul said he looked to his predecessor for advice. Raoul said Obama told

him to be careful about who he employs and to make it a priority to make friends with lawmakers from the Republican Party, as well as those who lived outside Chicago.

Though he has been busy this legislative session serving as the chairman of the Redistricting and Pension and Investments committees, Raoul said he has taken on the responsibility of questioning bills in the Criminal Law committee that propose an increase in penalties and a decrease in judicial discretion.

[Peter G. Baroni](#) is the director of the Criminal Law Edit, Alignment and Reform (CLEAR) Commission, which has been working since 2005 to rewrite the state's hefty Criminal Code.

He said Raoul is a "champion of the efforts of the CLEAR commission" and is "evenhanded and willing to challenge anyone on a bill he finds problematic without regards to partisan politics."

Sen. Arthur J. Wilhelmi, who serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee with Raoul, said he has a lot of respect for his fellow Chicago-Kent grad.

Wilhelmi said not only has he learned a lot from this man who sits next to him on the Senate floor, but "I have grown very close to him as a friend."

"It's refreshing to see someone come into the legislature and be a zealous advocate for his constituents," Wilhelmi said. "He is respected because of his intelligence, his thoughtfulness and his genuine passion."

When Raoul isn't speaking out in the General Assembly, he is busy in his new job as senior counsel to the international law firm of Miller, Canfield, where he focuses on labor and employment law.

In between his dual careers and trying to squeeze in some basketball games, Raoul said he enjoys spending time with his wife, Kali, and their two young children, Che and Mizan.

And it's not just on the Senate floor that Raoul isn't afraid to show his emotions.

"I am one of those obnoxious parents at the Catholic school basketball games," Raoul said with a smile and laugh. "I yell at the refs and am the loudest cheerer on the team."

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