The Tenacious Tenney

By Aleta Mayne

Resembling a snake with its mouth open, the newly formed 101st Assembly district has been described by the Albany Times Union as “made up of the misfit towns nobody wants.” But New York State Assemblywoman Claudia Tenney ’83 does want them — even though the state’s recent redistricting has put her in a challenging position. If re-elected this fall, Tenney’s district will change from a cluster of towns in central New York to a skinny, winding stretch that’s a four-and-a-half-hour drive from the snake’s mouth at the northern point — New Hartford (outside of Utica) in Oneida County — to the tip of the tail — Montgomery (just north of New York City) in Orange County. The freshman legislator will have to be elected by and then represent a mostly new constituent base. But Tenney hasn’t let political barriers stand in her way in the past, and she’s not about to let the redistricting lines stop her from pursuing re-election. After all, introducing herself to diverse groups of people and their issues is what Tenney has done ever since she was a Colgate student. The Scene talked to the Republican incumbent to find out how she got into this political arena in the first place.

Hamilton origins
Tenney knows her current turf — 27 central New York towns that constitute the 115th District — like it’s her own backyard. Well, that’s because it is. The daughter of Cynthia and the late state Supreme Court Justice John R. “Jack” Tenney ’52, she grew up in New Hartford with two older brothers and two younger sisters.

The Tenney family’s central New York roots actually began in Hamilton, when Cynthia and Jack exchanged their first blush at Colgate’s Hall of Presidents in the early 1950s. Cynthia’s parents, Margaret and Robert “Bob” Roberts, lived in Hamilton, where Bob had founded the Mid-York Weekly newspaper in 1946 and helped to found Community Memorial Hospital as well as Seven Oaks Golf Course. Also, as Madison County’s Republican Party chairman in the ’50s, Bob Roberts took a number of Colgate political science students under his wing. One such lad, Jack Tenney, was a recent graduate who had begun studying at Cornell Law School. When Roberts decided to host an international relations summit in Colgate’s Hall of Presidents, he invited Jack and introduced him to his daughter Cynthia, a Vassar student who was covering the event for his newspaper. Little did the young couple know that not one, but two, of their future daughters would one day study at Colgate.

By the time Claudia applied to her father’s alma mater, her grandfather had passed away, but her grandmother was still living on Kendrick Street. Claudia applied to three colleges, was accepted into all of them, and, to her parents’ elation, chose Colgate. “It’s a family thing,” she said. “My uncles had gone. I was the fifth one to go, and my sister [Jane ’87] was the sixth.”

Colgate’s study abroad opportunities were a selling point for Claudia, especially because the university had a summer term at that time. “I spent every Christmas and Thanksgiving at my grandmother’s on Kendrick Street, so I thought it would be better to expand my horizons beyond Hamilton in the summer,” she recalled.

Tenney had her heart set on going to Italy, but a visit to the study group office during her sophomore year changed her trajectory. While waiting to meet with the study group director, Tenney got to talking with an upperclassman who had just returned from Yugoslavia. “I’m thinking, ‘It’s near Italy, but where exactly?’” she recalled. The other student pointed to the republic on a map, saying, “It’s so beautiful, so unique.” A thumbs-up from the study group director solidified Tenney’s destination — as well as her destiny.

Cultural exchange
Approximately 20 students departed on Colgate’s summer 1981 Yugoslavia Study Group, starting in the north and traveling south. The route allowed the students to be exposed to the country’s many diverse cultures as well as take political science and economics courses at universities along the way. Arrangements were made for group members to lodge with local families — some of whom Tenney still stays with when she travels to the region.

Tenney became fascinated with the republic’s melange of ethnic groups and religions. “Yugoslavia had a unique standing in the world,” she said. “And I identified with that. I’ve always done something different, and I think Yugoslavia defined me in that way.”

While she was on the study group, Tenney’s father had his concerns. “My father was panicking —
that’s a Communist country!” Tenney recalled with a chuckle. But Jack’s worries were mollified one day when, serving as New York State Supreme Court judge in Syracuse, he started chatting with attorney Tony Langan, whose niece Melissa Coley ’79 had attended Colgate. Langan told Jack: “She’s fine over there. My niece works for the Yugoslav consulate. You should get in touch with her.”

Jack did contact Coley, who was working at the consulate’s press and cultural office in New York City. Coley assured him that conditions were safe for his daughter. From Yugoslavia, Tenney reached out to Coley herself, sparking a friendship. Upon her return to the States, Tenney moved in with Coley in New York City. Like other Colgate students at the time, Tenney had the fall semester off, so she got a job at the firm Dewey Ballantine, Bushby, Palmer and Wood, where she got her first taste of a career in law. Then, in January, for her “Jan Plan,” Tenney became Coley’s intern at the consulate. With that experience in hand, after graduation, Tenney took over Coley’s job when Coley went to work for the Olympics in Sarajevo.

As the only American employee, Tenney had the chance to practice Serbo-Croatian, which she had learned on the study group. She also was constantly reminded of the struggles of the Yugoslav people—from immigration issues to navigating the republic’s socialist system—which she had first witnessed in her travels. Realizing that she wanted to help people and that she needed more skills to do so, Tenney thought, “I should go to law school because it could give me the ability to advance a cause.”

After a year at the consulate, Tenney resigned and chose to attend the University of Cincinnati College of Law because it was known for its Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights. During her first two summers off (1984 and 1985), she was given a scholarship to study Croatian at the University of Zagreb.

For a year following law school, Tenney accepted a position at the legal database LexisNexis before moving back to Utica to work for the firm Groben, Gilroy, Oster and Saunders. Over the next several years, she focused on building her law career, eventually becoming a partner at the firm. Along the way, she got married and, in 1991, had her son, Trey.

In 1996, wanting to strike out on her own, Tenney started a solo practice. Also at this time, after years of being asked by her father why she had studied “such a remote language like Serbo-Croatian,” the answer presented itself. The Bosnian War had just ended, and she learned that Utica’s Jewish Community Center was helping Bosnian refugees relocate to central New York. Tenney immediately went down to the community center to meet the refugees, invite some of them over for dinner, and volunteer her help. Recognizing their needs, she donated clothing and took them grocery shopping, where the refugees were awestruck by the differences in American stores. “Even our milk looks different — their milk comes in a box and isn’t kept cold,” Tenney explained. “So, I’d help them pick things out.”

**Building bridges**

Tenney took on another career when she joined the family business in 1997, which, in addition to the Mid-York Weekly, now included the Pennysaver. As the publisher, Tenney renamed the company Tenney Media Group and merged the two newspapers into one. She pitched in on all aspects, from managing the ads to editing content to reporting. Oftentimes, Tenney would write the political columns and cover local businesses, but “there were times when we didn’t have anybody and I was writing all the stories,” she recalled.

In the late ‘90s, some of Tenney’s Bosnian friends approached her for help in publishing the area’s first newspaper for their community. She agreed, and they called the paper Mostovi, meaning “bridges.” It was named after the famous bridge of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had historical significance to their culture. Tenney fondly remembers swimming in the Neretva river flowing beneath the bridge with Colgate students during her first trip there. As a favor, her company published the small, eight-page newspaper at a reduced rate. “We definitely didn’t make money on it, and we could have even lost money,” she said. “But it was a nice connection for me and them.” Eventually, the Bosnian group ran out of funding, so Tenney offered them a one-page insert in the Mid-York Weekly/Pennysaver for free.

That paper was also struggling to stay afloat because its advertising base was small, locally owned businesses that started going under as big box stores displaced them. In 2002, Tenney’s resourcefulness in hunting down new advertising clients ended up giving her a lead not only for the paper, but also for her career. One new client was New York State Assemblyman Dave Townsend, a 12-year incumbent being challenged in the Republican primary. (Tenney also sold ads to his opponent. “We were equal opportunity,” she quipped.) Townsend won the primary and continued to buy advertising from Tenney as he prepared for the general election. As with all political advertisements, Tenney thoroughly reviewed and edited Townsend’s ads. Through the process, Townsend became impressed with her legal knowledge and grasp of the political climate. When he won the election, he asked Tenney to be his chief of staff and legal counsel. “I don’t have the time,” was Tenney’s reaction. In addition to the media business, she was still balancing the law practice as well as her duties as a mom, and she was going through a divorce. “I did a lot of work early in the morning and late at night,” she recalled. But Tenney agreed to work for Townsend on a part-time basis, and when she sold the newspaper to Gannett in 2004, she was able to devote more time to her law practice as well as her job with the assemblyman.

In 2010, when Townsend announced his decision to retire from the Assembly at the end of the year, he suggested that Tenney run for his seat. “You should do this,” he told her. “You know the job, you know the district, you know the issues that are out there,” he stressed. “It’d be a natural for you to move into this.”

“I don’t know if I really want to do another campaign,” thought Tenney, who had just run for Oneida County Surrogate’s Court judge that year and didn’t win. But, after considering how many of the constituents and town officials she knew, and how much she wanted to continue to advocate for them, she decided, “I’ll go for it. I can bring some good credentials to the job.”

Going into the Republican endorsement meeting, Tenney believed she would have the party’s support, but she narrowly lost. “If one more person had voted for me, I would have had the endorsement,” she said. Undeterred, Tenney set out to gather the 500 signatures required to get on the ballot. She got more than 1,700 — along with backing from the Conservative and Independence parties as well as numerous labor unions and public interest groups. In the primary, she ran as an independent and beat the Republican-endorsed candidate who also happened to be the county chair. With no Democratic challenger, Tenney was sworn in as an assemblywoman in 2011.
Back to school
When you enter the building to visit Tenney’s Westmoreland-based district office, her door is the first one on the right. If you keep meandering down the hall, you find yourself surrounded by high school students buzzing about.

Tenney hadn’t yet been sworn into the Assembly when she first met with the Westmoreland Central School superintendent to discuss a bill for teachers. She mentioned wanting to relocate her office to that area in order to be closer to her largest geographic constituent base. “Why don’t you move in here?” the superintendent suggested. “Can I?” Tenney asked. He consulted the board and the lawyers, she checked with the Assembly, and soon, Tenney was the new kid in school.

It’s not uncommon to see students in Tenney’s office. She encourages them to visit, and last fall, she hosted a barbecue for the seniors.

Mike Popowski, a senior with a keen interest in politics, first met the assemblywoman when he volunteered to be a greeter at the open house she held shortly after moving into the school. Ever since, Popowski has made a habit of stopping by the office to talk to and offer his assistance to Tenney’s aides, even when she is away. “I know I want to get into politics, so I figure the more I show an interest, maybe I can work for them one day,” he said. Popowski has helped organize a veterans clothing drive, and he plans to canvass voters with one of Tenney’s aides.

Tenney gave him the opportunity to shadow her for a day in Albany, where he watched the Assembly session and sat in on her meetings with constituents. “She really listens to her constituents — she’s like a sponge,” Popowski observed. And, although he admitted that he doesn’t always agree with her decisions as a conservative, he said, “She told me that you have to be open to different ideas, regardless of your personal opinion, and represent your constituents. I really respect that.”

Through his time with her, Popowski said, “She’s taught me that there are some good people in politics, and that’s what motivates me to be a political figure someday, because I think I can make the same kind of difference that she’s making in New York right now.”

Problem solver
Piles of mail, folders, and paperwork are stacked high on Tenney’s desk — she’s been in Albany all week. The bookshelves boast photos of her son in his U.S. Naval Academy midshipman uniform; her two Jack Russell terriers, Emily and Tessie, and a Lego model of the White House, which Popowski built for her.

Holding up letters from her constituents, Tenney said that what she likes most about the job is “trying to solve their problems. A lot of what I do is help people navigate the bureaucracy in Albany. Ninety-nine percent of the people I try to help are grateful, and that’s the most gratifying part of it — politics is not.”

Tenney is a conservative: last year, the state Conservative Party gave her their top ranking, and this year, they gave her an award for being the “most conservative legislator.” However, she is also the most independent member of the legislature, meaning that she votes the least often in accordance with her leadership. A member of the Assembly’s Banks, Higher Education, Mental Health, Small Business (ranker), and Social Service committees, Tenney has omnifarious issues on her plate. “It’s very much like the practice of law,” she said, crediting her legal — and business — experience for facilitating her political juggling act. “You can’t be an expert in anything, but you want to know as much as you can if you’re going to make significant reforms,” Tenney said. She makes a point of carefully reading, drafting, making suggestions, and amending bills — skills Tenney refined as a lawyer and while working for Townsend.

“Understanding the legal process and legislative process is a huge advantage,” she said. “You have to take bills apart, look at what they’re trying to do, how the problem was caused, remedy a law, amend a chapter — because something may sound great, but when it gets passed, there will be something we didn’t think of; someone we’re hurting over here while we’re trying to help somebody over there,” she said.

One issue to which Tenney has dedicated a lot of time is Medicaid reform. “Medicaid is the single-biggest cost driver to the state of New York, and we are the single-biggest spender on Medicaid in the country, so it’s a huge problem,” she explained. In the 2011 state budget, Medicaid consumed more than $1 billion per week. In most states, the federal government funds 50 percent and the state funds 50 percent, but New York requires local governments to shoulder 25 percent of its share. Tenney has put forth two bills to cap the local government’s share of the cost. “We’re the only state left that requires our local governments to pay a twenty-five percent share, so we should be giving that responsibility back to the state,” she said. “If we do that, the state will have to reform Medicaid, or we risk becoming insolvent.”

Tenney has also been actively involved in welfare reform. “The way New York law is structured, in some cases, you’re actually better off on welfare than working,” Tenney said. “We’re trying to keep the benefits packages in line with the federal standards because we want to save the taxpayers money and we want people to be incentivized to work.” So, as a member of the Social Services Committee, she has supported initiatives such as strengthening the welfare to work requirement, authorizing random drug testing backed by treatment, and bringing welfare program exemptions and benefits in line with those of the working sector.

Assemblyman Andy Goodell (R), ranking minority member on the Social Services Committee, explained Tenney’s approach and the impact he believes she’s made on the Assembly. “Claudia has taken a lead on the floor of the legislature, voting against this year’s ten percent increase in welfare benefits and instead using the existing money to pay for a youth employment program,” he said. “She’s been a leader on the floor on a number of programs: cutting the cost of the Medicaid program, voting to cut middle-class tax rates to the lowest level in 58 years, and voting in favor of a stron-
In the top pay echelons is where everyone’s playing the game because that’s where the money is. I’m trying to look for fairness within the system.”

“Claudia argues bills based on their merits,” said Assemblyman Sean Hanna (R). “You’re not going to hear from her, ‘This is a popular thing to do,’ or ‘This is a legitimate issue. He’s got great values,” Tenney continued. For example, Phillips is a traditional Native American who does not want to sell the Oneidas’ land for casino gambling profits. “He’s contrasted with all of these people who have compromised their values for money. It’s hard to stand against the crowd, and I give him a lot of credit for that.”

It always comes back to Yugoslavia

On days when Tenney isn’t in Albany, in the mornings, she usually grabs a cup of coffee at Aroma Café before heading into the office. Conveniently, the Utica coffee shop is on her way to work, but Tenney really stops there because it’s owned by a Bosnian couple and is a gathering place for local Bosnians. It isn’t in Tenney’s district, so the patrons are not her constituents, but she enjoys having the chance to practice her Serbo-Croatian.

Around the corner from the café is the International Grocery & Music Store, another business that has been owned by a Bosnian couple for more than a decade and is something Tenney never imagined would exist in the area where she grew up. At the small shop, she delights in finding familiar Croatian delicacies like Kras chocolate for her son and Ajvar roasted red pepper spread.

Tenney’s Yugoslavia experience also seeps into her professional life. For example, it came up in a recent meeting with an advocacy group from the Central New York Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Utica. The topic of discussion was a bill to help the association continue to receive state funding. Tenney was familiar with the bill as well as the association. She had recently toured the center and, as she told the advocacy group representatives, she took some Bosnian employees by surprise when she spoke to them in Serbo-Croatian. Tenney also relayed a story to them about how a blind student whom she met while studying at the University of Zagreb had taught her the many ways that visually impaired people overcome challenges. “It all comes back to Yugoslavia,” Tenney joked.

Overall, it’s the desire to help people that has pervaded Tenney’s life since she went abroad. Still a practicing attorney, she mostly handles real estate contracts and wills. However, in addition to the Assembly position, she “inherited” from Townsend a lawsuit that’s totally different from her usual caseload. For several years, she has been arguing a case on behalf of Melvin Phillips, a full-blooded Oneida Indian who is a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the federal government to preserve land that his family has owned since the 1700s. When asked why she took Phillips’s case, Tenney answered, “Because it’s the right thing to do. He doesn’t have any money, he needs someone to help him, and I think he has a legitimate issue.

At the hearing, Tenney demanded, “Tell me how this district is compact and provides for effective representation — all the things the Constitution talks about that they need to accomplish in redistricting.” Albany Assemblyman Jack McEneny, LATFOR’s Democratic co-chair, answered: “That’s the best we can do.” Tenney was one of 40 members who voted no. 96 members voted yes. Although Cuomo had promised to veto the lines, he instead settled on a constitutional amendment for changes to the process in the future.

The day after the vote, Tenney found herself driving through the snaking 110th district, going to a parade, knocking on doors, and introducing herself at area businesses. To the media, she’s joked that, if re-elected, she’ll travel through the district by motor home or borrow the governor’s helicopter. By early April, she had already logged hundreds, if not thousands, of miles traveling to events and driving from town to town in order to meet her new potential constituent base. The seven-county district comprises 25 towns and one small city, with issues ranging from flooding in the Catskill Mountains to the MTA tax that Orange County residents pay to commute to New York City.

Surprisingly, the tour has given Tenney a positive perspective. “Everyone is so nice, and I have been so well received. I want to make lemonade out of lemons.”

Referring to the situation as “the silver lining on the gerrymandering cloud,” Tenney is gearing up for the September primary against her Republican challenger from Orange County. She has been endorsed by the majority of the county Republican committees as well as the State Conservative and Independence parties. If she wins the primary, Tenney will run against a Democratic opponent in November. In the meantime, she’s gotten to better know the other legislators caught up in the shuffle in order to “work with them and have a seamless transition as they move to other areas and I pick up the towns,” Tenney said (assuming she wins, of course). As she investigates the issues that these towns and counties face — some of which are similar to her current district and some of which are entirely new — Tenney continues to work for the constituents who elected her in 2010.

There are times, Tenney said, when she looks around and asks herself, “Why I am doing this?” Keeping a sense of humor about the situation has helped. “Politics is an endless supply of entertainment,” Tenney said wryly. “It has everything: power, greed, excitement, greatness, courage, vice, cowardice.” On a serious note, she added, “There are good people on both sides of the aisle.” People who are really trying hard.

“If you want to solve the problem, you have to dive in and come up with solutions,” she said. “I’m enjoying the opportunity because I am trying to make a difference, and I feel like people in our community recognize that. I have my days when I don’t think I can put up with the politics anymore, but if you’re struggling and the cause is worthy, that’s sort of an affirmation of life.”