RI's oldest and youngest lawmakers share working-class roots. Then the differences begin

By Antonia Noori Farzan *Providence Journal* Dec 24, 2024

Rhode Island's oldest lawmaker spent decades working in textile mills that have long since closed.

The youngest grew up in public housing in rural California, doing backbreaking farm labor as a teenager to help support his immigrant mother.

While they both have working-class roots, they represent two divergent wings of the Democratic Party – and are separated by about 55 years in age.

Here's a look at the oldest and youngest faces of the General Assembly.

The oldest: Rep. Samuel A. Azzinaro, D-Westerly

"I feel like a teenager myself, but my body is that of an almost 82-year-old," joked Rep. Samuel A. Azzinaro, D-Westerly, who is 81 and has a birthday approaching in January – making him the oldest member of the General Assembly.



The longtime lawmaker has deep roots in Westerly, where he grew up in an Italian American family that was active in Democratic politics. His father, Samuel J. Azzinaro, was sworn in to the state House of Representatives in 1943, the year he was born, and served in the legislature for 18 years.

"I never wanted to get involved in politics, because I saw the time it took, how much it took my dad away from us," he recalled.

What changed his mind? His great-uncle was putting together the Democratic ticket and needed one more candidate to join the slate.

"In 1989, my mother's uncle said, 'You have to run for Town Council,'" Azzinaro recalled. "I said, 'I don't want to run for Town Council.' And he said, 'You've got to run for Town Council.' I said, 'OK, I'll run.'"

"So here I am, 35 years later."

In total, Azzinaro spent 12 years on the Westerly Town Council, including four as its president. In between terms, he served on the town's recreation board. He won a seat in the General Assembly in 2008, after state Rep. Peter Lewis decided to step down after a decade representing Westerly.

"They asked me if I would want to run for state rep, and I said, 'You know what, I'd love to do that, because my dad was up there,'" Azzinaro said.

Azzinaro fended off a primary challenge from progressive Jonathan Daly-LaBelle this fall, and will begin a ninth term in January. He's served in the legislature for 16 years, meaning that he's on track to tie his father's 18-year record. Whether he'll seek another two-year term after that is up in the air.

"I'm not out to beat any records," Azzinaro said, noting that he has the longest commute to the State House of any lawmaker. "We'll wait and see."



Azzinaro is endorsed by Rhode Island Right to Life, which backs anti-abortion legislators. He describes himself as a moderate Democrat.

"A lot of people think I should be a Republican for some of the ways that I vote, but I tend to go along with almost everything that the Democratic Party wants," he said. "There are a few things I don't go along with, but that's my prerogative."

Democrats have become more liberal over his lifetime, he said, but both political parties have changed.

"The Democrats are going a little more to the left," he said. "The Republicans are going a little more to the right. We just need to find the balance to work together."

Azzinaro chairs the House Committee on Veterans Affairs and points to eliminating the state tax on veterans' pensions as one of his biggest accomplishments. He's also proud of his role in

creating the Westerly Higher Education and Job Skills Center, which trains people to work for companies like General Dynamics/Electric Boat.

Another piece of legislation that he sponsored designated the harbor seal as Rhode Island's state marine mammal.

Azzinaro served in the National Guard and then the Army Reserve after graduating from Westerly High School, and went on to follow in his family's footsteps by going to work in the textile industry.

He spent most of his career at the now-defunct Bradford Dyeing Association, where he oversaw textile-dying operations until 1993. The company sent him and several others to the Rhode Island School of Design for night school for three years while he was learning the trade, he recalled.

Afterward, he worked as a service manager at a local repair garage and then ran a store that sold furniture and televisions. When that business ceased to be lucrative, he started doing carpentry with his son but retired once he joined the legislature.

Driving to Providence and spending hours at the State House after a full day of strenuous labor proved too demanding, he said.

Azzinaro has five children, 11 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, most of whom live in a 4- or 5-mile radius. The others live in Pawcatuck, Connecticut, which is only about 8 miles away.

"The whole world has changed, and Westerly has pretty much remained pretty much the same," Azzinaro observed. "It's a great town to live in, and more and more people are finding that out."

The youngest: Rep. David Morales, D-Providence

Rep. David Morales, D-Providence, was 22 when he first won a seat in the General Assembly. Now 26, he's still the body's youngest legislator.

That distinction isn't something he's proud of, he said, since he wishes there were more young people. But he does feel as though his age gives him a "unique perspective" and feels that he has a responsibility to represent young people across the state when the legislature addresses issues such as low wages, the housing shortage and the climate crisis.

He often uses social media to keep other young people apprised of what's happening on Smith Hill, posting videos where he explains issues in accessible language and tells viewers how they can make their voices heard.



The process of how a bill becomes law can seem complicated, he explained, and "more often than not, I'm one of only a handful of politicians they're following on social media."

Morales grew up in public housing in rural Soledad, California, the setting of John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men." Raised by a single immigrant mother, he helped support his family as a teenager by picking grapes in the blazing summer heat.

"There was always a ton of pressure to make sure that I was making my mom proud and that her sacrifices were worthwhile," he said.



While still in high school, Morales enrolled in college classes at night, which allowed him to graduate from the University of California at Irvine in just two years. From there, he went on to Brown University, where, at age 20, he became the youngest-ever graduate of the master's degree program in public affairs.

Morales got involved in local politics through the Sunrise Movement and the Working Families Party, and he was struck by Providence's small-town feel and the accessibility of local and state government.

As a relatively new arrival, he appreciated being able to go to committee hearings and testify about the need to raise the minimum wage – and then see that reflected in state law.

"I felt that direct advocacy was making a difference," he said. "And it was."

Morales is one of the most progressive legislators in the General Assembly, and an outspoken advocate for protecting public benefits, expanding affordable housing and instituting universal

health care. But he's also known for his ability to get along with lawmakers who hold more conservative views.

He views the passage of the bill known as "Cover All Kids" as one of his biggest accomplishments. The legislation ensures that all lower-income children have access to state health insurance, regardless of their immigration status.

Growing up surrounded by immigrants who worked at low-wage jobs, he recalls, "I thought it was normal to watch people economically struggle." Once he left that "bubble," however, he could see clearly how unevenly resources were distributed.

In his day job, Morales leads community programs at the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, with a focus on getting Spanish-speaking immigrants involved in climate change and environmental justice initiatives. He also hosts library story times dressed up as Spider-Man, coaches Little League and is a professional wrestler.

In fact, he's a two-time Renegade Wrestling Alliance HYPE champion. Stepping into the role of "the commissioner" – his villainous alter ego, a classic wrestling heel – he gleefully faces booing crowds and repeated body slams. It's an unconventional hobby for a politician, and one that's won him some unlikely fans.

Long seen as a rising star on the left and a potential candidate for higher office, Morales has teased the possibility that he might challenge Providence Mayor Brett Smiley in 2026.

"I would just say that, similar to many working people, families and Providence residents, I'm disappointed with the current administration's lack of urgency related to the housing crisis, supporting our homeless neighbors, and the lack of support for our students in Providence public schools," he said.

For those reasons, he's taking "a close and serious look" at being a candidate in 2026, he said – but nothing is official yet.