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When Mike Quigley returned to the [United States House of Representatives](#) from the Easter recess on Tuesday, he was armed with a couple of atypical vacation insights from his Congressional district: how to replace a 100-year-old water main and how to cook great French fries without a timer.

“Entertainment Tonight” and Politico.com please say hello to Mike Quigley, star of a self-produced “Undercover (sort of) Congressman.” It’s a nontelevised “reality show” in which a protagonist seeks to actually learn something, not merely avoid embarrassment and gain celebrity.

So while some constituents sought a spring-break tan, and too many others simply looked for work, Mr. Quigley, a Democrat, helped the City of Chicago lay a water main in Lakeview; went fishing for Asian carp with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources; hung out with Melrose Park police officers and River Grove firefighters; worked a counter at Connie’s Beef in Elmwood Park; assisted a postal carrier in Roscoe Village; dressed a Chicago-style hot dog at a Superdawg at Devon and Milwaukee Avenues; and had a characteristically awful Chicago Public Schools lunch at my kindergartner’s North Side elementary school.



“It’s been an extraordinary listening device, and fun,” Mr. Quigley said at a Wrigleyville coffee shop. “It’s as close as you can get to embedding yourself in the community.”

He alluded to [Studs Terkel](#)’s classic, “Working,” and how so often people are, and want to be, proud of their jobs. Of course, skeptical me couldn’t initially resist wondering whether the fellow with a bantamweight fighter’s build was pulling a stunt.

Actually, as my 6-year-old prefaces most declarations, I think not.

To understand why Mr. Quigley interspersed pro forma plant tours and community meetings with this eclectic immersion in working Chicago, be reminded that it's just a year since he, a Cook County commissioner at the time, won a special election in a North Side district where incumbency is not the usual sinecure. In 15 years, the district has seen [Dan Rostenkowski](#), Michael Flanagan, [Rod R. Blagojevich](#), [Rahm Emanuel](#) and, now, Mr. Quigley.

But, to hear him tell it, it didn't take long to discern the perils of going native in Washington: existing in a cocoon of attentive aides, meetings at the White House, trips on [Air Force One](#) and dealing with global issues. With a Lincoln Park mortgage and two daughters in college, Mr. Quigley actually lives in his office. Still, there's an occupational coziness that can breed intoxicating isolation — and cement popular suspicions that “you go to D.C. and don't come back,” as he put it.

The impact of the D.C. dynamic may take a while to infect, at times turning self-styled populists into aloof insiders. But, so far, Mr. Quigley is resisting and claims he learned a lot while he was “undercover.”

For instance, he said, spending hours in the woefully cramped River Grove police station influenced him more than any complaining letter. The owner of Connie's Beef detailed the frustrations of the tax system on small businesses. His day with the mail carrier underscored the importance of Saturday delivery to the elderly. And nobody will convince him that public school lunches are healthy after his visit to Ravenswood Elementary ("Awful pizza and a dry pack of shreds of wilted lettuce and packaged dressing," he said).



A visit to Superdawg was a window on how treating employees well — including giving them health benefits — improves performance, and how you don't need a French fry timer if you're a pro.

Even knowing the popular image of city workers, the Department of Water Management employees impressed him as being as efficient as any private sector counterparts. A Northwest Side maker of small motor parts helped him understand the competitive impact of China's currency policy.

There was more and will be more, including spending a day with a U.P.S. driver and in busing tables. Some people will roll their eyes, especially those in a [Democratic Party](#) establishment unhappy with Mr. Quigley for endorsing the belated independent candidacy of Forrest Claypool for county assessor.

That move especially infuriated some politician-lawyers who do well, if not good, dealing with the slated assessor candidate, Joe Berrios, in his role on the board overseeing big-money commercial tax appeals.

Of course, those same politicians may have lost intimate contact with constituents long ago. So let's root for Mike Quigley, against all odds, to maintain his gumption.

It's quaint, isn't it, getting to know us and what we do?