

Two vie for hearts of Republicans in House race

By Terri Hallenbeck | Burlington Free Press Staff Writer | Sunday, September 3, 2006 | www.burlingtonfreepress.com

As Martha Rainville and Mark Shepard debated in front of a Johnson State College political science class last week, seven paid Rainville campaign staffers sat in the audience. Shepard came with two campaign volunteers.

It was one sign of the many disparities between the two campaigns for the Republican nomination for Vermont's lone U.S. House seat. This is a race between the party's anointed candidate -- Rainville -- and the one who is running against party wishes but who believes he represents its core beliefs -- Shepard.

The two candidates vying for the affections of Republican voters in next week's primary election share some political views but also have marked differences, particularly on social and fiscal issues. The winner will face Democrat Peter Welch and a potential string of independents in November.

No difference is more telling between the two Republican candidates than the nature of their campaigns.

Rainville has 10 paid staffers, roomy offices in Williston, television ads and access to national Republican money and advice. Last week, her campaign had \$234,836 in the bank.

Shepard has laid off two campaign managers and has two part-time employees. He travels the state with his wife and four sons in a 1993 recreational vehicle, making as many radio talk show appearances as he can. His campaign had \$20,129 last week.

Shepard's journey -- One recent morning, Shepard's RV was parked in the Fairfax driveway of Chris Santee. As Shepard spoke about his views and his reasons for running, his three oldest children -- Isaac, 9, Caleb, 6, and Zachary, 4, worked on crafts projects at the table nearby while his wife, Rebecca, held the youngest, Samuel, almost 2.

In these cramped quarters -- a child's bike was stashed in the front passenger's seat -- the Shepard family has traveled to every county in the state, spending nights in driveways and campgrounds. They have been home to Bennington just four days since July 1, he said.

Shepard, a two-term state senator who had given no appearance of angling for higher office, put his small engineering business on hold, bought the RV and took on this peripatetic existence even though Gov. Jim Douglas asked him not to run. He felt compelled, he said, because he didn't think his views were being represented.

"If I'd seen a candidate running for this office that came close to where I was on the issues, I'd be working for that candidate," Shepard said. "The party should have reached out among those that have really been clearly representing the party."

Lt. Gov. Brian Dubie would have been such a candidate, he said, but Dubie declined to run for higher office.

Shepard, who turns 46 on primary day, is against abortion and same-sex marriage and strongly in favor of less government. These more conservative views are what drew in Shepard supporter Al Thomas, a retired ophthalmologist in Grand Isle.

"He has a certain moral character you're not going to corrupt in any way," Thomas said. "He knows the issues. He knows the difficulties that face Vermont."

Shepard said his stances and votes are on record, while Rainville's stances have been evolving, which he considers an indication that she is new to politics. "I don't think we, for the most part, know Martha Rainville," he said. "What I want to know is not just what is the answer to a certain question, but what brought her to that point. Do you understand that government interferes with people's choices?"

Shepard's philosophy puts him to the right politically of many Vermonters, yet he disregards any notion that he's unelectable in a state that is represented in Washington by a liberal independent, a Democrat and a moderate who left the Republican Party after he determined it had gone too far right.

"Do we think that because there's more Democrats, we should just embrace their policies?" Shepard said. "Or should we be bold enough and courageous enough to say, 'Listen, this is what good policy is' -- it just needs to be understood that way -- and go out there on the campaign trail explaining a different point of view?"

Rainville's backing -- Rainville was a strong draw for the Vermont Republican Party. She was the first female National Guard adjutant general in the nation and was repeatedly in the public eye as the leader through numerous emotional deployments and soldier funerals. The party rallied behind her quickly, winning permission to support her candidacy before the primary.

"No other candidate comes close," said Jim Barnett, the party's chairman. "Every indicator shows that Martha Rainville is the only Republican candidate who can win this race -- with her level of organization, fund raising, name recognition and unique status as a woman and a general."

That backing has been a boon to Rainville -- financially and logistically. "It opened doors to me," she said.

Rainville, 47, of Williston, said the early nod has provided her access to Republican members of Congress who have offered her advice and moral support. She has found Rep. Heather Wilson, R-Ariz., the only female military veteran in the House, and Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn., a fellow New Englander, particularly helpful, she said.

If the party had waited until after the Sept. 12 primary to become involved, the winner would have had only eight weeks to take advantage of those benefits, Barnett said. "To do anything else except what we did would have guaranteed a Republican loss in November."

Rainville, who was in the military for 27 years, did not make most of her political views -- or her party affiliation -- public until she announced her retirement from the Guard in February. Expressing her ideas has been a work in progress, she admitted, and one that she finds easier in small groups where the give-and-take allows her to clarify her position.

She and her staff said it's a matter of style. "She's very detail-oriented," said her spokesman, Brendan McKenna.

"I don't want to get to the point where I speak in 10-second sound bites," Rainville said.

While opponents criticize her for being elusive, supporters characterize her as especially articulate.

Lefty Lewis, a Republican voter from Stowe who described himself as a Republican centrist, said he was impressed by Rainville's work in the Guard, and after meeting her at several Rotary meetings, was impressed by her political views, too.

"She's a sharp lady," he said. "She sure sounded to me like she had a handle on the issues."

Rainville said her views have solidified during the past few months. On health care, she said, she has shifted toward the belief that a combination of government involvement and free market is the way to provide more people with health care coverage.

"I've moved more toward the middle. I was wary of government's role," she said. "Government's role is to ensure that those that are uninsured are covered."

"I do believe less government is better, but I think we have to find and acknowledge the appropriate role of government in these issues."

CANDIDATE PROFILES:

MARK SHEPARD AGE: 45

RESIDES: Bennington PARTY: Republican

POLITICAL OFFICES: 2 term state senator

OTHER JOBS: Founder of Adaptive Control Systems, a small business that designs and builds control systems for the industrial automation market

FAMILY: Wife, Rebecca, and four sons, ages 1 to 9

WEB SITE: www.shepardforcongress.com

MARTHA RAINVILLE AGE: 47

RESIDES: Williston PARTY: Republican

POLITICAL OFFICES: None

OTHER JOBS: U.S. Air Force active duty, 1979-83, then part-time Air National Guard posts; adjutant general of the Vermont National Guard, 1997-2006.

FAMILY: Divorced; three adult children.

WEB SITE: www.martharainville.com