

# Election Day

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a ballot. I ran, I knocked doors, I went to a lot of events, I spoke to a lot of people," he says. "It is exciting that the grueling part — especially the last month or so — is over. That is kind of exciting to feel like I'll have some time to get my life back a little bit and not worry about campaigning."

New candidates oftentimes put a lot of responsibility on their shoulders. The fear of failing, of letting down others is constantly running through their minds. That stress only builds when many of those voters who put their faith in candidates also donated money. Those sorts of things are weighing heavy on Stewart.

"It's not like a lot is expected of you, but just a lot of pressure," he says. "Win or lose there's a lot of pressure on you."

The 30-year-old teacher joined the race in March of this year. Fed up with the rhetoric and legislative actions against teachers — including those proposals that did not pass or make it past committee — Stewart decided he would run for office, something the poli sci fanatic had always wanted to do.

Plus, getting to speak on the behalf of teachers was an added bonus.

"It's almost weekly that I hear something from teachers about a parent complaining about something in the classroom that was just total misinformation, wasn't something that actually happened," Stewart says. "In the last few years, that's gotten worse. The complaints have gotten worse over literally nothing."

Teachers are beat down and emotionally drained, he adds. Stewart used his platform to speak against the negativity perpetuated by lawmakers.

Government and politics are some of the subjects he teaches on a daily basis at Berg Middle School. He even gained a reputation for hosting several political leaders in his classroom, including presidential hopefuls like Beto



Tyler Stewart, left, finishes teaching a class at Berg Middle School on Nov. 8 in Newton. Stewart was the Democratic candidate who ran for Iowa Senate District 19. Erick Zehr, right, is joined by his dog Kemba while tracking down absentee ballot voters at the Jasper County Democratic Party headquarters. Zehr was the Democratic candidate running for Iowa House District 38.



Christopher Braunschweig/Newton News

O'Rourke, the state auditor, former Congressman Dave Loebsack and many other candidates.

Stewart has frequently hung political signs from candidates of both major parties on the walls of his classroom. Still, he has taken some flack from some folks who feel he gives special treatment to Democratic candidates, despite the fact he has invited Republicans to his classroom. He was already used to these attacks.

Developing a thick skin for the more political aspects to his campaign would be an easy feat for Stewart, but winning against an already established Republican challenger like Ken Rozenboom would require a miracle. Stewart acknowledges he is the underdog. He's ran the numbers. He knows he's at a disadvantage.

"But there's something about speaking truth to power," he says. "I know my opponent is part of the establishment. What I've learned is that we put a lot of these politicians on a pedestal. We assume they're very well-organized, thoughtful, knowledgeable beings. I don't think that's necessarily always the case."

The teacher learned a thing or two about politics. Stewart learned that everyday Iowans like himself can run for office.

"I understand that a lot of this isn't personal, it's political," Stewart says. "And I know a lot of people will see the

letter before my name before they'll see my name and know who I am and what I stand for. And I think that's just reflective of a broken system that we have."

### 2:00 p.m. — Erick Zehr agonizes over what he could have done better

Erick Zehr occasionally looks around for his dog, Kemba, while tracking down the absentee ballots. The blue heeler mix is never far off from his side. She's timid and is rather affectionate once she gets to know someone. But most of all she's calm, which is exactly what he needs at the moment. He pets her often.

The first-time candidate for Iowa House District 38 is rehashing the past year in his head, thinking back to all the things he could have done better or the things that he missed. He's agonizing while at the same time trying not to feel guilty if he does come up short. Zehr is putting himself in a difficult, incongruent headspace.

"I'm excited for whatever's next, whether it's going to the Capitol or getting my life back," he says with a nervous laugh, almost mirroring the same comment I heard from Stewart earlier this morning. "I'm optimistic about the potential returns, but I keep going over things in my head. Second-guessing my choices."

Zehr thinks back on the campaign and he doesn't understand how somebody can

be in his position as a candidate and have an ego or develop arrogance. Now that he has experienced this all firsthand, he does not comprehend "how people that get elected can be such narcissists" and be so full of themselves.

"I just don't understand how you can go through this process and feel that way," he says. "Having gone through it I couldn't be more the opposite. I'm reminded of every single day of how much responsibility these positions bear on making people's lives work. It's hard for me to grasp that."

Talking to people for eight months straight and hearing their stories, their struggles, has opened Zehr's eyes. He wants to help them solve those issues.

But the only way he can is with a victory. Therein lies the issue. Zehr has doubts. He won't say it aloud though. Then again he doesn't have to. Even from the most basic political side of things, the odds are stacked against him. Democratic representation in the county is slipping.

For more than four years the Democratic Party has struggled to maintain a hold on Jasper County. With the county becoming redder than ever with each election cycle, it is not out-of-line to think Republicans will take this one by storm. Which leaves Democrats in the sheriff's, treasurer's, recorder's and attorney's

offices.

Zehr is convinced the political system is broken, maybe even worse than he initially thought going into the race. He says this without knowing the results. He is disgusted by the sports team mentality of today's party politics. There are ideas and solutions out there, he says, but too many people are standing in the way.

"Standing in the way of progress," he says. "Too many immutable things like money in politics or the parties wanting to keep things a certain way because they feel that's a game they at least know how to play, versus the unknown alternate way of fighting for these things. I don't know if it changes."

It is going to take politicians who have their priorities straight before any real change occurs, Zehr adds.

Zehr worries about Iowa. Although he believes the state's demographics are very purple, Iowa is "very red" in terms of representation. He worries about national politics coming to the state, alleging Gov. Kim Reynolds has higher ambitions. He worries about public money going to private schools, about an abortion ban.

"All of that is national agenda brought down to Iowa, and I'm not sure that it works for Iowans," Zehr says.

The ruminating thoughts were forcing out of Zehr's mouth like steam from a pressure cooker. The whistling, burning vapor left after a few minutes, letting him finally concentrate on some more positive aspects. He thinks back on his campaign, the progress he and his volunteers tried to make.

Win or lose he is looking forward to seeing how much difference they made.

"We had goals and pillars of our campaign that were guide stones. Yes, winning the election is the ultimate goal, but the subgoals are to elevate and prioritize actions over words," he says. "We want to show we're a campaign about action, not empty promises. We want to make sure these voices are heard."



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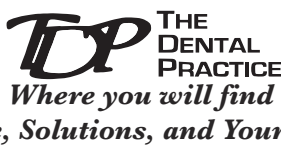
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