

Wesley Fenlon

For the Democratic challenger for state Senate district 47, helping people is more than just a passion—it's a career.

Tim Riley, 47, hopes to represent the people of Clarke, Barrow, Jackson, Madison, Oglethorpe and Elbert counties when Georgia voters head to the polls this November. The position of state senator embodies the union of his two greatest interests: politics and public service.

“I was always into politics,” Riley said. “I paid attention to what was happening in government.”

The Watergate scandal and Vietnam War had a strong influence on him growing up, driving an interest in just what the government was doing.

“Every morning I'd turn on the TV and see how many troops died,” Riley said.

By the time he was 16, Riley had already volunteered for a Board of Education race in his home town of Warner Robins, Ga. He went on to convince his own mother to run for city council and coordinated her campaign.

In 1988, at the age of 27, Riley became the youngest person to win a Democratic nomination for the Georgia Senate when he was just two years over the age limit.

“I knew I was toast,” Riley said, grinning. “But I did better than people expected.”

Though he didn't win the race against Republican incumbent Paul Coverdell, it wasn't an empty loss. His better-than-expected numbers were ultimately just an encouragement.

Now, 20 years later, Riley still represents the younger alternative to his Republican competition, 65-year-old Ralph Hudgens. Age is just one small factor he plans to use to his advantage in the coming race.

Riley hopes that his ideology will strike a chord with younger voters. His campaign manager, 20-year-old University of Georgia student Louis Elrod, believes that Tim has the ability to connect with the students of Athens.

“Tim is one of the most eager and passionate candidates I’ve worked with,” Elrod said. “Young people especially can relate to the energy he brings to the race.”

Of all the problems facing the state of Georgia, education concerns Riley the most.

“Everybody should be educated,” Riley said. “I started looking over the past six years at how the [state] administration has attacked the education system and cut \$1.5 billion. It boggles my mind.”

Even with such cuts, the state budget remains in the red. The burden is being put on property and business owners, costing them more in taxes, while the education system still suffers.

Riley is also deeply concerned about the number of underfunded trauma centers in Georgia.

“This administration is costing us lives,” he said. “People are dying because of their decisions.”

Riley aims to stay true to his local roots and not forget what his constituency really requires. He feels that local control of government is another key issue for his campaign.

“The Gold Dome thinks they know what we need better than we do,” Riley said. “The 47th District is not Atlanta. We don’t need the flash and glamour.”

Running for state Senate is just another example of Tim Riley taking the initiative in politics when something needs to be done. When he heard that Ralph Hudgens was going to be uncontested, Riley decided that Hudgens didn’t deserve a free pass.

“Why isn’t anybody stepping up?” he said, posing the rhetorical question that spurred him to take on the race.

Outside his political involvement, Riley makes a living as a licensed professional counselor. He currently provides outpatient care for alcohol and drug abuse patients at his three Aloha Counseling Centers and has a Ph.D. in counseling psychology.

His political involvement and counseling work might be more closely related than you’d think—Riley plans to use his wealth of experience dealing with people to help him in the coming race.

Riley hopes to improve the state’s public transportation system. He believes strongly in a commuter rail system that would cross the state from population hotspots such as Macon, Athens, and Augusta.

Ultimately, such a system would pay for itself by cutting down on exhaust fumes and oil use. Trains also eliminate the problem of road rage, a subject Riley is intimately familiar with as a counselor.

“Trains reduce anger,” Riley said, laughing.

More importantly, his counseling experience will be critical in senatorial dealings.

“I can reach across the aisle,” Riley said. “I can make people heard, attend to their needs.”

His many years of counseling work have taught him that personalities should take a back seat to principles. He learned early in his career to suspend judgment; now, applying the same psychological open-mindedness to politics, he plans to fight for what his constituency wants, regardless of personal feelings.

“I will be working actively within each community,” Riley said. “I won’t be taking them for granted. I’ll make sure I get their wants and needs covered in Atlanta.”

#