

Demo Strategist Faces Uphill Race

By Pat Pyke

It's a good thing Lauren McLean is a marathon runner. Pounding the pavement with Democratic state legislative candidates as they meet voters face to face is just one of McLean's many duties as a leader in the party's bid to regain seats in the Statehouse.

McLean, a 24-year-old master's student in public administration at Boise State, is the caucus director and only paid staff member of the Democrats' legislative campaign committee, Restore Representative Government (RRG).

McLean has the lean build and the patient, determined demeanor of an endurance athlete — traits which suit her Herculean mission. Her task: To help all 57 Democratic legislative candidates mount viable grassroots campaigns by providing them with training, fund-raising assistance and strategy planning.

She says that personal contact with voters is essential to rebuild a base of support for Idaho Democrats, who hold only 16 of 105 seats in the Legislature.

"We're relying on the fact that, first of all, [many voters] are going to be independents, and they'll be interested in the fact that a candidate has spoken with them, has come to the door and has cared about them," says McLean.

The message McLean and the Democratic candidates want to deliver firsthand is that their party is in line with Idaho voters on key issues including education, health care, the economy and natural resources.

"People associate Democrats with East Coast liberals, and really, if you look at the candidates we have, we don't have any candidates who are like that," she says.

The candidates McLean consults with as she drives around the state, toting her laptop computer filled with Democratic visions, can best be described as moderate, she says.

A five-week period in the fall found McLean campaigning with more than a dozen candidates. "Every day is different," she says.

She mingled with voters at the Bonner County Fair with District 1B candidate Jerry Stoicheff, knocked on doors in Payette with District 9B candidate Terry Haun, and strategized with campaign workers in Pocatello for District 34 candidate Mark Packer.

"I think she's gained the trust of many candidates," says House minority leader Wendy Jaquet, (D-Ketchum), who was instrumental in forming RRG. "They check in with her and tell her what they're doing and they respect her expertise."

One warm evening in September, McLean and Jaquet attended a fund-raiser in Meridian where the bright spirits of the Democrats gathered there matched the glowing sunset over the

Eagle hills. The event, an ice cream social for District 14B Democratic challenger Jim Corey, drew about 100 people.

Corey, who earned a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Boise State in 1996, is the kind of candidate McLean and Jaquet worked hard to recruit. With deep roots in his community and outspoken support from some moderate Republicans, Corey has mounted a well-organized and substantially funded campaign against Republican incumbent Shirley McKague.

Corey received help from RRG in defining issues, raising funds and strategizing how to reach voters in the state's fastest growing district, where education, growth and working-family tax burdens are hot topics.

"I wouldn't have run without their assistance," says Corey, referring to Jaquet and McLean.

"Lauren, of course, is pivotal," he says about McLean's issue research, training support and general advice.

McLean keeps tabs on all the party's legislative candidates and helps them fine-tune their messages to their individual districts. "Some days I try to call all 57 candidates," she says.

McLean's task is the political equivalent of running uphill. Fortunately for the Democrats, hill running is one of McLean's specialties. A run in the Boise foothills landed her in Idaho in 1998.

McLean wanted to move west, having served an internship working on natural resource policy in Montana while an undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame.

While pondering whether to accept admission to law school at the University of Washington, she accompanied her husband, computer engineer Scott McLean, on a job interview trip to Boise.

"I went for a run in the foothills and realized I didn't want to be in law school. I wanted to be here in Boise. And we just dropped everything and we came here."

She enrolled at Boise State and soon landed a job with the Democratic Party and eventually as an intern for Jaquet and Sen. Betsy Dunklin, (D-Boise).

Jaquet, who with 15 other Democratic legislators founded RRG, recruited McLean as caucus director. "She could see where we should go, she took ownership of the vision," says Jaquet.

As Election Day approaches, McLean is cautious about becoming too optimistic. "But I'm starting to feel excited for November to come and excited to see what our caucus room looks like in January," she says. "I think it might look different." □



Democratic legislative caucus director Lauren McLean helps candidates mount viable grassroots campaigns.

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