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Huntersville's Miller hopes inexperience is good

By Heather Somerville

Experience is a watchword in most political campaigns, but Huntersville's Dempsey Miller is a candidate who's hoping to use his inexperience in politics to his advantage. The State House District 99 candidate says he's just a regular guy, uncorrupted by the politics of Raleigh and eager to bring integrity back to the state house. In fact, that's his campaign slogan -- "Bringing Integrity Back to Raleigh."

Of course, to bring anything to the state capital, Miller will have to get elected first, and even Miller admits that will be a tough road.

Miller, a Republican, is running for a seat which covers most of Charlotte's University, the Newell community and a sizeable chunk of southeastern Huntersville. It's Democratic territory and he's up against Democrat Nick Mackey, the Charlotte attorney, well known for his controversial run at the Mecklenburg County's sheriff office last summer. Mackey won an unusual party caucus election to fill the post left vacant when Jim Pendergraph resigned to take a federal law enforcement job elect, but never got to serve because the N.C. Democratic Party threw out his nomination following a cyclone of controversy.

Although Mackey's name is synonymous with something bordering on scandal for many constituents, he unseated six-term incumbent Democrat Drew Saunders of Huntersville in the primary to become the favored candidate. Race may have played a role in the election: Mackey is black and the district's Democratic voters are majority black as well. That demographic is unlikely to play a role in the general election. Miller is also black.

Miller is playing off of Mackey's infamy -- evidence of some less-than-stellar behavior on Mackey's part surfaced during the sheriff mess -- and campaigning on Christian morals and high values that he will use to turn Raleigh around.

"I want to bring integrity back to Raleigh," says Miller. "So much turmoil has happened there. I want to take the voice of the people back to Raleigh. I'm a Christian, and I'm a servant of the Lord. And as a servant of the Lord, I also serve other people."

The fresh, uncorrupted face theme fits Miller in other ways. Because he's never held a political office, Miller doesn't have the library of legislative accomplishments other seasoned candidates can pull from. He does have a little political experience, however. Miller ran twice for the Huntersville town board, in 2005 and 2007. He wasn't elected.

Beyond that, his resume is mostly built on his service on numerous professional boards, religious organizations and children's charities. But when asked about his lack of experience on the political front, Miller says his intimate knowledge of the community in which he has lived and worked for nearly three decades is qualification enough to hold office.

"I've lived in this community since 1980," says Miller. "I know what's going on around me."

Miller is focusing on a couple of key issues he says he always hears about from residents. Miller says one of his priorities in the would be to reform transportation in the district. He'll do that, he says, by changing the way federal highway funds are distributed so they favor the most congested transportation areas in the state.

Miller says his other hot-button issue is crime. He says too many crimes are committed by repeat offenders, who are left on the streets because the district attorney's office is swamped with more cases than it can handle.

"I'm for things that would speed up the (judicial) process. I won't dictate what level of prosecution needs to get that done, but I would support (prosecutors) in what they need to do," says Miller.

Miller was asked by the local Republican Party to run against Saunders. Miller says his intention was only to offer a challenge to the incumbent, but when, to his surprise, Mackey unseated Saunders, Miller says he became much more invested in winning the race. He says, given his opponent's history, he doesn't have any confidence in Mackey's ability to serve the constituents, and he thinks many voters feel the same way.

"It really matters, to me, who is serving the office, and I don't want to see (Mackey) serve," says Miller.

Miller has lived and worked in North Carolina all his life and in the greater Charlotte area since 1980. He moved to Huntersville in 1995, where he currently works as a real estate broker for Alan Tate Realtors. He and his wife, Myra, who works as a registered nurse at Huntersville Oaks assisted living center, have one daughter, Angela, a police officer in Greensboro, and one grandson. Miller graduated from N.C. State University in 1980 with a degree in civil engineering. Although a real estate agent now, Miller also has an engineering degree. He was employed as a professional engineer with Duke Energy for 13 years before starting his own engineering firm, WATU Engineering, which he owned and operated for 10 years.

For more on Miller, visit www.demandhonesty.com.