Representing

Two UNH grad students start their terms in the N.H. House

Saturday, March 23, 2019

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JOE ALEXANDER (L) AND WILLIS GRIFFITH (R).

Lots of students have to juggle their class schedules with other commitments: jobs, internships, sports. For Joe Alexander and Willis Griffith, the balancing act is different: both are newly elected representatives to the New Hampshire House and both are graduate students in UNH's Carsey School of Public Policy.

Griffith, a Democrat who represents Hillsborough, calls the decision to enter state politics simple. Earlier this year, he had participated in Carsey's weeklong Washington,

D.C., colloquium, where students attended meetings and talked with policy practitioners, and he didn't like what he saw.

"While I was there, I had some time to reflect on what is going on in Washington, and it wasn't the most positive experience," Griffith says. "So, when I got a call from a mentor urging me to run for state rep, it was a no-brainer."

Alexander is a Republican representing Manchester Ward 11. He was compelled to vie for a seat in the 400-member House, he says, because he wants to see changes in the way politics are conducted and hopes to "bring new perspectives" to fellow representatives.

He also was inspired by the process.

"The whole idea of having a citizen legislature and that anybody can become a state representative appealed to me," Alexander says. "That there is the possibility to get involved at a young age — that I could raise $3,000 and run — was pretty amazing."

And while campaigning was new to both of them, Alexander had the added experience of going through a recount to win his seat. His was one of 20 New Hampshire House races reviewed to determine the winner.

Shortly after the November election, new representatives attended orientation at the State House. Griffith calls that experience "dryly exciting."

"It made me anxious to get going, even though I already knew balancing work and being here would be a challenge," he says. Griffith works at the Lake's Region's New Hampton School, where he teaches and coaches soccer.

"Already I can see there is a real barrier for younger representatives who are working full-time," Griffith says. "It would be great if some concessions could be made to make committees more accessible."

In the meantime, he plans on "diving as deep as I can," introducing bills when he is able and being a "real advocate" for his community.

Alexander's advocacy will initially focus on New Hampshire's constitutional carry law, which allows for open or concealed carrying of a handgun, and the state's voter laws.

The recount for his seat taught him that 'every vote counts' is not just a slogan. And that all the door knocking he had done made a difference.

"During the recount, I found out how many split-ticket ballots there were. People didn't care about the party; they wanted someone they knew. It made me glad I had knocked on every single door."

Alexander and Griffith are the latest in a line of active students and recent graduates from the university's Durham and Manchester campuses who have served in New Hampshire government roles in recent years. Both 24, they're also two of the youngest representatives in the New Hampshire House, where the average age during the last legislative session was 66.

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