

Dustin Hall

12-01-2008

“First-Time Candidates”

Katy Hubener had spent time as a college professor, realtor, and nonprofit media consultant when, in 2003, she was approached about the possibility of adding another title to her résumé: Texas State Representative. The leadership of the North Texas Democratic Party had been impressed by her volunteer work as a clean air advocate, and felt that she might be just the candidate to reverse a decades-long history of Republican victory in State District 106.

Hubener said she was both surprised and intrigued by the offer. Although her family had long been involved with Democratic Party politics in the Dallas area, the idea of becoming a candidate had not crossed her mind. But the more she considered it, the more intrigued she became.

“I thought it would be pretty challenging and quite interesting all at the same time,” Hubener said. “I’ve always been interested in a challenge, so it began to sound like an OK idea to me.”

As Hubener would find, making the transition from concerned citizen to political candidate involves a complex mixture of leadership skills, financial backing, long-term planning and plain old good luck.

According to Ross Ramsey, editor of the nonpartisan political newsletter Texas Weekly, first-time candidates often underestimate the level of commitment involved in a campaign.

“If you’re going to run for office, it’s difficult, it takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of people and it takes a lot of resources,” Ramsey said. “In a very real sense, it’s like starting a business – just a short-lived business. It only has a lifecycle of six to eighteen months. Just as if you were starting a business, you have to sit down and make a business plan and think it out.”

As a former businessman and state political staffer, Rep. Mark Strama had a unique perspective from which to form his campaign business plan. Strama – now serving his third term in the Texas House representing Travis County’s District 50 – worked on the gubernatorial campaign of Ann Richards and served as Chief of Staff to State Sen. Rodney Ellis before entering the private sector in 1996.

In 2004, Strama made the decision to reenter the political field as a candidate for state representative. He said that the initial decision to run for office is usually followed by a flurry of activity on the part of the candidate and those around him.

“The first step is letting your friends, family and strategic allies know that you’re running, which is a lot of time on the phone and a lot of meetings,” Strama said. “The next step is to start raising money, because you can’t start hiring staff until you’ve started raising some money. And every politician will tell you that’s the least fun part of the job. The initial analysis of ‘can I win?’ has to be informed, in part, by asking ‘can I raise the amount of money I need to win?’”

Huebner agreed that having adequate financial resources can often be the factor that makes or breaks a political campaign. Acquiring those resources becomes a major part of the candidate’s job, she said.

“It’s like they say, campaign money is like yeast – you’ve got to raise it early and often,” said Hubener. “We spent a good portion of our time raising money. That’s part of that process of getting a list every morning to call, making sure the agenda is full and the calendar is full, and always having something going on.”

“Money is enormous,” she said. “You’ve got to have it, because you can’t send out a mailer, you can’t put up a sign, and you can’t hire a caller if you don’t have the funds.”

Strama added that there is an important distinction between having money and possessing the ability to raise money. A candidate’s personal net worth or that of his acquaintances is often less important than the candidate’s fundraising ability, he said.

“The competitive State House races now almost always cost \$500,000 or more,” Strama said. “But you don’t have to start with \$500,000 in your own personal bank account or in the bank accounts of people you personally know. You have to start with the ability to go out and develop the relationships that you need to raise that kind of money. I know candidates who started with very few connections, but were persistent and aggressive and had the sort of personal charisma to develop the relationships that are necessary to be an effective fundraiser.”

Although the proliferation of money in political campaigns may seem like a modern development to some, Strama said that this is not necessarily the case.

“The amount is higher than it used to be, but money has always been, unfortunately, the first qualifying consideration for politicians,” said Strama. “In the late 1800s, there was a United States Senator named Mark Hanna. And when Mark Hanna retired from the Senate, he said, ‘in all my time in office, I’ve learned there are only two things that matter in politics: the first one is money, and I can’t remember the second one.’”

The task of fundraising is often affected by the manner in which candidates come into politics, said Ramsey. Although Hubener may be an exception, there are two main ways in which citizens become candidates, he said.

“There are those among us who always wanted to be in public office and always wanted to be in government and have patterned their careers that way,” Ramsey said. “And then there are people who get into it because they want to get something done...or they just feel like nobody is taking care of business, and that, ‘by God, I’m gonna do it myself.’”

Lillian Simmons is one such citizen who chose to enter the political arena and do it herself. A retired legal secretary and piano teacher, Simmons recently ran her second campaign as a Libertarian candidate for State Representative in Williamson County’s District 52. She received

5% of the vote in the 2006 election, but she said that the success of her campaign isn't measured by vote totals.

"There's really a very small possibility of winning, because it's a small party – we just don't have the people or the financial support that are necessary to win," Simmons said. "But what we want is to get whatever publicity we can get. And we want to send a message to the voters that they have a third choice. They don't have to vote for the powers that be – they can vote for a third party."

Simmons said she hopes to call attention to the Libertarian Party's platform of smaller government and less taxes, and hold other candidates in the race accountable for their stances on issues, including the controversial Trans-Texas Corridor tollway plan. Her opposition to the plan was also major part of her campaign during the 2006 election.

"My purpose is really to give some publicity to these causes," Simmons said. "I don't care about winning. I know I'm not going to win – it doesn't matter."

Campaign victory was elusive for Hubener as well. She ultimately ran three times for District 106 representative and lost each race – the last defeat coming in 2006 by a margin of only a few hundred votes.

Although such a close defeat may seem demoralizing to the second-place candidate, the experience of losing an election is often the key to later success, said Ramsey.

"It's really interesting that a lot of the people who are successful in politics lose the first time, or lose the first two or three times," Ramsey said. "It's the ones who can pick themselves back up and say, 'ok, what did we learn there?' who become successful. It's those sorts of mistakes that build the experience that you win with."

For Hubener, succeeding as a political candidate ultimately comes back to a more basic calculation of time and money. She said that anyone weighing a run for office should carefully

consider the logistical factors involved and the ways in which running for office will disrupt their daily lives.

“You need to make sure you have personal financial resources to be able to make your living expenses while you’re doing it, because it’s difficult to juggle the job and the campaign,” said Hubener. “And you have to have an employer who really does care about these issues and will support you in that endeavor.”

Following her last campaign loss, Hubener left politics and returned to life in the private sector. Along with her mother, she is co-owner of a real estate agency in the Dallas area. Even though she is now self-employed, Hubener said she has no plans to run for office again.

“But you never say never,” she added.