

Who is Ben West?

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Mar 10, 2016

When Wilsonville resident and political rookie Ben West announced his candidacy for the U.S. Congress Feb. 10, he made national news. But it wasn't just because he hopes to run as a Republican against longtime incumbent Kurt Schrader, D-Ore., to be a representative of Oregon's 5th Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

West is known as one of the plaintiffs in the 2014 lawsuit that led the state Supreme Court to strike down a ban on gay marriage in Oregon. He's also known for endorsing Republican physician Monica Wehby in her unsuccessful bid to unseat Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., last year.

In trying to capitalize on the attention he received, West wants to prove that he is more than a single-issue candidate.

"Kurt Schrader will have no idea what to do with me," West, 38, says. "I'm not a homophobe, I'm not a racist, I'm not your dad's Republican. Though I hold a lot of traditional conservative values and I'll fight for them, I'm kind of an interesting, new, hybrid, big-tent kind of Republican."

West is a Portland native and a fourth-generation Oregonian, descended on his mother's side from farmers who moved to Oregon from the Dust Bowl. His fraternal grandparents eventually moved from Mt. Angel to Portland, buying a home where West's father and West were both raised.

West's father worked for most of West's life in construction and as an entrepreneur selling hardware. His mother devoted herself full-time to raising West and his younger sister.

Since his childhood, West has identified as a Republican. He learned from his parents to do more than merely follow politics on TV.

"I was always taught to try to make a difference in your community, and to not be a bystander — to get involved as best you can in the democratic process," West says.

While attending Portland Bible College, West began a career in mortgage banking that persisted for decades. In 2006, he met his husband Paul Rummell, and despite their political differences — Rummell is a Democrat — they fell in love.

But West was restless in his career.

"I went to Paul one day, and I said, 'I just am not feeling fulfilled,'" he says. "I remembered what I originally wanted to do straight out high school: I wanted to go into the ministry or do something ministry related, because I knew I would be helping people in a very tangible way."

After months of difficult conversations and careful consideration, West decided to leave banking for a career in nursing. He'll be graduating this spring from a five-year program at Portland Community College that will make him a registered nurse.

West's decision to become a nurse was made at a busy time. West and Rummell had decided that they wanted to raise a child, and they had begun to host children in therapeutic foster care. Those are children who have struggled to adapt to other foster homes, and who are frequently coping with severe trauma or other issues.

One of those children was a 6-year-old named Jay. He came to the Rummell-West household — his eighth foster home — in June 2012. It didn't take long before the couple knew that they wanted Jay to be their son. West recalls "many long nights" where the aftereffects of trauma kept Jay from sleeping, and it was after one such night that they decided to try to adopt him.

"He finally, finally went to sleep. And we both plopped on opposite ends of the couch. Paul looks at me, and he says, 'Jay's totally our kid, huh?'" West says. "And I go, 'I kind of think so. Can we try to get two or three hours of sleep tonight?'"

An arduous process of attempting an adoption with the state followed. Bureaucracy made things so difficult,

West says, that for a time the question of whether or not he and Rummell would be able to adopt Jay was put into doubt.

It took until mid-2013 for the couple to get the state's approval, and they waited to tell Jay until they knew for certain.

On a summer day at Overlook Park in Portland, Rummell and West were at last able to tell Jay who his family would be. They were sitting on the bent trunk of the park's famous elm tree when they made the announcement.

"He lights up, he gets excited like it's Christmas morning, and he lunges on me and grabs my neck. And he starts yelling, 'I have a forever family! I have a forever family!'" West says. It's an emotional memory for him, one that is difficult to tell without getting choked up.

The family moved to Wilsonville in 2014, and over the course of the past two years, Jay has grown into a happy, healthy fourth-grader attending Lowrie Primary. And it's been a process of healing for West and Rummell as well.

"Paul and I were always taught growing up that 'You do not have what it takes or the ability to parent.' That you as a gay man are disqualified from participating in that. I don't think Jay understands the healing that he brought to me and Paul's life," West says.

West sees the difficulty of arranging the adoption as an example of the effects of a government grown too large. He says that he wants to streamline government services like foster care programs, making the government more attentive to the needs of those it supports. He feels similarly about improving care for veterans, and says he'll sponsor a bill to reform the Department of Veterans Affairs if he's elected.

West also feels strongly about the importance of remaining accessible to constituents, and says that he'd like to see term limits imposed on congressional positions, encouraging politicians to remain a part of their communities. He intends to continue to live with Rummell and Jay in Wilsonville even if he's elected to Congress, spending as little time as possible in Washington.

Although they're on opposite sides of the political aisle, West says that Rummell is supportive of his bid — as are West's parents, Republicans who don't support gay marriage.

"We're not going to agree with every Republican 100 percent of the time," West says of his campaign. "But if we can come together 80 percent of the time, we can get a lot of things done."

Before West can race against Schrader, he'll have to clear the May 17 Republican primary race against at least two more opponents vying for District 5 nomination: emergency room mental health technician Seth Allan, and former Oregon Right to Life Director Colm Willis.

West is confident in his ability to win that race, however, and says that he would be the most likely opponent to beat Schrader. Candidates like Allan and Willis have lost time and again, he says, and argues that he has both the ability to appeal to voters and a platform that reflects their wishes.

"I'm not just the gay Republican," says West. "I have a lot more to offer."