



'The regular guy experiment': Hamilton's Ed the Barber runs for U.S. Senate

Mike Davis | Times of Trenton By Mike Davis | Times of Trenton

Follow on Twitter

on October 06, 2013 at 7:30 AM, updated October 06, 2013 at 2:38 PM

HAMILTON — Ed Stackhouse has heard the same chorus repeated on Election Day for his entire life.

He remembers, as a child, asking his father what candidate he voted for and always hearing the same response: "The lesser of two evils."

"Forty years later, I'm still hearing that same thing," Stackhouse said.

But when voters pick their next U.S. senator on Oct. 16, Stackhouse will offer them another option: himself, Ed the Barber, the "regular guy experiment." He said he would immediately become the most recognizable and talked-about senator in Washington, D.C.

"I'm long-haired, I have a beard and I don't believe I have to shave it to be taken seriously, either," he said.

Stackhouse's grass-roots campaign is centered on his business, 33's Barber Shop on Route 33 in Hamilton Square, where he has gathered more than 1,000 signatures to get his name on the ballot throughout the state.

Like many voters, Stackhouse, a father of five, said he must continue to work seven days a week to pay the bills, put two children through college and keep his house out of foreclosure.

He spends slow hours of the day riding his "campaign vehicle," a bright green exercise bike outside his shop, and waving to passing drivers.

"This isn't the million-dollar run, big-business superstar kind of campaign. This is word of mouth and Facebook," Stackhouse said. "This is the way the Founding Fathers did it back when the country was founded. They had to work for a living. I don't have the affordability of being able to leave work and campaign all over the state."

REGULAR GUY IMAGE

In the barber shop, Stackhouse says he has spent more hours with local voters than either of the frontrunners, Newark Mayor Cory Booker, the Democratic candidate, and former Bogota Mayor Steve Lonegan, a Republican.

It was in the barber shop where Stackhouse first heard of former U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg's death and of the special election to fill the remaining 15 months of his term.

"Fifteen months is the perfect time to try the regular guy experiment," Stackhouse said. "I'm not going to run a campaign for the next election the entire time. I want to go there and do right by the people. If they say I did pretty well, they can vote for me again."

At 33's Barber Shop, Stackhouse has lent an ear to thousands of customers sounding off about the topics of the day, from high school dates and unpaid bills to property taxes and military strikes.

And he's not about to change.

"You have one-on-one contact with people very close, more contact than these guys have," Stackhouse said of elected politicians. "I want to be the type of politician that can go and look at a Facebook poll, who's going to come back here to New Jersey and cut hair two days a week and ask, 'What do you think about Syria?'"

He already has an outfit picked out for his first day on Capitol Hill, a bright canary-yellow suit that he said will "add fuel to the fire."

He said he'll enter the U.S. Capitol with his own ideas: drug testing for welfare recipients; rerouting aid for foreign countries to domestic problems; fixing up schools; and stimulating economic growth.

And instead of simply cutting funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which provides food stamps to low-income families, Stackhouse suggested earmarking more funds toward building food banks.

"Restaurants, stores, ShopRites — whenever they have dinged cans and produce that is going to go bad in three days, put it out there and let people who are hungry come and get it because they're going to eat it," Stackhouse said.

PUTTING DRUGS BEHIND HIM

A recovering crack cocaine addict, Stackhouse said he regularly turned to donations and charities for food while struggling with addiction, living in cars and bushes, and alienating himself from loved ones.

"It's an insidious, obsessive disease where every moment of your day is eaten up by getting it, how you're going to get it, how you're going to find the money to get it, doing it and where you're going to do it," he said.

After working as a trash collector for a few years, a television advertisement inspired him to learn how to cut hair. Diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia, becoming a barber was the "perfect job" because the never-ending flow of activity — cutting hair, talking to his customers and pedaling away on the exercise bike — keeps him busy and focused, Stackhouse said.

Since opening his doors for business, Stackhouse has turned 33's Barber Shop into a hotbed for charity work, a place where Stackhouse collects donations and promotes blood drives.

Last week, a dozen industrial-sized trash bags in his barber shop were filled with tabs from aluminum cans, part

of a fundraiser for Shriners Hospitals for Children.

He doesn't hide from his past, Stackhouse said. He embraces his recovery from addiction and transformation and said it lets him relate to voters in ways his opponents cannot.

"They haven't lived the real-life experience. That's what I want to offer to the voters of New Jersey, something more along the lines of what they know and they are living," Stackhouse said. "The politicians pose with people like me on the steps. I don't need to pose. This is a real-life story. This is it. This is me."

Contact Mike Davis at (609) 989-5708 or mdavis@njtimes.com.



CONNECT WITH US: On mobile or desktop:

- Like **Times of Trenton** on Facebook
- Follow **@TimesofTrenton** on Twitter

© 2015 NJ.com. All rights reserved.