

McMurray tries to beat long odds with candor, openness and vision

Takes time to listen to constituents

By Jerry Zremski

NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

Democrat Nathan McMurray faces challenges in New York's most Republican congressional district, and one arrived in a gray pickup truck outside Wyoming County Democratic headquarters a few Sundays back. As McMurray supporters rallied in Warsaw, the man in the truck – clad in camouflage and a National Rifle Association cap – revved his engine to drown out the Democrats.

So McMurray went up to the truck and shook the hand of someone who didn't agree with him.

"He didn't want to talk," McMurray recalled.

But plenty of people do. Witness the crowd of 100 that gathered to hear Mc-Murray in NewYork's most Republican county. Witness the thousands of McMurray signs outside

homes east of Buffalo. Witness polls that show McMurray neck and neck with Rep. Chris Collins, a Clarence Republican.

Credit that enthusiasm in part to Collins' indictment on felony insider trading charges. But to hear McMurray supporters tell it, their candidate deserves credit, too – for charming their votes out of them with his earnest, if sometimes unconven- See **McMurray** on Page **A10**

Democratic congressional candidate Nate McMurray mingles with volunteers as his campaign hits the election

homestretch. Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Former vice president Joe Biden recently met with Nate McMurray and stumped for him in the race for the 27th

District. John Hickey/Buffalo News

Barnstorming the district to reach as many as possible

MCMURRAY • from A1 tional, efforts. "He is ready to meet and speak with you no matter where or when," said Sue King, 73, a former Republican from Avon, in Livingston County. "It turns out his values are my values."

Out of nowhere

Collins' indictment seemed to come out of nowhere — but then again, so did McMurray.

Only three years ago, he was an unknown attorney for Delaware North Cos., running his first campaign, for Grand Island town supervisor. He ran then, as he's running now, in part on his biography, one that makes him Collins' opposite in every way.

Collins grew up the son of a businessman, McMurray the son of a single mom. His father, a painter from North Tonawanda, died of cancer at the age of 39, leaving behind six sons and a daughter.

McMurray, the secondyoungest, was 4 at the time. He remembers his mother, Judith McMurray, working three jobs to support the family. He went along when she cleaned doctors' offices and when she collected cans for gas money.

“There were a lot of difficult Christmases and cold nights and desperation, but no matter what, my mom was a source of absolute joy,” recalled McMurray, now 43, who has been known to tear up at campaign events when talking about his mother.

Amid her struggles, Mc-Murray's mother turned to the Mormon church and brought her family along. McMurray has left Mormonism and now calls himself “an a la carte Christian,” but he remembers the church as a source of stability, filled with male role models. McMurray became a missionary at age 18. He had no interest in Asia, but was assigned to South Korea, where he quickly had a life-changing experience. He learned to speak Korean.

Returning to Buffalo after two years, he enrolled at Erie Community College before moving on to the University at Buffalo and the University of California's Hastings College of Law in San Francisco.

That, and his Korean language skills, earned him a job at an American law firm in Seoul, where he helped U.S. companies that wanted to enter the Korean market.

That seemed to be the beginning of a blessed expat life. McMurray went to Beijing to study law and learned Mandarin. His work earned him a Fulbright fellowship to study at the Constitutional Court of Korea. In Seoul, he met his wife, Min. The couple's two sons, now 7 and 10, were both born in South Korea.

But Buffalo beckoned. He and his family moved to Grand Island in 2012. “I really wanted to be back home,” he recalled.

Grand Island's longtime Democratic leader, Jim Sharpe, talked McMurray into running for supervisor in 2015.

He won by 14 votes and has been on a whirlwind ever since. He worked with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to convert a highway to a trail on the island's west side, worked for cashless tolls, helped get a visitors' center

built and raised his voice against the pollution spewed toward the island by Tonawanda Coke. Local Republicans aren't exactly blown away by the whirlwind.

"Since McMurray became supervisor, I've thought: 'Why did I move here?'" said the town Republican chairman, Dean Morakis, who complains that the Democrat disrespects property rights and wants to build a big town government that homeowners can't afford.

But McMurray's tenure impresses Rep. Brian Higgins, a Buffalo Democrat. "He's my kind of elected official," Higgins said. "He works with purpose and for purpose. He has a vision, and he has done the hard work to make that vision real."

From long shot to contender

Collins' troubles made headlines all through 2017. And even though Grand Island is not in Collins' 27th Congressional District, Mc-Murray saw what was happening and started thinking: I can do better than this. "I got a taste of politics on the local level, and I thought I could make a difference," he said. So began a bumpy journey from congressional long shot to contender. McMurray started barnstorming the district a year ago, and Democratic activists saw something in the tall, talkative Grand Islander that they did not see in other potential candidates.

"The biggest thing for the party leaders is that Nate could throw a punch, that he could go on the offensive against Chris Collins," said Jeremy Zellner, the Erie County Democratic chairman.

Relying on a group of volunteers and young aides, McMurray's effort felt at first more like a start-up than a campaign, one that used Twitter for its advertising.

McMurray's Twitter voice showed the man in full, and it showed him to be an unusual politician. "I put a tiny pic of Fred (Mr.) Rodgers on my desk," he tweeted back in April, misspelling "Rodgers" in the process. "I try and look at it before every interaction with a constituent and especially before town meetings. Odd as it sounds, it's helped me better understand others, be more loving, empathetic — I wish I was much more like Mr. Rodgers." McMurray would attack Collins on Twitter, too, but he wasn't doing what most winning politicians do: dialing for dollars, lots of them.

"I was uncomfortable with it," he said. "Any normal person would be."

Fearing his speeches were too lawyerly, McMurray took to YouTube and watched Robert F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan to learn from two of history's greatest communicators.

All the while, he worked the district — and started winning over some voters just by listening to them.

Cindy Fleischer of Mendon, in Monroe County, met Mc-Murray at the Canandaigua Fourth of July parade.

“I was able to talk with him, joke with him and get to know his character,” said Fleischer, who is retired. “He is every inch the genuine, ethical, smart and refreshingly humble man he seems to be.”

And then, on Aug. 8, Mc-Murray got a stroke of luck: Collins got arrested.

On a run in Grand Island’s Buckhorn State Park, McMurray got the news in a flurry of text messages. “I was shocked – but not really,” he said.

Preaching to the unconverted

Collins’ indictment won’t necessarily make McMurray the 27th district’s next congressman; Republicans hold a natural 11 percentage point advantage.

McMurray fights the district’s red tide every day.

He rode in the Erie County Fair’s demolition derby. He worked the crowd at the Langford Tractor Pull in southern Erie County. And he’s visited every town in the district, many more than once.

“I honestly believe that if I could talk to every single voter in the district, I would win easily,” he said. “But I can’t. The district’s too big.”

But in trying to win over the district’s Independents and Republicans, McMurray faces two potential roadblocks: the voters’ beliefs, and his own. Most voters, no matter how conservative, seem willing to talk to this avowed progressive. But others are like the guy McMurray met at a Hamburg gas station last week.

“Must be nice to have that Hillary-Soros money,” the guy told McMurray, referencing Hillary Clinton and George Soros, the wealthy Democratic contributor. “Look at that \$500 haircut.”

Voters like that leave Mc-Murray confused. For one thing, he relies on Grand Island town board member Bev Kinney to cut his hair.

For another, “I don’t know how people identify with Mr. Collins,” he added. “He’s one of the richest people in Congress.”

Collins’ indictment cured McMurray’s money shortfall and made this a competitive race, but it also made the Collins campaign more feisty.

Through ads and his spokeswoman, Natalie Baldassarre, Collins has been hammering McMurray as too liberal for the district. She noted that McMurray deleted several tweets critical of the NRA, but McMurray said he stands by their sentiment – including the one that used the hashtag #Homegrown Terrorism. Similarly, McMurray stands by his tweet in which he said of President Trump: “I don’t like him.” And McMurray talks about the virtues of single-payer healthcare every chance he gets. None of this appeals to most voters in the conservative district, Baldassarre said.

“There’s a reason why Nate McMurray constantly deletes his liberal positions from social media on the issues important to NY-27 families,” Baldassarre said. “He is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Whether he’s calling

for restrictions to the Second Amendment, higher taxes or socialized healthcare, his progressive agenda is not in line with the values of NY-27 and the voters see him for the hypocritical fraud that he is.”

McMurray counters by saying he’ll do something Collins never did: listen to his constituents.

“He’s never represented them once,” McMurray said of Collins. “He’s used every moment he’s been in office to exploit them and benefit himself.”

And slowly, it seems, that message is sinking in, Hochul said.