

■ Tim Johnson

By Tena Haraldson

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Timothy Peter Johnson never intended to practice law when he went to law school. He wanted the legal background so he could run for political office.

"Skills acquired as a lawyer are useful skills in politics," he said. "I know how to be an advocate. I know what the code is about. I know how to solve problems through use of the law."

Johnson, 39, a Vermillion attorney, is in a three-way race for the Democratic U.S. House nomination June 3.

He was born Dec. 28, 1946 at Canton to Ruth and Vandel Johnson. His father, a teacher and coach, has retired as chairman of the department of higher education administration at Michigan State University.

Running for office has long been a goal for Johnson.

"When I was a sophomore in high school I thought it would be exciting to run for governor," he said.

"In high school I started to know I was a Democrat," he said. He was especially motivated by President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty.

Johnson attended Vermillion High School and earned a bachelor's degree in political science at the University of South Dakota. Midway through college he signed up for a Washington, D.C., seminar run by the Quakers, an experience that forced him to examine his beliefs.

"I was a little bit out of my climate," he said. Many of the other students were from Ivy League schools, he said. "They tended to be liberal but not radically liberal. The people running the program were pacifists."

Johnson worked for George McGovern's campaign while in college, was a member of Young Democrats and served on the student senate.

After college graduation, Johnson was in the military for four days before he was discharged because of a hearing problem.

He went on to get a master's degree in political science at USD and did doctorate work at Michigan State. He worked two years as a budget analyst for the Michigan state Senate.

Johnson and his wife, the former Barbara Brooks of Sioux Falls, moved back to Vermillion where Mrs. Johnson is a member of the USD faculty in the department of social behavior. The Johnsons have three children, ages 4 to 13.

After law school Johnson entered private practice, working six years as a legal service lawyer for USD.

He held various county offices for the Democratic Party and ran for the state House in 1978, campaigning farm-to-farm in the rural parts of his district.

"Very few people really wanted to know very much about the issues," he said. Instead, they were looking for a nice guy who worked hard, he said.

He was re-elected to the state House in 1980, then moved to the state Senate in 1982 and was re-elected in 1984.

While in the Legislature, Johnson served on the Appropriations Committee and sponsored legislation dealing with domestic abuse, drug penalties, drunken driving, health and divorce laws.

After eight years in the legislature, Johnson said he's ready to move on.

"I've done about what I'm going to do," he said. "A lot of our most fundamental problems are in Washington."

Johnson doesn't rule out running for another office in the future if he's not successful this year.

"However, I'm not one of those people who thinks they're going to run until they get it right," he said.

Johnson describes himself as a middle-of-the-road Democrat, someone who could appeal to moderate Republicans, too.

"I get a little impatient with liberal Democrats who think the government should support everybody and nobody should ever fail," he said. "The government should just make sure everybody has a fair chance. That's why education is an important issue."

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