

Student politician juggles three majors and civic duty

University student Randy Derrick leads a busy life of school and politics as he tries to make a difference

By Nika Carlson
News Reporter

Imagine that this is your schedule: Monday morning, you wake up early and drive 20 minutes from your house in the Southwest Hills to spend 8:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. in the College Democrats office.

You go to class, but leave early to make it to a meeting of the Lane County Economic Development Standing Committee. You barely have time to grab lunch before heading to work as the Management Information System manager at the Lane County Drug Court.

After work, you have a night meeting with various Democrats, then head home to do homework for your three majors: business administration, political science and economics. If you are lucky, you've got a little time with your cat before you crash out at midnight.

Repeat Tuesday through Friday, add work and more meetings Saturday and church Sunday.

Your name is Randy Derrick, you just turned 22 and, by the way, you nearly got appointed to the Oregon House of Representatives. You are a student politician.

Derrick doesn't call himself that. He said he is a civil servant.

He also, however, has six different commitments for the Democratic Party and was the founding member of the Young Democrats of Lane County Caucus. He sits on several local advisory committees and was just appointed to another that reports to the chief justice of the Oregon Supreme Court. He also is an economic development assistant for the Lane County Community and Economic Development office.

Derrick has interned for two local legislators, including spending four months as head intern in Washington, D.C., for Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. Not only was the nation's capital awe-inspiring, it afforded him the opportunity to meet a host of famous politicians, he said.

"Jesse Helms is so funny," Derrick said.

He sits on his church's board of trustees, and he is Lane County Commissioner Peter Sorenson's campaign manager.

"I have free time, but not a lot of it," Derrick said. "It's jealously guarded."



Tim Bobosky Photographer

University student Randy Derrick tells Lane County Commissioners on Jan. 16 why should be selected to represent District 8 in the Oregon Legislature.

Despite his busy schedule, Derrick said he doesn't feel like he is working. "When you care deeply about what you do, when you're passionate about it, it's not a burden," he said. "I love everything that I do."

His dedication has impressed his colleagues, most of whom are at least 20 years his senior.

When Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski appointed former Rep. Floyd Prozanski, D-Eugene, to the state senate, for instance, the Democratic Party of Lane County chose Derrick as their second of three nominees to send before Lane County Commissioners, who made the final selection for the vacant seat.

"He's done a tremendous amount of good already, and we're really proud of his service," Sorenson said.

Derrick wasn't selected, but he said the honor of the nomination was enough for him. The night he found out he was nominated, he gave up celebrating his birthday to work on his speech, he said.

Derrick's foray into politics began in eighth grade when he started asking his homeroom teacher questions about the political process, he said. He did a lot of reading about governance that year and volunteered on Springfield Democratic Rep. Peter DeFazio's campaign with his equally involved twin brother, Riley Derrick. While he continued volunteering in campaigns in high school, he didn't become involved with city politics until his senior year.

He said a community service requirement at Churchill High School led him to the Lane County Drug Court four-and-a-half years ago,

where he began with data entry. Since then, he's written a manual on the court's old computer system, led training throughout the state and helped develop a new state-wide management information system.

"He's amazing," Lane County Drug Court Administrator Tali McKay said. "He just goes after information, figures things out and does it. He's pretty awesome."

McKay added that his age has rarely been a problem.

"He gets along with absolutely everybody," she said.

Derrick, often seen in a tucked-in, button-down shirt, speaks with the confidence of someone secure in his opinions, using a quick but measured cadence and the rich vocabulary of a politician. His speech is peppered with acronyms that refer to the programs he's involved in.

He may seem older than his years, but he is the youngest person on all the committees he sits on, he said.

"I think that my sitting on those committees brings a perspective that wasn't there," he said. "There are times when your ideas don't get taken as seriously, but it's not as big of a challenge anymore because once you get in there and establish yourself, age is not really a factor."

Derrick is a self-described "policy wonk," but he said not all of his friendships and conversations revolve around politics.

Senior Daniel Bayley, a friend of Derrick's, said they met in their business Freshman Interest Group.

"He's always had a different level of knowledge than his classmates and has always been a step ahead of us," he said. "He was reading books in addition to the ones in class just to get that additional information and perspective."

Derrick said he isn't bothered that most people his age aren't as intensely involved in politics as he is, though he said he keeps voter registration cards in his car in case he runs across someone who is not a registered voter.

"That bothers me," he said. "A lot of students don't take the time to understand what the impact of not voting is."

However, nobody should be forced to do anything they don't want to do, he added.

So why does he do it?

"It's pretty much the old story about wanting to make change, wanting to make things better than you found them," he said. "I totally know I'm making a difference."

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