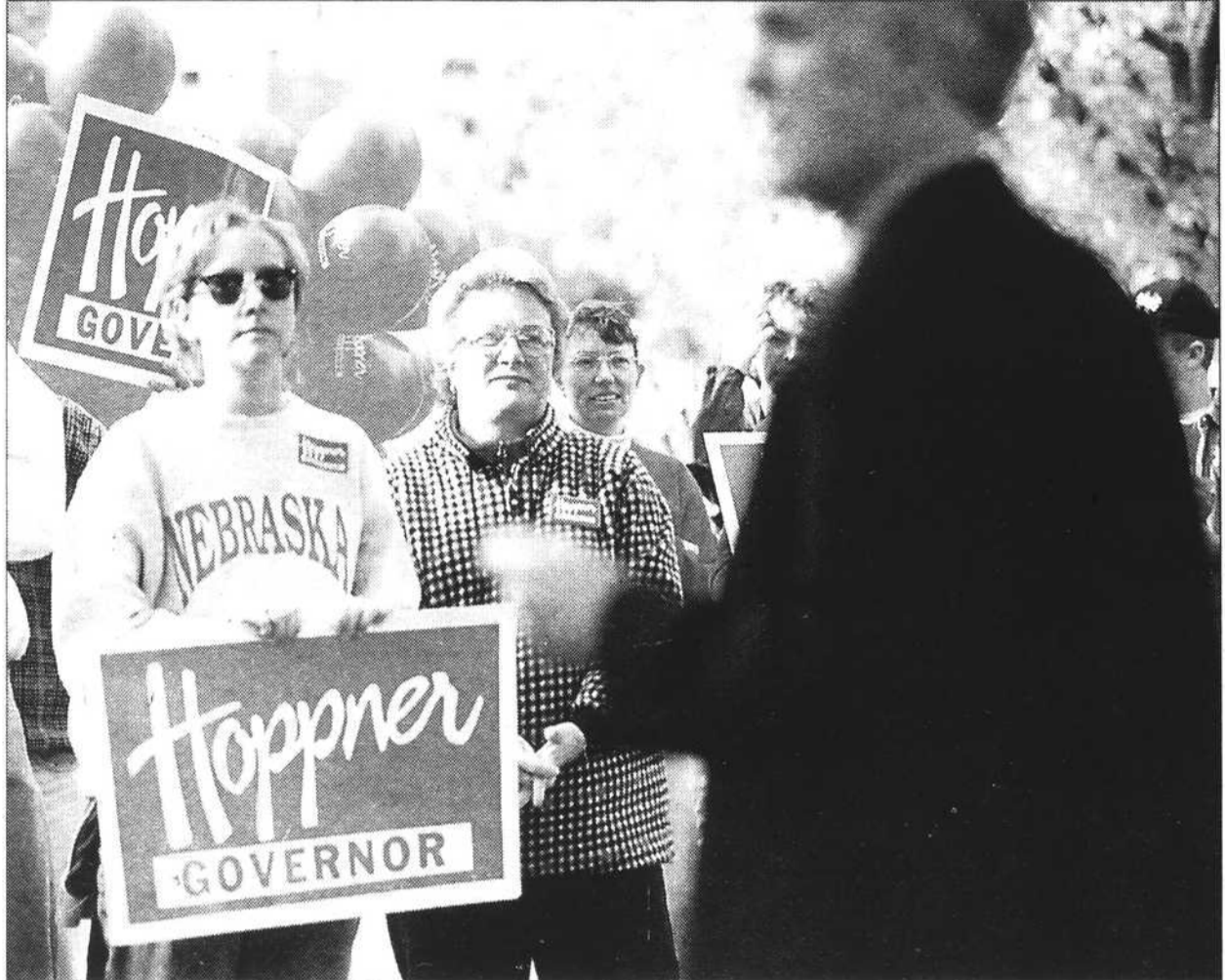
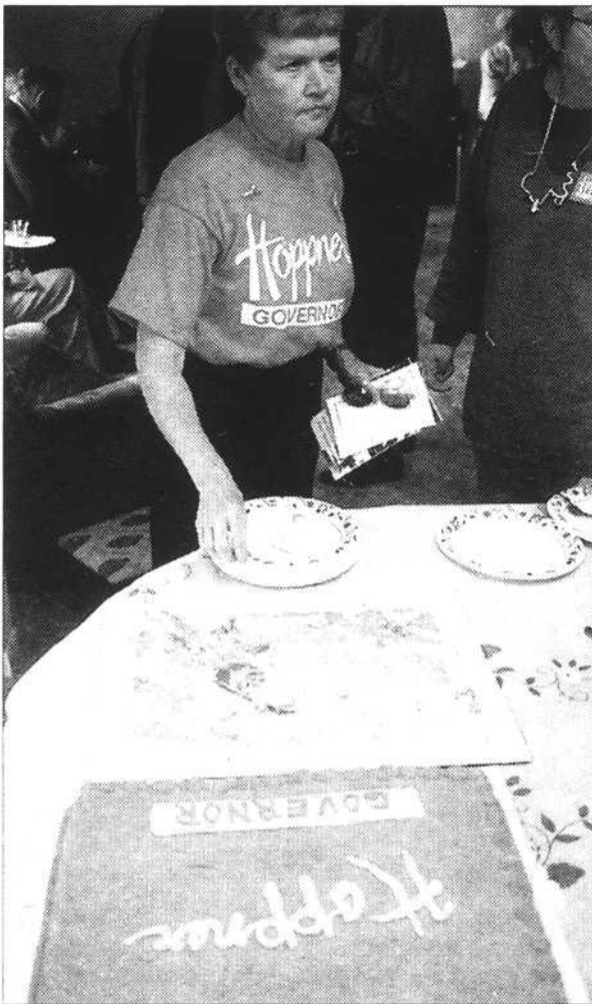


"(Hoppner) just really feels what the p



Hoppner brings humor to his campaign

BY TODD ANDERSON
Senior staff writer

Fortunately, political races are not decided by the success of punch lines.

Bill Hoppner's quirky sense of humor became a standby during his campaign, producing mixed results.

During a gubernatorial debate in Omaha early last month, Hoppner joked that his worst trait was loving people too much.

His quip failed to come across clearly with a silent crowd of Hoppner and Johanns supporters.

But at a recent rally with Gov. Ben Nelson, another Hoppner attempt at humor had even the current governor red with laughter.

"I'm going to prove you don't have to have hair to be governor of the state of Nebraska," Hoppner said.

Despite comedian Hoppner's lighter side, the Democratic underdog is straight-faced about his goal to beat Republican Mike Johanns in the race for governor, his friends and supporters said.

But even in private company, Hoppner reveals a light-hearted side.

Tom Hastings, Hoppner's boyhood friend, said Hoppner jokes that the first time he saw his wife-to-be, Nancy, he nearly wet his pants.

They were, of course, both infants at the time. Hoppner and Nancy Tonjes grew up in Pender, attended the same high school and were even baptized in the same church on the same day. They were high school sweethearts before getting married.

Hastings said sometimes Bill's audience has a hard time responding to his unique wit.

"He's so intelligent, his humor sometimes takes people time to absorb," Hastings said.

After an October debate in Kearney, Hoppner kidded that he would appoint Barney Fife, the bumbling deputy sheriff from "The Andy Griffith Show," to lead the State Patrol.

The comment drew the ire of the State Troopers Association, which reiterated its support for Johanns.

Nancy Hoppner said his humor just takes some getting used to.

"Bill's a very funny person," she said. "Once people understand his sense of humor, they realize he's a lot of fun."

A right-hand man

A look at the other side of the comic candidate reveals a man with serious sights on the governor's office.

In all his 48 years, Hoppner has never held an elected political office.

His experience, however, comes from acting as right-hand man for a number of federal and top state officials.

That work, he said, taught him the ins and outs of state government and its agencies.

In 1973, while finishing his law degree from the NU College of Law, Hoppner worked as then-Gov. J.J. Exon's legal counsel.

The man who interviewed Hoppner for the job, Norman Otto, said Hoppner's early experience under the Exon administration gave him the opportunity to fine-tune his already-keen mind.

"Bill was always so quick to grasp issues and be able to analyze them," Otto said.

"He never had to cram anything; he already had it all in his head."

Hoppner later worked in Exon's senatorial office in Washington, D.C., as chief of staff.

He returned to Nebraska to work for then-Gov. Bob Kerrey in 1982, and later became chief of staff in Kerrey's Senate office in 1989.

Kerrey said Hoppner's strength is his understanding of law.

That treasured skill will augment Hoppner's leadership ability to make him the top candidate, he said.

"Bill knows the state well, and he understands that the laws have to be written to give

people an opportunity to grow," Kerrey said.

Coming to a commitment

Hoppner never mentioned running for elected office during the years he worked in business and as top aide in Nebraska government, his wife said.

She said people he knew started to suggest 10 years ago that he think about becoming a candidate for state office.

Hoppner first ran for the Democratic nomination in 1990, but lost to current Gov. Ben Nelson by 42 votes after two ballot counts.

Nelson will leave the office in January after serving two terms, the legal limit for elected state officers.

Nancy Hoppner said her husband became used to the idea of running for office after he identified goals for the state.

"There were some issues he was interested in, and he thought he could make a difference," she said.

This time around, Hoppner defeated former state Sen. Jim McFarland with a 66 percent majority in May for the Democratic primary election.

Hoppner has said he decided to run for Nebraska's top office because he wants to make sure state government invites all Nebraskans to participate.

Hastings said Hoppner does not consider that promise a joke.

As executive vice president of Gretna-based International Transportation Services — the business Hastings built from scratch and still owns — Hoppner sought the input of the company managers before making decisions.

"He would give them difficult questions to put them on the line," he said. "And once he had the facts he was willing to stand up to the plate."

Hastings said Hoppner has lived his whole

life without compromising the ethics that govern his approach to leadership, which makes him a rarity in today's political arena.

"During fund-raisers, when people bring up money, (Hoppner) makes it very well known that a campaign donation might get you an audience, but it won't get you a vote," Hastings said.

Feeling for the people

After searching for a few seconds for the word that best describes her husband's best quality, Nancy Hoppner said it is his humanity.

"(Bill) just really feels what the people in the state are feeling," Nancy Hoppner said.

"He wants to help the people that just aren't being represented the way they like and to make things fair for them," she said.

Hoppner helped start and was the original president of the Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest, a nonprofit organization of private attorneys that works to provide better representation for low-income Nebraskans.

He also is chairman of the Martin Luther Holmes Society and a board member of Daywatch, a Lincoln center for the homeless.

Milo Mumgaard, current director of the Appleseed Center, said Hoppner's concern for others is genuine.

"He has a vast sense of compassion and concern for the underprivileged, and he's particularly aware of how the poor and those without power are left out in our systems," Mumgaard said.

Mumgaard said Hoppner is unique compared with other leaders because of the traits that make up his character.

"He's a rarity because of this combination of strong-willed leadership and sophistication, with a highly sincere compassion for the down-trodden," he said.

Hastings also said Hoppner is an empathetic person.

"Hoppner believes government should represent those who don't have a voice," he said.

For those qualities and Hoppner's experi-

Election '98	
Name:	Bill Hoppner
Party:	Democrat
Age:	48
Occupation:	Lincoln business consultant.
Hometown:	Born and raised in Pender.
Education:	Graduated with a business degree from UNL in 1972. Earned law degree from the NU College of Law in 1974.

JON FRANK/DN