

Integrity important to Conley's run

CONLEY from page 1

—prompted by friends and supporters to consider running.

"I had to think about the whole thing," Conley said. "I had to think about whether or not it was worth the year it would take up. I had to think about how it would affect the other things I wanted to get done. It wasn't something I had to do."

Eventually, with enough prodding, Conley agreed to run in early November of 1999. But it took the process of weighing the options to get there.

This is, sometimes, how it works. And with Conley, a junior sociology major, others saw the potential for a student body president before he did.

He was smart. He had worked on a campaign before, helping Voice presidential candidate Andy Schuerman get elected last year.

He had worked inside ASUN as a member of a sexual orientation subcommittee, but he was not a governmental lifer, susceptible to the lethargy many members have. And as a resident assistant in Harper Residence Hall, he was a leader.

But he did not dominate a room. He let others be heard. He considered their ideas. This process, over and over again, was Conley's modus operandi. Conservative, predictable, fair.

And yet when Conley felt strongly, as he did in November 1999, he could make things happen swiftly. On Nov. 1 of that year, a homeless man was beaten on campus. It left Conley "outraged and pissed." Seventeen days later, along with friend Natalie Hoover, Conley helped organize a chili feed at a homeless shelter. It lingers even now as a defining moment.

Nearly everyone who talks about him agrees that his mobilization of the feed and his strong stance against the beating reflect his character.

"John has a lot of integrity and people see that," said Jaron Lutich, an Impact campaign adviser and one of the main recruiters of Conley in November 1999. "He paid for part of that food himself. You look for a person that you think could be president on our campus, and John is that person."

Lutich added again: "He has a lot of integrity."

Integral issues

Integrity — an overused word that has become a catch phrase for God (Promise Keepers) and country (the Marines) alike. But with Conley, the idea of incorruptibility hits home a little harder, if only because, well, he brings it up all the time.

How the campaign is run with it. How his running mates — first presidential candidate Brad Bangs and second vice Amy Ellis — have it, too. How the other favorite in the race — Empower candidate Heath Mello — doesn't. Following the campaign is a little

like reading a term paper on the word.

"I want to say that we won without any lying or any dirty tricks," Conley says of the party. "That we won based on the issues we had on the platform."

Issues. Impact has a few of solid worth. Conley's strongest beliefs seem to lie in work with diversity and connecting the Culture Center to the Nebraska Union. Students who use the Culture Center, he thinks, have little interaction with students in the union, and vice versa.

Conley also hopes to bring

John has a lot of empathy for people because he's been through so much, and he's been successful. He can put himself in other people's shoes easily."

**Laina Zarek
John Conley's sister**

larger entertainment acts to the campus through the University Program Council. He lets Ellis speak at length on this topic; it seems to be her baby more than Conley's.

There are other issues, such as getting more use out of the Library 110 class, but, for the most part, Conley is concerned with the

operation of the ASUN government, which meets once a week as a group on Wednesday nights.

The entire organization has grown weary, Conley says, and it's reflected in the lack of interest from the student body, as only 13.2 percent voted in 1999.

"Whatever percent of the people who voted," Conley says, "that's how many were really working their tails off in ASUN."

"God, you have people coming in there with their sweats on and looking like they just woke up and people bringing food in."

It takes time for Conley to arrive at that exact phrasing, a few minutes to choose the right words. Deliberate.

At many meetings, Conley says, ASUN senators just come and go as they please.

"Do one thing," he says, "leave or stay. If you can't sit still for a couple hours..."

Conley hopes to bring some more accountability to the proceedings, to check on his senators better, to stay on them if they don't do the job right. To give them self-determination, as well.

"One thing about John is that when he cares about something or someone, he wants to see the right thing done," said Conley's sister, Laina Zarek, a student at Northwestern University. "And he's sometimes angry when he sees people doing what he doesn't think they should."

Family Ties

Zarek has played an undeniably pivotal role in Conley's life and sheds insight on what shaped Conley as the person he is now. Zarek and Conley met in grade school, not long after Conley had moved to Gothenburg from Pennsylvania.

Conley grew up in a single-parent household near Pittsburgh, where his biological mother, Nancy, was a waitress. They were poor. Often, Conley ate the same food day after day.

"I didn't have a lot growing up," he says.

In Gothenburg, Conley and

Zarek became fast friends. In fifth and sixth grade, Zarek says, they had "one of the cute little boyfriend-girlfriend things."

Eventually, that grew into a brother-sister relationship. Conley became close to Zarek's parents, Rick and Patricia, whom Conley calls Pops and Mama Z. In junior high, he moved in.

Conley's birth mother still lives in Gothenburg. He says they have a good relationship. Laina Zarek says Conley loves his mother, but that "they don't see eye-to-eye on things."

"John has a lot of empathy for people because he's been through so much, and he's been successful," Laina Zarek says. "He can put himself in other people's shoes easily."

Building time

When Conley decided to put himself in the shoes of a presidential candidate, he handled it in the same straightforward manner he's accustomed to. He gets Ellis, another friend from Gothenburg and current ASUN senator, as the second vice president.

Conley also knows that greeks — members of fraternities and sororities — vote most in the elections, so he names Bangs, a member of Phi Kappa Psi Fraternity, as the first vice president.

Impact begins to compile a list of senatorial candidates and supporters, influential student leaders who might be able to sway votes. Understand, this all takes place within the stratosphere of the campus' academically successful and highly involved.

Though Conley knows firsthand the common nature of most students — he is an RA, after all — he believes in motivated individuals. He brings up former president Ronald Reagan as a model for these beliefs. The trickle-down theory, only for representative government.

"At first, you're only going to get a few people who really care about things," Conley says. "I could walk around my floor and ask guys if they wanted to play football. And a few would. But there'd always be those guys who'd ask, 'Well, who else is going?'"

"You round up a few more guys, and then those guys that were saying no earlier, now they want to go.

A lot of people only want to get involved if this person or that person is doing it. So you go after the people who will get involved anyway and then get the others."

Conley believes in working within the system and winning people over to his side. He is not disaffected nor is he disillusioned. He has issues, but they fit in the comfortable settings of the betterment of campus, like many other parties and many other presidents of the past. But Conley figures he's different.

Part of it is being non-greek, which some people consider the kiss of death in the campaign.

Conley did rush during his freshman year but didn't opt into the fraternity system.

"There's some great things about it," Conley says, "especially in the way that they're able to get together and get things done."

He figures that getting things done, with his way of working, won't be a problem. Being non-greek and not a part of the establishment is an advantage in his eyes.

Because his main opponent is Empower and its presidential candidate, Heath Mello, and they embody both the greek system and lifelong ASUN membership. Mello worked his way up through the ranks in ASUN. He has made the rounds and been to the senatorial meetings.

Conley also worked with Mello on the Voice campaign last year.

Conley knows Mello. Some traits he admires about him. Others, Conley does not.

Mellowing out

To Conley's credit, he says little in the Daily Nebraskan or in public debates attacking Mello's positions nor some of the assertions Mello makes, many of which Conley see as distortions of the truth, or false entirely.

But as time goes on in the campaign, Conley's answers grow more candid and unflattering when discussing "Mr. Mello."

"Mr. Mello will say one thing to you, something to someone else," Conley says. "He tells my running mates things I never said, and he tells me things they never said. And he expects it not to get back to us."

Conley believes Mello lacks integrity, or at least the kind necessary to become president. Mello is many things Conley is not. He is more outgoing, spontaneous and random. He is not deliberate. He has a tendency to dominate conversations rather than hear them out.

He is a better speaker than Conley. His image is more polished, more prepared. Mello is good at giving the right answer. It is all part of what Conley once called "Mr. Mello's pleaser persona."

Mello then, in some ways, represents the very things Conley resists — the lack of conversation, off-the-cuff decisions.

As the election moves on, Conley speaks as often about how damaging Empower's reign would be as he does about what he will do with the office. He wants to win, but he also wants not to lose.

One reason, Conley says, is that Mello was once part of the Impact party and wanted to run as second vice president. Conley said no but agreed Mello could run for senate.

In an Impact meeting document marked Nov. 17, 1999, Mello is shown as having the

responsibility to educate senators on duties and dealing with the electoral commission as part of his campaign duties.

Lutich, one of the campaign advisers, had reservations about Mello, which he relayed to Conley in an e-mail given to the Daily Nebraskan. While Lutich saw Mello as valuable to the inner workings of ASUN, he didn't want Mello at some of the top-level meetings, nor for him to be involved until it was "absolutely necessary."

The e-mail, and Conley's response, which acknowledges Mello's tendency to take over meetings but yet sees him as a valuable senate trainer, seems to imply Mello was in for the long haul with Impact.

A few weeks later, on Nov. 29, Mello left the party and formed Empower. Mello wrote in an e-mail to Conley that he hoped "we can still maintain a normal relationship in the future because I want to value a relationship with you higher than offices."

Conley says that would have been fine, had Mello not used some of the ideas for his party that Impact came up with on its own.

In fairness, some of these ideas, which include improving campus communication and keeping certain government offices open later, aren't under any patent. Mello could have had them before anyone else did, as he claims or simply adopted them as he liked. It's hard to plagiarize in politics.

But Conley asserts Mello even lifted Impact's party colors of blue and orange. Lutich concurs.

"I remember it very well because we were talking about how blue was the best color, and John said, 'Why not go ahead and throw orange in there, make us look like the (Denver) Broncos.' And Heath comes out with blue and orange."

Mello denies the claim. If it was a color swipe, it's likely it won't do much to sway the election. But of these little things, grudges are born. Conley wants to win, yes. But he also wants to beat Heath Mello.

The interlude

There's three other parties, A-Team, Duff and Fishpond, and well, they're nice little third parties, good to have around, Conley says, for competition. Lutich is good friends with Duff president Jason Kidd and first vice president Kevin Sypal.

A-Team is truly unconventional, with no senators and only its three executive members. Conley likes them, especially A-team president Joel Schafer, a complete outsider who wants things changed entirely.

Fishpond is the work of even fewer members; in fact, it is a one-man show — Josh Hesse, who plans to put fish in the union fountain.

In early February of this year, these three parties are in their infancy stage. Conley says he is interested to see which ones stick around, if any. He's not sure any of them will. Duff and A-Team are not critical threats yet. Fishpond isn't either.

Conley is sure it will be Impact vs. Empower, outsider vs. establishment, integrity vs. charm, a kick in the pants vs. business as usual.

In short, John Conley vs. Heath Mello. And Conley is off and running, in his same measured way of working.

"We'll do it right, and we'll be clean," Conley says. "And we think we've got as good a chance as Empower does."

I want to say that we won without any lying or any dirty tricks. That we won based on the issues we had on the platform."

**John Conley
Impact presidential candidate**