



Political opponents for the same House seat from Sanders County at the Campaign Academy course in Missoula were Ryker Kern, left, and Pat Ingraham.

The calm before the campaign

Hello, my name is Jim, and I'm a junkie for politics.

Which is why I spent some time at the one-day Campaign Academy sessions across Montana. At the first session in Missoula, 60 candidates and campaigners showed up, plunked down their \$35 and spent the day getting advice on everything from writing the campaign plan to election laws to press relations to getting out the vote to fund-raising and every other possible unpleasant task that would keep any right-thinking person out of politics.

But no, there they were, fresh-faced and eager to learn. So earnest in asking questions of Montana Political Practices Commissioner Gordy Higgins, wanting to stay within the law. Or maybe probing for the loopholes. "Is that side of beef a donation in kind that exceeds the \$130 limit?"

"Do I have to put my party affiliation on my nametag?"

Lotta questions like that.

I saw a couple holding hands as they walked out of the room on break. Not political opponents. Surely.

I talked to another pair on break and found that they were from the same area, Sanders County. In the same campaign? In a sense. Opponents in the Republican primary for House District 13. She is Pat Ingraham, and he is Ryker Ridge Kern.

And so civil. Ryker said, "Politics is temporary; neighbors are forever."

And so idealistic. "I'm running because my conscience told me to run," Pat said. "I have something to offer, something to give back."

One justice of the peace candidate in Lake County is Lonnie Erickson, a detention supervisor at the Lake

County Sheriff's Office. He wants to bring respect to the court and provide a deterrent atmosphere to criminals.

"I want to establish a legacy for my son and grandkids," he said. And no, he doesn't think that's too idealistic.

Dave Wanzenried, Montana House Democrats leader now running for the District 49 seat in the Montana Senate, addressed the candidates and campaigners with an upbeat message. He sounded almost as idealistic as they did, even after years in the trenches.

He graciously introduced a Candidate Academy participant, Rusty VanOverbeck, who has filed as a Republican to run against Dave.

Dave told the group that they could not consider themselves campaigners until they had been bitten by dogs and run off by property owners. "Voters like to tell you in person to get off the property." That was kind of funny.

He encouraged the potential candidates by telling them that the political structure of Montana was built to encourage a citizen government. The term limits. The inexpensive filing fees. The Legislature in session for only four months every two years. That was kind of serious.

"Enjoy the experience of your first campaign," Wanzenried said. "It comes only once in a lifetime, and you must enjoy it." That was good advice.

He described the political system in Montana as one in which the parties have more in common than not. That I don't know.

I do know it's an important election year. And the Legislature goes into session come January.

Like the new, fresh-faced candidates, I can hardly wait.



Lake County justice of the peace candidate Lonnie Erickson pays close attention at the Candidate Academy session in Missoula.



A contender for the Montana Senate District 49 seat is Dave Wanzenried, left, who has been in politics since the 1990s and was a speaker at the Campaign Academy in Missoula.

Rusty VanOverbeck is campaigning to oppose Wanzenried in the general election. VanOverbeck has attended the Campaign Academy twice, including the session at Missoula in March.