

Arizona Daily Star

Can Kwasman avoid the Glassman model?

By Tim Steller – July 10th, 2013

Adam Kwasman formally announced his desire to run for the Republican nomination for Congress Monday, but his ambition has long been plain to see.

Kwasman is a young lover of politics who spent a year as a congressional page for then-Rep. Jim Kolbe at age 16, later interned for Kolbe, worked for the Cato Institute and managed Jesse Kelly's congressional campaign at age 28. It's in his blood.

So it shouldn't surprise you that he decided to explore running for Congress just eight months after winning his first political seat - state representative from the northwest side.

Still, there's risk in such a move. When talking to the now-30-year-old Kwasman Monday and Tuesday, I kept thinking of another surprising run by a young, ambitious local politico: Rodney Glassman's challenge to Sen. John McCain in 2010.

That ended in a flameout that left Glassman exiled from public office until his recent hiring as interim town manager of Cave Creek.

Like Kwasman, Glassman was young and ambitious - though a Democrat - when he quit the Tucson City Council in 2010, after less than three years in office, to run for the party's nomination for Senate.

He was 31 when he launched the suicide mission against McCain, which he lost by about 24 percentage points.

Kwasman is hoping to challenge the incumbent Democrat, Ann Kirkpatrick, in the vast Congressional District 1, which reaches from his hometown, Oro Valley, through Pinal County, eastern and northern Arizona to Flagstaff.

Kirkpatrick may not be the formidable force McCain was - in fact, the National Republican Congressional Committee is targeting her seat as one of its top-priority races and plans to fund whoever challenges her. But it's always difficult to unseat an incumbent.

"These are tough races because these are entrenched, experienced incumbents who know how to win races," said Daniel Scarpinato, the Tucson man who works as spokesman for the national committee.

Kwasman, an economic consultant for a local financial adviser, is treating his relative inexperience as irrelevant.

"It doesn't matter whether you're 30, 60, 90, good ideas are good ideas," he said.

The St. Gregory College Preparatory School graduate got a bachelor's degree from Tulane University and a master's degree in economics from George Mason University, a bastion of free-market libertarianism.

But what gives people like Kwasman the audacity to make the transition from a guy who thinks he has good ideas to a potential congressional candidate? I asked an expert, Jennifer Lawless, an associate professor of government at American University who wrote "Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office."

Not only did she write the book, Lawless herself ran an out-of-nowhere primary campaign against a Democratic incumbent congressman in 2006, when she was 30 and living in Rhode Island.

One of the key predictors of a person deciding to run for office, Lawless said, is support and encouragement from what she calls "electoral gatekeepers" - that is, officeholders, party officials, donors and the like. Another is the support and encouragement of family and friends.

Kwasman has both - but so did Glassman.

Pima County Democratic Party Chairman Don Jorgensen said he appreciated Glassman's effort against McCain, but ...

"Rodney wasn't ready. He didn't have the experience or the depth to make that run when he did," Jorgensen said.

Similarly, he said of Kwasman, "His ambition may be exceeding his aptitude."

That can be all right, if a candidate improves his name recognition, builds a supporter base and gets some good practice - even in a losing effort.

"It generally works, as long as you either exceed expectations or don't rub anybody the wrong way," Lawless said.

Kwasman has assembled a decent cross-section of supporters, including his social-conservative seatmate, Rep. Steve Smith, and moderate Foothills Rep. Ethan Orr, whom Kwasman fought over Gov. Jan Brewer's Medicaid proposal this session.

"He's a political animal, and I think he'll surprise people," Orr said. "I think he'll be a very good candidate."

The key for him will be to make the the run politically productive, whether he wins or loses, unlike Glassman, who lost and disappeared from the political scene.