



Parry positions himself as an outsider but has insider ties

By Blake Nelson

Columbia Missourian

Published Nov. 2, 2016

COLUMBIA — Fred Parry and Ted Farnen walked into a bar.

"Bar" is the wrong word. "Brewery" is more accurate. Specifically, the Bur Oak Brewing Co. in Columbia, the site of Fred Parry's last fundraiser for his campaign to become Boone County's next Southern District commissioner.

It was Oct. 20. The two were early and stood alone near lines of empty tables. Musicians were warming up their instruments. Three enormous metal vats loomed overhead, capable of holding enough beer to bathe an elephant. Parry, a Republican, listened as Farnen, a former Democratic state representative, talked and gestured.

The scene was notable for two reasons.

One, it marked the end of an extraordinary fundraising stretch for Parry, who has brought in over \$103,000 — more than the combined amount raised by the three other commission candidates. That total is made up of contributions of \$5,000 or less, according to data from the Missouri Ethics Commission.

Two, Farnen was an unlikely attendee for a Parry fundraiser. Farnen himself lost a bid to become the Democratic nominee for the office Parry is seeking.

"I have disagreements with Fred on many issues," Farnen wrote in an open letter in October. "I've said mean things about Fred in private, public and to his face." And yet, "for the first time in my life, I'm publicly supporting a Republican candidate for public office."

Farnen's support, echoed by other Democrats and Republicans, hinges on Parry's ability to be two things at once.

On the one hand, Parry is very much a Boone County insider: he's taught at MU, published magazines including Inside Columbia, served with the Central Missouri Food Bank and worked on the Boone Hospital Center Board of Trustees and the Columbia Housing Authority Board of Commissioners.

Those local ties resonate with a lot of Parry voters. Many couldn't pinpoint the moment they met Parry; it was too long ago.

"It's about the community, not the party," said Trevor Fowler, a former Democratic candidate for the commission who, like Farnen, became a Parry supporter after his primary loss.

On the other hand, Parry has positioned himself as an outsider. The current commission is made up of three Democrats, and if Parry's opponent, Democrat Brianna Lennon is elected, they will all be lawyers. Parry is neither, and in a September interview, he offered repeated critiques of the commission.

On the commission's decision to close early meetings about the Boone County Fairgrounds: "If they were wrong about that, chances are they have been mistaken about other meetings that should have been held in the public eye."

On county crime: "The big question is: Do the citizens of Boone County feel as safe in their homes and in their downtown shopping district as they did five years ago? And the answer is typically a resounding 'no.'"

On how the commission engages with citizens: "If we took on a stance where we were much more aggressive in how we communicated ... (citizens) would have a much higher level of satisfaction with their elected officials."

(Other excerpts from that interview can be seen in three short videos of Parry and Lennon talking about growth, disparity and government accessibility).

Norm Ruebling, co-owner of the MO-X shuttle company, is a Parry supporter who attended the last fundraiser.

"You always know where he stands," Ruebling said. "You either love him or you hate him."

The "hate him" part of that equation partially stems from Parry's openness to saying things others would not, like his occasional pronunciation of this paper's name as "The Manure-ian" when he co-hosted a talk show on KFRU/1400 AM. Or his campaign video depicting the county commissioners as money-eating chimpanzees. The latter choice led Boone County Treasurer Tom Darrough to chuck one of Parry's campaign signs into the trash.

The "love him" part could be seen when a woman named Cindy Mutrux approached Parry at the brewery and handed him two stuffed animals: a yellow cat and an anthropomorphic plant. Mutrux said she bought them for Parry this summer in Rio de Janeiro, where she watched her great-nephew J'den Cox win an Olympic bronze medal. Parry helped raise money for Cox's family to attend the Games, Mutrux said, and the stuffed animals were a thank-you gift.

The "love" is also rooted in Parry's willingness to pick certain fights.

George Carney, a Vietnam veteran who attended a Parry fundraiser in Ashland, knows the commission's decision to remove the Desert Storm Memorial from the Boone County Courthouse probably won't be reversed. He just appreciates that Parry acknowledged his frustration and keeps criticizing that decision.

Carney's frustration is also connected to broader issues, such as San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision not to stand during the national anthem as a form of protest.

"I know you're not writing about this," Carney said, "but it's connected to what's happening in football, because I like football, and I'm upset about what guys, well a few guys, are doing." In that sense, Parry is very much part of a national trend of Republican outsiders challenging political norms throughout the country.

Yet Parry also bucks stereotypes sometimes attached to Republican businessmen. Take the question of poverty, for example.

Almost 20 percent of Boone County citizens live in poverty, according to the U.S. Census, compared to 15 percent of the state overall. When asked in interviews about solutions to that and other disparities, each of the four candidates took a different angle. Republican Brenndan Riddles, candidate for the Northern District, emphasized the importance of work ethic. His opponent, Democrat and incumbent Janet Thompson referenced liberation theology. Lennon said the commission needed to do a better job seeking input from more citizens.

Parry offered the most specific answer.

"Home ownership is the one thing that will break the cycle of poverty," he said. He suggested increasing the density of housing in Columbia, and brought up lengthening bus hours so more people working late shifts could have an easier time getting to work.

"Too many people that cook our meals in restaurants and do our dry cleaning," Parry said, "are living in communities outside of Columbia because they can't afford to live here."

He also believes hospitals in the area could become more of a regional draw, and Parry is very open to Boone Hospital Center partnering with University Hospital to make that happen.

"Three years ago my son was in a horrific car accident and was rushed to the trauma unit at University Health Care," Parry said. "I got to see first hand just how strong MU Health Care is."

Parry's son survived and is now a sophomore at Ole Miss. Both Parry's sons have helped out throughout the campaign, along with his wife, Melody Parry. During the final

fundraiser at the brewery, Fred and Melody Parry often stood in different corners of the room, talking up different groups of people.

The whole experience has been a bit of déjà vu for Melody Parry. Her dad, Rodney Garnett, was a Callaway County commissioner when she was growing up, and she remembered the phone constantly ringing with county business. She said she enjoyed going door-to-door for both Garnett and Parry but isn't sad to see this campaign wind down.

"It's a larger county than I thought it was," she said.

Garnett laughed when asked if Parry ever came to him for advice.

"I'm glad I'm not running now," Garnett said.

Parry, near the end of the night, saluted his father-in-law.

"To Rodney," he said, "the tightest Democrat in all of Callaway County."

The roomful of people, which at different points that evening included at least three "Make America Great Again" hats and one Hillary Clinton supporter, laughed.

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.