

## 15 MINUTES

## A local experiment in democracy

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Independent U.S. Congressional candidate and Cape Coral resident Jeff George opened the door of his office: a small, white house sharing a parking lot with the Islamic Center for Peace in Fort Myers. It was a quiet morning for the 39-year-old Army veteran and documentary filmmaker, clad in jeans, no shoes and a maroon polo T-shirt. He was there working on his campaign, Crazy for Congress, with volunteer Chuck Myron.

George announced his bid for Florida's District 14 seat in the House of Representatives on Sept. 7 at the Islamic Center. Footage of the announcement is available on YouTube and on his website, crazyforcongress.com. He will also be providing a live webcam of his day-to-day operations.

It's all part of his campaign — "Transparency, Integrity and Accountability" — to give alienated voters insight into the political process and a candidate who will run outside the usual boundaries of big money and politics.

"Wealth has always been the most direct means to power," he said. "Right now, particularly with the Internet, we have a real opportunity to take some of that back — the opportunity for people to truly be heard and interact with each other."

"I think the problem is the political process has gotten so far away from average citizens and everyday people that we need to find some means of taking it back.

A lot of things that happen in the political process are not the result of competition or malfeasance, but necessity. ... One of the reasons the big money is so necessary is you really have to buy people's time."

His campaign will be running on \$40,000 at best, while many winning bids for House seats spend upwards of \$1 million. George and his eight-member volunteer staff are struggling to collect the 4,959 signatures needed by May 2 to officially get his name on the November ballot and avoid the \$6,608 entry fee. So far they've collected over 100.

"It seemed more democratic than trying to buy our way into the ballot," he said.

They found that most of the strip malls and shopping centers in the area wouldn't allow him to campaign there. Big John's in Cape Coral was an exception. They are planning to go door-to-door in Naples and have volunteers collecting signatures at Florida Gulf Coast University. George's grandmother canvassed a senior center, he said.

Virtually unknown, George was also interviewed by the local daily paper last September. But on the day his big news was to appear, it was squelched by bigger news: George's opponent, incumbent Republican Connie Mack IV, had announced a marriage engagement.

Was Mack's news release a deftly timed attempt at one-upmanship, a power play to dominate media attention? Had he already perceived the Crazy for Congress campaign as a threat and taken off the kid



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO BY EVAN WILLIAMS  
Congressional candidate Jeff George

gloves? That's a doubtful proposition at best, George admitted.

"If it was an intentional move, we're much more important than we thought we were," he said.

That kind of attention can only be hoped for at this point. "But we're on their radar. This is a real, viable campaign and I think we have a real shot at winning, particularly because this is a four-way race this year."

Other opponents may include State Representative Burt Saunders, previously a Republican, and now running with "No Party Affiliation," and Democrat Larry Burns, a professor at Florida Gulf Coast

University.

George was born in Ohio and moved Fort Myers when he was 4 years-old. He grew up in the area and attended Cape Coral High School before spending five years in the Army in Germany and then Korea during the Gulf War.

During his last few years in the Army, George said he was attracted to the philosophies of the Muslim religion. He continued to study the culture and in 2003, officially became a Muslim. Since then, he's been directly involved with the Muslim community in Fort Myers.

"I'm a firm believer in the separation of church and state," he said. "...But religion does play a role in the lives of individual Americans and we need to find a better way of discussing this in politics."

In 2004, he started Daylight Moon Productions, because of the ability to purchase relatively inexpensive digital video equipment. George filmed a documentary in Syria, which aired on British television in 2005.

Eventually, he wants to produce a 3-D animated feature film, a sci-fi adventure. A self-confessed "science fiction geek," his favorite movies include the Star Wars series, and his favorite books are Frank Herbert's "Dune" series. But for now he'll concentrate on the campaign.

"I can't see doing it for the rest of my life, but I'd be more than happy continuing this same effort for a term or two in Washington," he said.

If he does go to the Capitol, George said he'll be filming that, too. ■



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