

Richards brings strong personality, love for history to 47th District race

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Mitch Richards speaks to Paul Couture, an attendant of Richards' fundraiser Thursday, Oct. 11, at the Cooper's Oak Winery in Higbee. | [Rachel English](#)

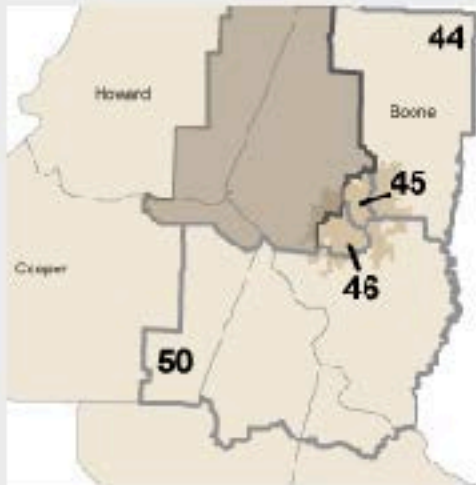
Mitch Richards, Republican state representative candidate in the 47th District, is running against Democrat John Wright. | [RACHEL ENGLISH](#)

COLUMBIA — Mitch Richards isn't afraid to speak up. He also isn't afraid to share his knowledge of history on almost any subject with anyone who will listen.

"What do I do in my free time? I read vigorously," he said.

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Missouri's new 47th House District includes parts of northern and western Columbia and parts of Howard, Boone and Cooper counties. It includes the communities of Harrisburg, Rocheport, Wooldridge and Higbee. Democrat John Wright and Republican Mitch Richards are seeking to represent the district.

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Richards, a Republican seeking to represent Missouri's new 47th House District, said that aside from the time he spends serving on Columbia's Citizens Police Review Board; operating his business, Show Me Languages; and fulfilling his role as a community activist, he loves to read. He concedes that might make him sound like a boring person.

That's hardly the case. Richards isn't just reading books in English. He's reading in Spanish, Italian, French, Russian and sometimes Chinese, although he says he needs to brush up on his Mandarin.

Richards' home library is stacked with these books, neatly sorted by language. In the French section, you'll find books by Alexandre Dumas, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the Spanish and Russian sections, you'll find authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez along with Russian classics by Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

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Richards likes the challenge of reading in other languages so much that he even has a Latin copy of "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" and a copy of the New Testament translated in ancient Greek.

Ask Richards about some of his books, and you'll see how much he likes to teach himself through reading. A conversation about his Russian novels, for example, morphs into an extensive description of the noun case system in Russian grammar.

Standing out at a young age

Richards' affinity for learning languages stems from a larger thirst for knowledge, particularly in history, that started around third grade.

Richards' mom, Bonnie Friebling, said he wasn't like the rest of his siblings when it came to

reading.

"All my kids except Mitch were reading sci-fi and fantasy, but Mitch read history," Friebling said.

As a kid, Richards would travel to Florida each Christmas to spend time with his grandpa. Friebling noted how Richards preferred to hang out with the adults and discuss history.

"He was very engaging and just loved to talk with the older adults," she said. "He would even be talking to the 75-year-old men about World War II experiences."

Richards' interest in public speaking and politics started to grow when he joined the debate team at his high school in Great Falls, Mont. That experience, along with his parents' appreciation for self-learning, helped Richards form strong opinions on issues at a young age.

"The biggest things my parents gave me were a love for learning and reading and self-reliance, particularly when it comes to knowledge," Richards said.

Experience abroad

What Richards knew and loved about history, he carried over into his studies in college. Richards attended the University of Montana, where he expectantly majored in history.

Richards wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his degree in history, but he studied it because he loved it.

"I don't like the premise of having to get a job with the type of degree you get," Richards said.

Following his undergraduate studies at Montana, Richards traveled and lived in parts of Europe. He developed an understanding of other cultures while living in Salamanca, Spain; Bologna, Italy; and other European cities. Building from

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his undergraduate degree in history, Richards decided to attend the University of Bologna, where he earned a master's degree in Eastern European studies.

While Richards was staying at a hostel in Paris in 2002, the country was holding a runoff election between Jean-Marie Le Pen and Jacques Chirac. Richards woke up the the day after the election to more than 40,000 people protesting in the Plaza de Republique.

"At the time I was kind of that young and naive American student," Richards said. "This was a very now and real thing happening. It made be think, 'Woah, they're also a country that has its own problems and things to deal with.'"

In 2007, Richards decided to move back to the United States. His parents had moved to Columbia in 2003, and it served as a good starting spot after traveling across Europe on and off for five years. Richards said it was experiences abroad that helped him develop a better understanding of himself and his feelings about the role of government.

"You learn a lot about not only yourself but about many other cultures living abroad," Richards said. "I looked around and realized there were a lot of great things about the U.S., but there were also a lot of trends I didn't really like."

Rethinking political affiliation

Those trends Richards mentioned became apparent to him in the years after 9/11.

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Richards said he became concerned with the "constitutional violations that were happening under the guise of the war on terror." Those include the Patriot Act and, most recently, the National Defense Authorization Act.

Richards said he hasn't always been a Republican with libertarian leanings.

"I was a Democrat in high school. I voted for Al Gore in 2000," Richards said. "Then 9/11 happened, and I'd be lying if I didn't say I came to the right, especially on foreign policy issues."

Richards felt the Republican Party "wanted to defend us more" and did a better job in foreign policy.

While Richards says he has libertarian perspectives on topics such as property rights, gun control and taxes, he emphasized that's "libertarian with a lower case 'L'" and not an affiliation with the Libertarian Party.

Community involvement

It wasn't long before Richards' itch to speak out against excessive government oversight took over. When Columbia first began to install [red-light cameras](#) in 2008, Richards felt compelled to speak up because he believed they were unconstitutional.

Here Richards met a new friend, Mark Flakne, who is the current leader of [Keep Columbia Free](#), which led opposition to the red-light cameras and to the installation of video cameras downtown.

"We became best friends almost immediately," Flakne said. "We have similar agreements politically and enjoy having friendly arguments."

Flakne said Richards' ability to remain consistent on issues that don't fit a political pattern reflects his integrity.

"It's refreshing to see someone who can cross party lines and blur stereotypical boundaries," Flakne said. "When his message is consistent — and whether you agree with him or not — you can appreciate how he stands on his principles."

The red-light camera debate however was just the beginning of Richards' involvement in local politics.

In 2010, Richards decided to run for First Ward City councilman. He was the youngest candidate on the ballot. Richards lost the election to Fred Schmidt, but considers it a learning experience.

"I got my butt kicked," Richards said.

Losing the race taught Richards about the intricacies of politics. He learned how to become a better public speaker.

"It broke me in and showed me how you have to be able to simplify some complex topics," Richards said. "I learned how to be succinct and how to communicate ideas to people in a limited amount of time."

A strong personality

Richards' reaction to the council election is typical of his personality. He isn't afraid to be honest about issues and emphasizes that he is running for office because he wants to stand up for what he believes while trying to represent people's interests.

"The silence of good men is just as much of an evil as the evil of evil men," Richards

said, paraphrasing the 18th century philosopher Edmund Burke.

Honesty and advocacy for civil liberties are things Richards hopes he can bring to the legislature.

"What really keeps me going is the idea that I'll be able to offer a voice that is often missing in politics — that is a real voice," Richards said. "There's nothing I hate more than when politicians have a slick way of responding to a question where they either don't provide a concrete answer or provide an answer to a completely different question."

At candidate forums during the past month, Richards has been very clear where he stands on issues such as health care and the economy. In an Oct. 4 League of Women Voters forum, Richards said Missourians are "overtaxed and micromanaged."

"We need to be talking about the fact government doesn't create jobs, people do," Richards said.

Richards also talked that night about how he's heard from small business owners that the Affordable Care Act will bankrupt them.

"If we expand Medicaid, which is very much the implementation of Obamacare, we're going to cost this state a lot of money," Richards said.

If there's one thing Richards hopes to have an impact on, it's the future of the Republican Party. Richards said the party has a chance to attract more youth but needs to give younger politicians like himself a chance to reach out even more to communities such as Latinos and African-Americans.

"You'd be amazed at the response you receive when you treat those communities with the respect they deserve and when they demand that the government treats them with the respect they deserve," Richards said. "If we can abide by that somehow, we'll win elections."

Supervising editor is [Scott Swafford](#).

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