

Collaboration, education keys to success, says House candidate

Marcus Brandon hopes to represent House District 60

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com

Marcus Brandon says he grew up steeped in traditions of Civil Rights legacies. That's not a rare occurrence, especially for a young person growing up around Greensboro and who later attended North Carolina A&T University.

"I've been involved with politics for as long as I've been able to walk," Brandon says. "I come from a family of Civil Rights leaders who were very involved in the movement and were very civically engaged. I was passing out fliers and knocking on doors and



Thirty-five-year-old political consultant Marcus Brandon is running to fill Earl Jones' seat in the House of Representatives.

going to community meetings since I can remember. It's always been a part of my life."

After attending college and working in the private sector, Brandon says he still enjoyed doing activism and Civil Rights work.

"I never knew you could actually get paid and work in it," he says. "I decided I needed to do something different with my skills. I had worked in the private sector doing sales and I wanted to use my skills to do something more. I packed up my bags and moved to D.C."

There, Brandon started work with NGP Software, a top Democratic technology firm. He was introduced to clients across the country and gained experience with political fundraising. Soon, he was headed back to the Carolinas, working on a Democratic campaign to defeat Republican South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford.

A few more stints in other campaigns — including President Jimmy Carter's son's campaign to unseat Republican U.S. Sen. John Ensign and work with non-profit groups like Progressive Majority and Equality Virginia — eventually landed him a job working as national finance director in Dennis Kucinich's 2008 campaign for the White House.

Brandon has since moved back to his childhood home. There, he decided to run for the state House of Representatives and defeated 10-year incumbent Rep. Earl Jones in the Democratic primary. Brandon faces Republican Lonnie Wilson on Nov. 5.

The 35-year-old political consultant says he decided to run after he realized his hometown needed a change.

"I decided I wanted to have a different conversation we've not had, particularly in my community, for a long time," Brandon says. "The

incumbent that I beat had been in office since I was five-years old — first on the city council and then as a state representative. He's a nice guy and he is one of my heroes; I worked on one of his campaigns when I was younger. But, we need to have a different conversation now."

Brandon's perspective on change and his ousting of an incumbent might at first glance conjure up images of the increasing anti-incumbent fervor analysts and pundits say is sweeping the nation. But, Brandon is no Tea Partier. He's a solid progressive, and willing to stick his neck out in service to constituents. Among his biggest concerns are jobs and education.

"We've moved beyond the politics of the sit-in movement," Brandon says. "That conversation has changed from who can sit in the restaurant to who can now afford to sit in the restaurant. That goes beyond racial lines. We need to move to a conversation that is more encompassing and representative of more people."

Making sure money is spent wisely and effectively is going to be key to building community, Brandon says: "We have to make sure that the money going to agencies is being used collaboratively — that people are maximizing their own dollars and participating with both civil organizations and local, private industry," he says.

In addition to wisely spent money on job creation, Brandon says more focus should be placed on education across the state.

"We are continuously talking about education in terms of dollars," he says. "We've been talking about the education gap since I was in kindergarten, and that gap hasn't moved. We can throw as much money as we want into education, but we are throwing money at a broken system. We can't afford to do that."

Brandon also says we can't wait to fix education. The nation, he says, ranks low on educational achievement and it is a problem

created by a "cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all" approach.

"When I knock on doors and talk to voters, I ask parents with multiple children, 'Do each of your children learn the same or differently?' and nine times out of 10, parents say, 'All of my children have different learning styles,'" he says. "What we have is all of their children taking the same tests. That's the way our state and national systems work. This type of education isn't going to work in this one household, so how is it valid for all eighth grade science and math students?"

Education, he insists, must be individualized. "We have to put education back into the hands of its stakeholders: parents, teachers and students. They are the ones who will be able to best make the decision of what is most effective."

Brandon says he's most excited about the possibility of continuing the work he's known since childhood.

"I'll get to do what I've always done, and that is fight for equal opportunity and access for all people and that includes the African-American community, of which I happen to be, and the LGBT community, of which I also happen to be," he says.

That sense of inclusion and fairness was instilled in him as a child: "I'm a descendent of the Civil Rights Movement and it's a part of my very core — the values that my nana and parents taught me and that's that everybody in this country should have access to equal opportunity."

Whether he's talking about jobs, education, housing, food stamps or equality, Brandon insists every one has a right to be seated at the table.

"We still have to fight for everyone, whether you're an LGBT youth or an African-American woman or a white male," he says. "It is all a matter of fighting for access and opportunity for all of your constituents, and I'm am very excited about being able to get into the legislature and do that." ::

COMMUNITY

Equality NC honors five Carolinians

Statewide group to bestow awards in November

Equality North Carolina has chosen their first-ever round of Equality Champions. This is the fourth year the group will hold a conference and gala, and the fourth time it will present its Legislative Leadership Award, but the group announced this year it would also start honoring community members and advocates who are engaging in LGBT community building across the state.

The group has chosen five Champions, each from five different parts of the state. The Champions are profiled below, reprinted in part from Equality North Carolina press materials.

Roberta Dunn, Charlotte

Roberta is being recognized for her outstanding leadership and work with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department on behalf of Charlotte's LGBT community. She has led the effort to open communication with CMPD officials and successfully encouraged CMPD and its chief to hold an open forum with the LGBT community. As a result of her efforts, CMPD may now also create an LGBT community liaison position.

Roberta is a transgender woman. She has been married

for 27 years and has four children. Since her retirement five years ago, she has been living her life as the person she always felt she was, a woman. She is active in the Charlotte/Mecklenburg area in several organizations including HRC, MeckPAC, and Carolina Transgender Society. Her goal in working through these organizations is to promote greater understanding and acceptance of the LGBT community and its needs.

Ellen W. Gerber, Triad

Despite her "retirement" at the end of 1991, Ellen W. "Lennie" Gerber has continued to practice law on a volunteer basis by assisting on cases, doing research, and drafting documents for various civil rights organizations including the ACLU of North Carolina, the North Carolina Gay Advocacy Legal Alliance (NCGALA), the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. That work led, in 1997, to the privilege of arguing the case of



Pulliam v. Smith to the Supreme Court of North Carolina.

From 1992 through 2001, Lennie worked extensively as a volunteer with Summit House, a community corrections program designed to keep families together. In 1994, she realized a long-term goal when, with two other attorneys, she co-founded NCGALA.

Lennie's long-time partner of 44 years and counting is Pearl Berlin.

Rev. Joe Hoffman and Noel Nickle, Western

When Noel and Joe were married, they had a religious wedding in North Carolina and a legal wedding in Vermont,

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