

## Local Youth Plunge Into Politics

by Fred Coppersmith

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There is a preconceived notion among many that students are apathetic about politics and civic involvement. But those who subscribe to this notion could be quite surprised by four Bellefonte youth involved in local politics. James Stewart and Justin Houser are both directors of the Bellefonte Area School Board. Kevin Field is the constable of Spring Township and Thomas Strouse is the auditor of Benner Township. As eighteen-year-old Stewart said, "Politics can be a very funny thing at times."

These four former Bellefonte students were all elected to local office within the last year. Stewart is a recent graduate of Bellefonte High School and now a Penn State freshman majoring in computer science. He is also beginning a two-year term as school board director.

"I think there are a lot of students who can be apathetic," Stewart said, "but then I think there are a lot of students who care a lot about politics. They may not actually try for elected positions, but they have extremely serious debates and discussions, even around the lunchroom."

Houser, a Bellefonte native, agreed. "I think that no matter what segment of the population you look at, you're going to find people who don't understand what's going on," he said. "Maybe they don't want to understand, or maybe they don't care. I think you'll find that everywhere. But I think that a lot of young people are far more interested than they're given credit for."

Houser, a freshman in Penn State's Schreyer Honors College majoring in political science, is beginning his own four-year term as a Bellefonte school board director. He and Stewart are currently the board's youngest members.

"Of course, people don't reach voting age until eighteen," Houser said, "and some people feel they can't make a difference. But what we've done shows that people can make a difference."

Far from apathetic, both Houser and Stewart believe students are perhaps simply ill-informed about local politics. If more students were aware of their eligibility for positions such as those on the school board, more students would likely seek office, they claim.

When they first decided to run, Houser said, "people were genuinely surprised that these positions existed and that so many of them go unfilled—particularly the minor township and borough offices—and that anyone who is eighteen years of age and has lived in the state and county for a year is eligible to run. People

were very surprised, and I think if more people were aware, more people would run."

"Most students don't consider it," Stewart added. "And having four of us do it all at once is definitely unusual. I would say it's an unusual case, but it's not unusual in the fact that we're serious about politics."

Despite their seriousness about their civic involvement and giving back to the local community, the question most commonly asked of all four has been, "is this a joke?"

Kevin Field recently told the Associated Press that "people often asked, 'You're so young—why are you doing this? Is this a joke?'" According to Field, "it really wasn't."

Field, a freshman psychology student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, received more than seventy-six percent of the vote over incumbent Marsha Shawver in his campaign for constable of Spring Township, southeast of Bellefonte. Of the four, Field was the only one who did not run unopposed.

"Apathy about government, especially local government, is a problem among all age groups," said fellow Bellefonte school board member Lorraine Mulfinger. "But students are not worse than any other age group. After all, there are few older adults fighting (for these) seats."

Each of the four Bellefonte students came upon their decision to run for local office in different ways and each made his decision independent of the others. Always interested in politics, Houser first served for two years as the student representative to the school board, a position he feels gave him the necessary experience and familiarity with the board's operation.

School board member Tammy Meyers has known Houser since he was in middle school and has long been impressed by the active role he has sought in the community. "(Houser's) commitment to the school board is very unique in someone his age," Meyers said.

Stewart admitted he was never much interested in politics before running for a position on the Bellefonte school board. His main interest, he said, was with the school board itself and the district.

"A lot of it was just everything coming together at the right time," Stewart said of his decision to run. "I found out that there was going to be an opening on the ballot and no one was going for the school board position. I was thinking, hey, school board, I think I could do that job. And I thought I could help out the school and the district. It was there, and I just decided I would go for it."

This is a common theme among the four: initial surprise that so many of these positions remain unfilled, followed quickly by a determination to win them. Strouse, no beginning his six-year term as a Benner Township auditor, first learned of the position in his senior-year social studies class. Interested in the idea, he decided to conduct his own research.

“What began as an interest and exploration,” he said, “turned into a determination to actually make myself part of what I was reading about. It’s something everyone can do and something that more people should consider.”

Currently a freshman majoring in international politics and economics at Penn State, Strouse said he has always had at least a mild interest in politics, but only in his senior year of high school did he have an opportunity to explore that interest. That, he said, is part of the problem and may help to explain why some students are viewed as apathetic towards politics.

Students his age, Strouse said, “must be taught earlier in their school careers about the importance of politics in their daily life. (I have) seen many other people my age who have a strong passion for politics and know they can make a difference, which is great to see.”