

Seals says it's time for a Democrat
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Dan Seals spends many long hours shaking hands and smiling.

He's on train station platforms, hob-nobbing over morning coffee and working crowds at political gatherings.

And he's talking to just about anyone who will listen. He talks about the war, tax cuts and a host of other issues.

Before the Wilmette Democrat can get 10th Congressional District voters to agree with his positions, they have to know what they are.

Name recognition and getting ideas to be taken seriously were the challenges in mounting a campaign in the 10th Congressional District against popular three-term Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk.

"It turned into a strategy, but at first, it was the only way to campaign," Seals said.

Kirk has held the seat for six years and has comfortably won re-election in his last two tries. The Democratic frustration showed in the first questions of his potential supporters.

"Can you win?"

The 35-year-old finance marketing director from Wilmette faces a seemingly uphill battle to establish the same recognition and financial support Kirk enjoys.

Seals says the first part of the battle is convincing voters why the incumbent isn't good for the job.

Born on Chicago's south side, Seals now lives in Wilmette with his wife and three daughters.

His father played for the Chicago Bears, and Seals has drawn comparisons in Democratic circles to Sen. Barack Obama, as both are African-American.

Seals has a master's degree in public policy from Johns Hopkins University, and took leave of his job as a finance marketing director for the campaign.

And though he's worked in government policy before as an intern for Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman, he says the 2004 election piqued his political interest after Democrats fared poorly in Presidential and national Congressional contests.

Through his involvement with a local Democratic organization, Seals eventually became interested in running for office and defeated Winnetka lawyer Zane Smith by a comfortable margin in the March primary.

The last Democrat to test Kirk was Lauren Beth Gash, who ran in 2000, Kirk's first victory. Seals says some voters he meets call Kirk's last two Democratic challengers "sacrificial lambs."

Gash now runs the local Democratic organization that helped recruit and teach candidates how to run a campaign.

"Whichever one grew the strongest would be the candidate strong enough to defeat Mark Kirk," Gash said.

She attributes Seals' success partly to his affinity for fund-raising.

Campaign disclosure reports in mid-October showed he had more than \$550,000 to spend.

"Those numbers add to the legitimacy," he said.

Although the amount is less than what Kirk has, it's enough to establish a television presence with ads that started several weeks before Election Day.

In those ads, and throughout the campaign, Seals' message has reflected that of Democratic challengers running across the country — trying to tie his Republican incumbent opponent to the policies of President Bush.

Seals differs with Kirk on the war in Iraq by wanting troops to pull out in a year.

The two differ on plans for immigration reform and in their backing of some of Bush's tax cuts. Seals also notes Kirk's vote to authorize government involvement in the Terri Schiavo case.

What hasn't come with some of the national strategy is the financial help fellow Democrats U.S. Rep. Melissa Bean and challenger Tammy Duckworth enjoy from the national Democratic party in the suburbs' two highest profile Congressional races.

Seals says he could see that as a slight, but understands he hadn't gone through usual party channels to become a candidate.

"Who are you?" he suggests the party might ask. "You're nobody."

"I feel that I had to prove myself," he said. "I've never been to candidate charm school."

If he loses in November, Seals suggests he might try again in two years, using fundraising power and name recognition earned to mount a stronger challenge. In the 8th Congressional District, Melissa Bean lost once to long-time Republican incumbent Phil Crane before succeeding him.

But Seals admits another run would be up to his family.

Seals has told media about how his decision to campaign hinged on whether he'd allocate family resources to politics, or remodeling his kitchen.

He actually lives just outside the 10th Congressional District, but has said he'd move in if elected.

Nov. 7, he'll find out if his next big purchase will be a new kitchen, or a new house.