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State

Kim Davis denied his marriage license. Will voters let him try to oust her?

By Will Wright

wwright@herald-leader.com

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Morehead

With the primary election just days away, Rowan County clerk candidate David Ermold walked through his campaign office and joked that the bags under his eyes have grown darker by the day.

"I noticed it in a picture I took this morning," Ermold said. "I'm like, 'Wow, they're a little bit thicker than what they were.'"

If he wins the Democratic primary Tuesday, Ermold will face Republican incumbent Kim Davis, the Rowan County woman made famous in 2015 when she denied marriage licenses to same-sex couples, [including Ermold and his partner](#).

First, the novice political candidate must survive a 4-person race for the Democratic nomination, which won't be easy.

"I think it's going to be a lot tighter than a lot of people think," he said. "The primary is the harder fight for me."

The assistant English professor at University of Pikeville faces Elwood Caudill, Jr., a four-generation Rowan County native and 20-year employee of the county's Property Valuation Administrator office; Nashia Fife, an adjunct instructor at Morehead State University and Navy veteran; and Jamey Jessee, a lifelong resident of Rowan County.

Caudill knows just how close elections can be.

In his 2014 campaign for county clerk, he lost the Democratic primary to Davis by just 23 votes. She later changed her party affiliation to Republican.

"I got so close," he said. "I wanted one more try."

The election is noteworthy for another reason, too: Ermold's fundraising levels.

Ermold has collected more than \$200,000 for this election, far more than any other candidate, according to data from the Kentucky Registry of Election Finance.

In 2014, Davis raised \$16,000 for the primary and general election combined. Caudill raised just under \$8,000 for the primary that year.

Most of Ermold's donors are from other states, records show.

"What happened in 2015 affected (these donors) personally. They could relate directly to the situation that was going on in this county," Ermold said. "They have sent their support in to show the people of our county that they care, too. They care about what happens in Rowan County."

Ermold itches his campaign as, in part, a way for the people of Rowan County to prove to the rest of the country that Davis' actions are not reflective of the county.

"Through this campaign, they will be able to send a message out to the rest of the country, to the rest of the commonwealth, of who they really are," he said. "It's the only way to bring closure to everything that has happened."



David Ermold, left, and David Moore in Morehead. They are helping to organize the Morehead Pride Festival on Saturday in downtown Morehead.

John Flavell

Caudill, too, is looking for closure, saying his election will help close a negative chapter in the county's history.

When Davis refused to issue marriage licenses to gay couples, protestors and media from around the country flocked to Morehead, a quiet university town in a mostly rural area of Eastern Kentucky.

The crowd converged at the clerk's office, in the same building and just a couple doors down from Caudill's desk in the PVA office.

Work was temporarily disrupted, but Caudill said the impacts of 2015 ran deeper.

"It's changed a lot of things in this county," he said. "The way people look at each other. The way they agree or disagree."

Caudill said he has heard from many people who feel the same way he does: "I want it to go away."

"It's just a confusing thing," Caudill said. "I want to make sure that if I win, this doesn't happen again."

A majority of Rowan County's voters are registered Democrats, but Democrats in Eastern Kentucky are often notably more conservative than those elsewhere, particularly outside the Southeast.

Even Davis was a registered Democrat until 2015.

Despite receiving heavy amounts of criticism, Davis holds a significant amount of support from some of her conservative allies, including Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin.

In a video promoting Davis' memoir, *Under God's Authority: A Kim Davis Story*, Bevin called Davis "an inspiration" and praised her willingness to stand up for her beliefs in difficult times.

Davis said she expects high voter turnout in the upcoming primary, but declined to comment further for this story.

Grant Alden, co-owner of a popular coffee shop and bookstore in Morehead, said he thinks most people in Rowan County are approaching this election as they would any other — they want to find the best person for the job.

"I don't think it's viewed here at all in the same way that the national media view it," Alden said. "From 20,000 feet it looks like a cockfight, and it's not."

Rowan County Clerk Kim Davis once denied David Ermold a marriage license. Now he wants to take her job. **Linda Blackford** | blackford@herald-leader.com

However, Alden said people's unpleasant memories of 2015 could lead them to vote against Ermold in the primary, and against Davis in the general election.

"If David Ermold wins, we have another national circus," he said. "The vast center I think is most likely to reject both of them, because we don't want the media circus again."

While the debate about Davis' actions in 2015 divided spectators from around the country, Alden said that divisiveness does not reflect how most people in Rowan County approach politics.

"We get along pretty well," he said. "We don't look for ways to divide, we look for common ground."

Fife echoed the idea that many Rowan County residents "want things to go back to the way things were, to go back to normalcy."

"I think no matter who wins the primary, there's going to be national attention," Fife said. "I'm sure if David (Ermold) wins, there's that sense of justice ... but I think regardless of who wins, I think it's still going to be a news story."

Will Wright is a corps member with Report for America, an initiative of The GroundTruth Project. Reach him at [859-270-9760](tel:859-270-9760), [@HLWright](https://twitter.com/HLWright)