

School candidate draws fire for letter

Written by Steve Ostermann
Wednesday, 17 March 2010 18:24

Challenger criticized for submitting letter to editor that he acknowledges a family member had published three years ago

A candidate for the Grafton School Board in this spring's election has come under fire for sending a letter to local newspapers that he submitted as his own but has since acknowledged was largely written three years ago by a family member for an Arizona newspaper and other publications.

Terry Maxwell, 19, a challenger in a three-person race for two board seats, said this week that the letter — which appeared in Ozaukee Press last November and discusses problems with public school systems in Wisconsin and other states — includes much of an editorial column written by his grandfather, Terrance Maxwell Sr.

The column appeared in the Arizona Range News on March 27, 2007, under the same headline used by the younger Maxwell in a letter submitted to Ozaukee Press.

"I had my grandfather's permission to use his article, and I don't see anything wrong with what I did," said Maxwell, a Grafton High School graduate and first-year college student who is making his first try at public office.

"He's a better writer than I am, and I agree with his views on education, so I used it in my letter."

To verify that he had his permission to use his grandfather's column, Maxwell presented a statement signed by Terrance Maxwell Sr.

Titled "What it means to be educated," the letter was signed "Terry G. Maxwell, Grafton School Board candidate" and contained no reference to Maxwell's grandfather.

Although it was not known at the time the letter appeared in Ozaukee Press that it included previously published material, several readers have since questioned the letter's originality.

The letter also drew criticism from Maxwell's two opponents in the School Board race, incumbents Nancy Follis and Eric Oleson. Both said they heard that Maxwell's letter may not have been his own before they were contacted by Ozaukee Press for comment.

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“If it was his grandfather’s writing, he owed it to the people to say it was,” Follis said.

“I think it raises questions about his ability to serve on the board. When you’re going to be a School Board member, you have to handle a lot of confidential material and do it with forthrightness and honesty.

“The way it came across, he made it look like he wrote it, and he didn’t.” Oleson called Maxwell’s letter “an ethical breach.”

“He signed his name to that letter, which made it appear like it was his, and that was wrong,” Oleson said.

In his letter, Maxwell substituted Wisconsin for Arizona in parts of the original column and added a paragraph about the Grafton School District. He likened his use of his grandfather’s writing in the letter to what other candidates for public office and elected officials have done.

“Do you think that President Obama or John McCain write all their own speeches?” Maxwell asked. “There’s nothing wrong with what I did, and I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.”

Maxwell said criticism of his handling of the letter “is an attempt by my fellow candidates in the race to discredit me.”

He also said he believes his criticism of teachers’ salaries and benefits and the impact teaching contracts have had on school budgets has prompted unfair attacks on his character by some Grafton district employees.

Oleson said Maxwell made himself a target for critics by not making it clear from the start that the letter contained someone else’s writing but believes it shouldn’t become a major campaign issue.

“He made a mistake, but I don’t want to get drawn into a debate on this,” Oleson said. “There are more important issues to worry about.”

The School Board election is Tuesday, April 6. The top two vote-getters in the race will win three-year terms.

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Follis is the board's longest-standing member, having served since 1992. Oleson won his first term in 2007.