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Interview: Michael Kelley in KY-4

By **Trey Pollard**

Tags: Nick Clooney, Michael Kelley, KY-4, Ken Lucas, Geoff Davis



Michael Kelley

Oldham physician Michael Kelley is the only Democratic candidate running for the 4th Congressional District seat currently held by Geoff Davis (R-Hebron). Davis handily defeated his last two well-funded Democratic opponents - former 4th District Congressman and "Blue Dog" Democrat Ken Lucas in 2006 and television personality Nick Clooney, in 2004.

Kelley, on the other hand, enters the race as a relative unknown to the previous Democratic suitors to the 4th, with none of their financial or organizational advantages.

A primary care physician in Crestwood, Kelley completed Medical School at the University of Louisville in 1993. The race is one of his first flirtations with politics.

In this interview with PolitickerKY.com, Kelley speaks of his hopes to connect to voters with a "non-traditional" campaign - it will include the candidate cycling across the district. Kelley also acknowledges the challenges of a race against an entrenched political veteran, which include Kelley's own distaste for campaign fundraising, and discusses how his medical experience could inform his work if elected.

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- \$280k for Lunsford, \$540k in self-financing
- \$461k for Northup in KY-3

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How did you end up in this race?

There are two different reasons.

One, as is true with the majority of people in the country, I am very, very dissatisfied with what has been going on in the last eight years with our leadership. Our country is headed in the wrong direction, and we need to do better, and we can do better.

That is coupled with the fact that Geoff Davis is very good at running for Congress, but I don't believe he's a gifted legislator. I don't believe he has used his position to do good for our country. And he was going to get his job back unopposed.

In a democracy, having an incumbent run unchallenged is unacceptable. But an incumbent who hasn't used his position of privilege and authority to serve properly, that's also unacceptable.

So, I decided to run because I am dissatisfied with the status quo...Rather than sitting around and grumping about it and feeling hopeless, I realized I have a Constitutional right to run for Congress. So I decided I would try and step up, and make it better.

Did you grow up having political aspirations?

I never wanted to be a politician. In fact, I don't think I want to be a politician.

Having said that, I do think I could do better than what we have in there right now for the 4th District. Not being a politician, but running for Congress is not necessarily a bad thing. People are tired of politicians and what they have done leading our country. Being someone who isn't going to be a hugely funded, big-money campaign politician: that's okay, too.

The odds of being elected against an incumbent are long. The odds of being elected against an incumbent who raises huge amounts of money when I am not going to raise huge amounts of money make it even longer.

But, even though my chances may be a couple percent, if I were to get in, I would get in without any strings attached. I wouldn't owe loyalty to anybody or any organization other than the voters and the constituents in the 4th District.

And that is exciting. Getting a Congressman in who is completely clean, who hadn't sold pieces of his integrity to get his job – that is pretty heady stuff.

You mean being a member of congress without being “a traditional politician”?

With the system we have right now, the one commonality that congressmen have is that they are all really, really good at raising money. They aren't necessarily able to do their jobs well. They aren't necessarily thoughtful, or frugal, or forward-looking. They aren't necessarily ethical. They aren't really all particularly good at being legislators. They are all really good at raising money. And that shouldn't be the standard for being a congressman.

We may have a very unacceptable political reality right now, but we have one of the best models of government in the world, as laid down by the Constitution. It gives us the right to change our system.

If you look at the Declaration of Independence, it's all about changing our system if we find it to be unacceptable.

So, we have founding documents that give us the power and the right to remake our government when we

feel like it's not serving us adequately. I think we have the duty to. We shouldn't sit back powerless and grump about the direction our country is headed in when we have the ability to change that direction.

Almost always, the candidate with the most money wins the election. The candidate with the most money is usually the person who had the least problems selling their soul to raise money and the people and corporations who are giving them large donations...are doing that because they have special interest needs. They want and need special access to our legislators.

Not surprisingly, since they are the ones that pay for our members of congress to get into office, they are the ones who have bought the loyalty of our congressman.

Understanding those obstacles, how realistic are your chances in the 4th District, and how do you circumvent these financial obstacles?

How do you overcome the overwhelming advantage of the incumbent being the incumbent? The way the system is now, regardless of whether they are gifted, or capable, or incompetent, almost always the incumbent will win reelection. That is something I can't overcome by myself.

As far as how do you overcome the \$1.2 million of fundraising that Geoff Davis has done compared to the \$15,000 of fundraising that I've done: I don't know how to overcome that.

The problem is that really, honestly, it is hard for me to work up much enthusiasm for raising hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars because the first impediment is I am unwilling to sell my integrity in order to raise large amounts of money.

I am not taking any PAC money – not that all PACs are bad – but a lot of PACs are designed to buy favor for special interests.

I am not going to take any bundled money, which is absolutely designed to buy specialized access.

The other fact is that spending hours a day dialing for dollars is currently what the most important job of a candidate is. It is hard for me to work up enthusiasm for that either. I don't want to call people and beg them for money and worry about whether accepting their large donations therefore gives them some hold over me. So, that leaves me being a more passive fundraiser.

Ultimately, that will mean that I won't raise much money.

Again, though, trying to work up enthusiasm for raising millions of dollars...when the campaign is over, there is nothing to show for it – you're not going to build an orphanage or fund a charity of some type. You'll pour it into TV advertising and it'll just evaporate.

The funny part is, honestly, I don't think I would want a Congressman who is excited about wasting hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars on a campaign, because once you get comfortable spending millions of dollars for no real tangible good, well, now maybe you are comfortable spending billions of dollars or hundreds of billions of dollars for no real tangible good.

So the idea of having a congressman who is frugal and isn't wasteful – maybe that is not a bad thing.

Unfortunately, that makes a long shot campaign even longer. But that's the reality of our system right now.

Do you have any ways you think you can connect with voters in the district, given these hurdles?

The internet now means that any question you may have interest in, all you have to do is type it into a

search engine and now it's at your fingertips. Unfortunately, that relies on folks actively going out and seeking information instead of passively absorbing it through their TV.

People are busy and people are disenfranchised; they are turned off of politics. They feel like everyone who is in office or running for office is probably a crook. So, when your choice is between one crook or another crook, why do you care?

And there is also the fact that political parties now have adopted a strategy of not just trying to motivate their own supporters, but they are also actively trying to disenfranchise their other party's supporters. The net effect of that is that the majority of voters just lose interest. They have no interest in finding out what is going on with the election or even showing up to vote.

Those folks – having a candidate who would rather hang on to his integrity than have a huge political campaign war chest, maybe that would be interesting for them.

But, there is no doubt it's an uphill battle that I am approaching the campaign from a non-traditional angle.

Will there be any kind of way you will be articulating your message – advertisements, canvassing, etc.?

I am going to be bicycling from Oldham County to Ashland, Kentucky over Memorial Day weekend. [That's] a couple of hundred miles.

Hopefully, it will get my message out, and I will be able to meet some people. And other than maybe paying for some inner tubes, it's a low-cash way of trying to introduce myself to folks.

And also, part of it is the idea that we have a health care crisis. There are a lot of different things that need to be done to address that, but one of the elements of making health care less expensive is better lifestyle choices. People are going to need to quit smoking, exercise, and watch how they eat. So [the cycling trip] kind of hits on two different themes: one, hopefully I will get to meet people in the 4th district. And two, the idea of promoting fitness is a significant part of making health care affordable.

The 4th district is an enormous place. Its 220 some-odd miles from one end to the other. Actually having a ground campaign where you have a ground campaign where you try and knock on a majority of doors is probably unrealistic.

The fact is also that I am not a millionaire and I need to have a job to support my family. I'll need to work full time in addition to running.

Obviously, Mr. Davis is receiving a government paycheck, so he is able to work full-time campaigning while he is on the public dole, and I don't have that luxury.

What about your interaction with the party and other candidates? Will they be any help?

I'm not expecting help on a federal level or from the national party.

I doubt the state party will have the funds and resources to devote to my campaign. I'm hoping that they can help out with grassroots, which is really what I am most interested in, anyway.

I'm hoping that after many years of the Democrats in the 4th district having difficulty being enthusiastic about the federal races, that this will help reinvigorate the grassroots and give them something to motivate them to get more involved.

Turning back to what you mentioned about your cycling tour – how realistic do you think a universal health care system is?

I think the most significant problem with our system right now is that [health care] costs too much money. Were you able to make it decrease by 30 percent or 50 percent - which would bring it in line with most developed countries' health care expenditures - a significant portion of the uninsured would now be able to afford health care. You might have to expand the safety net to get the last 20 million or so uninsured... but certainly you could get a big chunk of the uninsured if you could just make it more affordable.

So how do you go about making it more affordable?

Right now, it's an incredibly wasteful system. It's wasteful because there is a complete disconnect. People who are going in to get health care have their premiums taken out of their paycheck, so they don't necessarily feel that premium coming out of their paycheck because it isn't money in their pockets. It isn't money they have to write a check for.

The way they get the best value for their money is they want the most expensive treatments they can get instead of the least-expensive, high-quality treatments, because often times the money out of their pocket isn't any different one way or the other.

The physicians also have no real reason to pinch pennies. It's not their money and they want to make their patients happy, as well as healthy.

The insurance companies have tried to institute cost-saving measures, but it is hard to motivate patients and the doctors to take care of the money that is essentially the managed care companies'.

We have to make it so the patient chooses the best treatment at the lowest cost – not the one that just happens to be the lowest out of pocket for the individual even though its more expensive.

The alternative is rationing. That's what England has. It's not a bad system, but its rationing, nonetheless... Overall, England gets equal or possibly better health care at a much lower price, but they also sacrifice choice. If we want to bring a system like that into America, that's okay – it's going to be rationed, so you can't claim it's going to be anything other than that.

I am afraid the "fix" that is coming is going to be driven by big money. It's going to be driven by managed care - that has deep pockets and lots of money to contribute to campaigns - and pharmaceutical companies.

We will have lots of special interests driving our system not necessarily for the benefit of patients, but the benefit of their corporations.

And the people who are going to try and figure it out are predominately going to be lawyers. No knock on lawyers, but that is who serves us in Congress, and they don't have first-hand knowledge of how the system works.

I am afraid we are going to have a system that is more bureaucratic, has less choice and ultimately doesn't save us any expense anyway. [That system] will be designed very poorly because of big money, and because it won't actually involve the folks that know the most about how the system works.

And that's part of my interest in running, because I think I could help make our healthcare system better and less expensive.

What are some of the other parts of your platform?

One is figuring out a way to responsibly end the Iraq war, or at least our part in the Iraq war.

Also, we need campaign finance reform – not just the hokey reform we have now, but actually publicly financed campaigns. You would have the potential to have candidates get into office who had not sold their souls for campaign contributions.

[This system] would be voluntary, but in the states where it has been tried, like Arizona, it has been quite successful.

Instead of having races that are unopposed or essentially unopposed, you have multiple candidates who jump in the race. Instead of a re-election rate for incumbents in the mid 90s, you have 20 percent of the challengers get into office. So you have turnover and you have fewer career politicians. And once they are in, they are beholden to the voter and the taxpayer and not the special interest.

To my mind, that's very exciting.

The only hope of having a government that actually serves the people instead of serving special interests is publicly financed campaigns, or at least the option of publicly financed campaigns.

That is they keystone. It's not that our problems now are too difficult to figure out, its finding honest politicians who don't have strings attached is too difficult under our current system.

If we have publicly financed campaigns, we have some chance of solving the other problems that our country faces because we'll have honest, ethical politicians. Saying "honest, ethical politicians" shouldn't provoke a snicker – it should just be a given. Then you'll get people in there who have a sense of duty to their country instead of whatever the politicians have that are in there now.

Is there anything else you want to share about your campaign?

As a non-politician, I would hope that by the end of this campaign, if nothing else, I will have gotten more people who have not taken an interest in politics, and maybe have been turned off to politics, maybe I will get them to participate in our system again.

What I would truly love is to convey the idea that with our constitution, we have the right to run for office – you don't have to be a millionaire, you don't have to have political connections. You have to be a citizen, you have to be above a certain age, and you have to be able to work through the reams of bureaucratic paperwork. But, you can go out and run for office just because you think you could do better.

You don't have to be scared off by not having personal millions and you don't have to be scared off by the current reality that you have to raise millions to have a high chance of winning. You can be a normal person and run for office and potentially make a difference.

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-The Herald-Leader, 4/21

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