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The education of Emily Walton



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Emily Walton used her online presence and tapped her community involvement to win a seat on the College of Western Idaho board. Her opponents were completely absent from social media and similar platforms.

Newly elected to
College of Western
Idaho board, she
knows the true
power of learning

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The newest member of the College of Western Idaho board doesn't have a high school diploma.

Emily Walton didn't get her GED certificate or decide to go to college until her late 20s. But when she graduated from Boise State University with honors in 2012, she was commencement speaker.

"From a GED to this magnificent speech you just heard," BSU President Bob Kustra said that day, "is an incredible journey."

In her first run for elective office, Walton won 58 percent of the vote, beating the incumbent CWI board member as well as a seven-term legislator in Tuesday's election. She'll take office next month.

"Higher education is something I care

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about," said Walton, now 35. "It seemed like a natural fit."

She won with no campaign mailings and no campaign signs. "Campaign signs don't vote," she said.

What she did have was a high-visibility presence online. Neither incumbent Gordon Browning nor Rep. Darrell Bolz, R-Caldwell, had a campaign website, Facebook page or Twitter account. Walton had all — and more.

She posted the video of her commencement speech, her position on issues and her personal story, her email address and phone number. She kept the campaign dialogue going on Facebook and Twitter.

Social media helped get

her message out, Walton said, but she thinks it was her message that attracted voters.

"I weave my own personal story into that and I think that makes a difference to people," she said.

PERSONAL STORY

Walton grew up on a potato farm in Declo.

"I was 'home-schooled,'" she said. "We read a lot but we did not get a real education. I think they wanted us to. They had good intentions, but when you have 10 kids..."

Walton left home at 17 and worked a variety of jobs in California and Idaho. Employers were surprised to learn she did not have a diploma. She worked five years as operations supervisor at the Boise Centre. She started asking herself, "Why

do I think I am not good enough to go to college?"

An idea started to gel, but she had no idea what to do. She met with a Boise State counselor, who helped her map out a plan and told her she needed a GED.

She got it. She was 28 years old. She enrolled at BSU and her life changed — she had access to knowledge, opportunities, connections, insight. She served on numerous committees; she founded the Idaho Civic Engagement Project, a nonpartisan nonprofit that involves younger voters in civic issues. She became the school's student lobbyist, advocating for students before the Legislature, State Board of Education and governor. She was Idaho Business Review Woman of the Year in 2013, and Boise Young Professional of the

Year in 2014.

Walton, who lives on the Boise Bench with her husband, Adam Rush, works as a communication and campaign consultant.

Following news that a judge had overturned Idaho's gay marriage ban last spring, Walton wanted to be there and celebrate what she considered a historic moment. She bought a cake and created a Facebook page announcing a celebration at the Ada County Courthouse. Several hundred people showed up, although the court issued a stay on the ruling. After a couple of false starts, that celebration finally took place last month.

Walton supports the Add the Words campaign and urges lawmakers to hold a hearing.

"We give hearings to people who want to bring back the gold standard," she said. "It is just bigotry."

Walton's advocacy is in part the result of another of life's lessons. As a 16-year-old in 1994, Walton traveled the state with her uncle drumming up support for a proposition to limit gay rights.

"I've gone on a personal journey that I think a lot of Idahoans who are raised in very conservative households go on," Walton told the Statesman earlier this year. "And they need that first friend that's a gay person, and they realize, you know, discriminating against people who are gay just isn't a part of our value set."

ABOUT CWI

Voters in Ada and Canyon counties created the College of Western Idaho in 2007 as a comprehensive community college. The school offers more than 60 professional-technical and transfer-degree programs, along with basic academic skills to help prepare for a GED and dual credits for high school students.

It has its administration building in Nampa and offers instruction at locations throughout the Treasure Valley.

CWI began offering classes in 2009 with about 1,200 enrolled students. By fall 2013, enrollment had increased to nearly 20,000.

A new cause for Walton

A family experience has led Emily Walton to embrace a new issue: She wants the Idaho Legislature to prevent parents from withholding medical care from children for religious, political or other reasons.

Walton's sister, Mariah, did not receive medical care as a child because of her parents' anti-government political and social views.

Mariah was often ill as a child. "They would say, 'You need to be stronger. Here are some herbal remedies. Go lie down,'" Walton said.

At age 18, Mariah went to a doctor. The doctor found a hole in her heart.

"If found early it can be fixed," Walton said. "It was totally preventable."

Now her sister needs a lung transplant, a rare, risky and costly procedure.

"She suffered for so long. She wasn't helped and she should have been," Walton said. "They shortened her life significantly and they are not going to get into trouble for this."

She still loves her parents, she said, but thinks the law should address such cases.

Walton is caring for her sister, who lives with her. This summer her sister flew by air ambulance to Salt Lake City following complications from a blood transfusion. She spent three weeks in intensive care.

"It was terrifying. The fact she got out was amazing," Walton said.

Walton hopes to see legislation introduced requiring parents to get medical care for their children.

"There are other kids this is happening to," she said. "You would never let an adult be treated that way. Just because you are under 18, you get to suffer or die?"

WINNING THE CWI RACE

Opponents Browning and Bolz were surprised. Browning expected to win on "name recognition" and did not campaign, he said.

"I am there to serve, not to earn money. It is a nonpaying job. It is a community service," he said.

"If she wants it bad enough to campaign, that is fine."

Bolz, the Caldwell Repub-

lican legislator, knew winning Ada County would be a challenge, but he expected to win his home county, where he's known for his civic and political activities.

A retired University of Idaho Extension professor, he served on a Treasure Valley Community College advisory committee and a College of Western Idaho farm management education

committee. But he lost in Canyon County, too.

Walton hauled in 44 percent of the Canyon County vote. Bolz received 36 percent, Browning 21 percent.

"I did not campaign as hard as I could have. I had a lot of people say, 'Do not worry about it. You are a shoo-in because of what you've done,'" Bolz said.

Walton, too, was surprised by her showing in Canyon County. "I thought I would lose Canyon County, so I didn't really work that hard out there," she said.

Her campaign strategy was talking and drawing support from the numerous civic, education and social organizations with which she has been involved. Her seven sisters and her mom made phone calls.

The fact that the CWI trustee race was nonpartisan worked to her benefit.

"This was a race where I did not have an R or a D next to my name," Walton said. "People who want to vote on that particular race have to educate themselves a little more."

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WEBSITE Idaho

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Read the Statesman's previous story about her.