

Going Against Tribe: Mobile Democrat goes rogue

by Jodie Cain Smith

I've voted for a Republican. Once. I'm about to vote for a Republican again.

So, what, in this age of tribalism when American voters choose a side and pledge their undying loyalty, would make me turn toward the other team? Not what, but *who*.

In November, when I cast my vote for Alabama House of Representatives District 97, my vote will go to Stephen McNair, Republican candidate for House Seat 97.

"Now, hold on, self-proclaimed feminist and proud tree-hugger, you're voting for the man?" you might question. "Why would you do that?" you ask in disbelief. The answer is simple: District 97 needs someone who knows what to fight for, when to fight, and how to fight. I want someone who is ready to fight tooth and nail for Mobile, and that someone is Stephen McNair.

Stephen McNair knows how special District 97 is. He knows our potential. He was raised here, and is a proud graduate of Murphy High School, but don't vote for him because you want the cannon painted blue and white. Vote for him because he has the stamina to fight the long fights.

In 2009, Stephen completed the 2,181 mile-long Appalachian Trail including hiking a 700-mile stretch then a 1,000-mile stretch. To do this, he and his wife Lila averaged 20 miles a day. Once a week, the pair entered small, remote towns to repair gear and restock supplies. Then, with sore legs and tired backs, they marched onward. This is the determination I want for us in Montgomery. Rest on your laurels when the job is done, legislators, but not a mile or even an inch sooner.

I want someone with empathy in Montgomery fighting for District 97. Someone who knows our district is a melting pot of socio-economic circumstances, but remembers we all deserve opportunity to thrive.

In 2005, as Hurricane Katrina barreled toward the Gulf Coast, Stephen McNair was a student at Tulane University. He lost everything in the storm. With no money, no job, and plenty of student debt, he turned to FEMA and the Red Cross for food, clothing, and shelter. When I asked what that experience taught him, he answered, "When you're in a Red Cross shelter waiting on your food card so you can eat, you will never look at people the same who need help."

After working in Arkansas for a few months to regain financial footing, Stephen returned to New Orleans, ready to help rebuild his second home. He and Lila stayed for five years. True empathy and perseverance are rare qualities, but Stephen McNair has an abundance of both.

As I consider the problems we have in our district – failing public schools, crime, and inadequate infrastructure – I am tempted to wring my hands, lament over the job at hand being too tough, too daunting. But, then I think, “No. Mobile deserves better than hand wringing and lamenting.” Doing nothing has not moved us any closer to where we need to be.

We deserve someone who will fight for what is ours and what should be ours. We deserve a representative who will demand that Mobile no longer play second and third fiddle to Birmingham and Huntsville. We deserve someone who will fight the long fight, the hard fight, the unpopular fight. Stephen McNair is the person for that job.

And, if I must abandon my tribe to get us there, so be it.