

Editorial

Our View: Civics investment

Nethercutt Fellows project should become a model

January 26, 2008

Former Congressman George Nethercutt's father was an attorney, and Nethercutt often reminisces about Spokane lawyers, circa 1950s, whose word was their bond. Nethercutt, who served 10 years representing the 5th District of Washington, believes that Congress needs elected leaders with the values of honesty and integrity he saw growing up.

Nethercutt lives in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., now but still does some legal work in Spokane. He was in town recently to announce the Nethercutt Fellows program. College students from the Spokane area will be chosen for all-expense-paid, two-week trips to the nation's capital, where they'll see how government works from the inside out. Nethercutt will jump-start the program with \$230,000 he has left over from his unsuccessful 2004 run for the U.S. Senate.

Nethercutt hopes someday there will be Nethercutt Fellows from all over the country doing the two-week stint, along with a course of college study in civics. "Not enough good people are out there running for office," he said. "My hope is this will spur that interest."

Ideally, Nethercutt's use of leftover campaign funds would become the standard. Rather than dishing out leftover money to partisan politics, thereby feeding the cynicism of the public, those leaving office would use the money to nurture a new generation of public servants.

The students who venture to Capitol Hill need to hear some truths about elected office. Constituents want decisions made in black and white, while members of Congress get things done in the gray areas. When Nethercutt ran against longtime speaker Tom Foley in 1994, he promised to serve only three terms. At the end of those three terms, Nethercutt changed his mind and ran again.

The elected officials the students meet should talk about the noble-calling aspects of public office, yes, but they should also be honest about the ego required to run for office and remain there, the relentless requirement to court media attention and the constituent demands that can become so overwhelming that members of Congress sometimes sneak out the back doors of their congressional offices.

Honesty and integrity can be modeled, as Nethercutt discovered as a young person growing up in Spokane. May the fellows who bear his name figure out how to get more of both values back to Washington, D.C.

Using campaign funds

What candidates can do with leftover federal campaign funds:

- Give the money to a charity from which the candidate doesn't earn a salary.
- Make unlimited transfers to party committees or to the candidate's committee for another federal office.
- Contribute up to \$2,000 to another federal candidate's campaign committee.
- Contribute money to state and local candidates, subject to state and local law.
- Transfer money to the candidate's state committees if state law allows.
- Refund the money to donors.

Source: Center for Responsive Politics