

Representing Calhoun

by Charles Oliver

Tom Graves recalls the events more than 11 yearss ago that led his family to Gordon County.

"We were going to Chatsworth for a picnic, and as we were driving up 411, we saw a sign that said 'House for sale. With land.' We had always dreamed of moving back to the country. It seemed that God was just directing us to that spot. We talked to the owners of the property and acquired it and moved there and started our family," he said.

Graves, 39, lives in Ranger with his wife, Julie, who teaches at Red Bud Elementary, and their children, JoAnn, 10, John, 9, and Janey, 6, when he isn't representing state House of Representatives District 12 In Atlanta. The district, which includes parts of Bartow, Gordon and Pickens counties. Graves has announced he is running for the U.S. House of Representatives, to represent Georgia's 9th Congressional District.

"I grew up in a single-wide trailer on a gravel road in a very rural area of Bartow County. My mom and dad loved me dearly and encouraged me to dream big," he said. "I was the first in my family to graduate from college."

Graves, who owns multifamily rental property as well as retail space, earned a bachelor of business administration in finance from the University of Georgia. He says business was something that always fascinated him.



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"I always enjoyed mathematics, and I enjoyed business. I was an entrepreneurial minded person," he said.

Graves says he was also interested in politics from a very early age.

"As a teenager in the 1980s, Ronald

Reagan was a very important figure in my life," he said. That interest was furthered by his reading over the years.

"I read a lot of historical books," he said. "Right now, I'm reading (U.S. Sen.) Tom Coburn's book 'Breach of Trust,'

which looks at what happened in Congress during the 1990s."

Over the years, Graves served as a member of the Gordon County Board of Elections and was active in the Calhoun-Gordon County Chamber of Commerce. But he says his real involvement in politics started in 2001.

"I was always interested in politics, but I had never been politically active until 2001. There was an issue that arose with an abortion clinic that was attempting to move into Calhoun," he said. "My wife and I became engaged with Georgia Right to Life, and Julie became the founder and president of the Gordon County Right to Life chapter."

The clinic did not open, but the experience was a life-changing one for Graves.

"I saw how much difference someone could make by getting involved. I had been involved a little bit before that with the local Republican Party, but that really raised my awareness of the need to be engaged with the process," he said.

In 2002, he decided to make his first run for elected office for the state House of Representatives.

"There was a lot going on at that time in Georgia, excessive spending. I wanted to be part of bringing common sense business solutions to some of the issues facing Georgia at the time," he said.

It was a heady time for Republicans, who captured the governor's mansion and the state Senate for the first time since Reconstruction. But while the Republicans picked up seats in the House of Representatives, the Democrats retained control, and Graves found himself in the minority.

"It taught me to learn the process. In order to be effective, to make any change, you have to be a student of process. I learned how to introduce legislation, how to amend legislation, how to get others to help with legislation, how to work with others. I've seen it from both sides," said Graves, who is now part of a solid GOP majority in the House.

Graves says the General Assembly "is filled with a lot of very good people."

But that doesn't mean they agree on everything, and he says dealing with fellow legislators on a daily basis has helped him better understand some of their concerns and viewpoints.

"You understand other people's view. You don't compromise principles," he said. "But it's OK to compromise your preferences, and if you can draw that line clearly, you'll be effective in representing your constituency but also be able to be somebody who doesn't just say 'No, no, no.' It's very easy to say no. I'm a solution oriented person. I may disagree with someone, but I won't disagree without offering an alternative."

Earlier this year, Graves was named Legislator of the Year by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a nonpartisan group of lawmakers from across the nation, for his efforts to help the private sector create jobs through tax cuts and other incentives.

But Graves says his biggest accomplishment is his family.

"What I'm most proud of is that I have a wife and three children who are proud of my accomplishments and the stances I've taken. My goal is to make my constituents proud, and most importantly to make my family proud, of how I represent them as a father and a husband," he said.

Lawmakers this year had to cut the state budget by almost \$3 billion, and Graves says the budget will continue to be a thorny issue in 2010.

"I don't know that it will be as difficult as it was this year. I think we've been through the difficult years of the budget," he said. "I'm really proud of how everyone has come together and dealt with the budget and realized that raising taxes is the wrong thing to do. When our revenue is down, so is the income of the average household, and there's no reason to raise the tax burden. It will be difficult but not nearly as difficult as this year."

Graves says the General Assembly will also have to look at ways to boost economic growth.

"Job creation is one of the top issues we have to focus on, especially in Northwest Georgia. When the private sector can create and sustain jobs,

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everyone benefits," he said.

Graves is preparing to wind up his time in the state House. He hopes to take fellow Republican Nathan Deal's place as the 9th Congressional District member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Deal is stepping down to run for governor.

"I'm pleased he has chosen to enter his name as a candidate. I think he'll make a great candidate," Graves said of Deal.

"Julie and I and the family had to determine where can we best serve Northwest Georgia. Given the conditions in the federal government right now, and the direction we are going, we believe our best service to North Georgia is going to Washington and being a strong conservative advocate for conservative legislation," he said. **CM**

Contributed photo

Graves received the Legislator of the Year Award from the American Legislative Exchange Council.

