



JERRY KONCZAL

Mike Wiles at his "office," the Cup O' Joe in German Village.

The Wiles way

Mike Wiles, a perennial failed candidate, joined the Columbus school board by a fluke. But after two years, he's starting to make his (unorthodox) mark.

BY NICOLE
KRAFT

Even before Mike Wiles decided to make his third run for the Columbus school board, he was thinking maybe enough is enough. He had lost his last two attempts, as well as a 25th District state rep bid and five tries at a school board appointment. And his wife was tired of the constant campaigning and then the melancholy that followed each defeat.

Wiles also realized that the package he offered was not that appealing to voters. A South High School dropout, he had earned a GED before joining—and going AWOL from—the Navy. The truck-driving Wiles was better known for his Hawaiian shirts, waist-length silvery braid and nearly toothless smile (just three bottom teeth) rather than his civic activism and progressive views on how to change Columbus City Schools.

But Wiles thought he still had something to offer the city's school district. Perhaps this time voters would look past his appearance to hear his views on improving schools and give him the seat he had long coveted.

He was half right.

What finally got Wiles elected on Nov. 3, 2009, was neither his beliefs nor his choice of shirts. It was, instead, his ability to obtain the 300 valid signatures required for a nominating petition—a feat that a trio of his competitors failed to accomplish, leaving Wiles as one of just three candidates on the ballot for four open seats.

Now, two years later, it would seem easy to dismiss Wiles as an accidental school board member who is only around until a more qualified candidate comes along during the next election. But a funny thing has happened during his stint at the board table: The ultimate outsider is starting to earn some respect, aligning himself with Stephanie Groce, the board's strongest critic of the district administration. And with Groce not seeking reelection this November, Wiles most likely will take over as the public voice of dissent on the board.

"I know there are those who say I lucked into it," says Wiles, sitting at his "office"—the Cup O' Joe on Third Street in German Village. "I say it's divine intervention. A lot of people talk better than me. They can dazzle you with numbers. But they couldn't count to 300. People who say I don't belong here, I remind them... there are people with big degrees who are as stupid as hell. People think because I'm a high school dropout I'm an idiot, and I say, 'No, you are, because you think education equals intelligence.'"

Wiles has long been a man with a plan. His calculations, however, always seemed to be a bit off. As a high school student, Wiles's interest in medicine led him to plot a future at the Ohio State University med-

ical school, where he would study forensic pathology and become Franklin County coroner by age 45. The glitch: He dropped out of high school and OSU's med school doesn't admit students with only a GED.

So Wiles followed his father and grandfather into the military, thinking (a bit irrationally, he admits now) he could turn Navy Medical Corps training and GI benefits—as well as a hoped for Congressional Medal of Honor, he adds—to pursue his medical goals another way. The challenge: Wiles didn't much like authority. Mousing off to the wrong superior officer got him sent to jail, and then he erroneously believed he could walk away from the Navy before his tour was up. That AWOL resulted in Wiles earning an undesirable discharge and the loss of all military benefits.

After a stint in security, he started to drive trucks in the 1980s and never left the wheel, now delivering PODS storage units. He raised his three kids not far from the south-side neighborhood where he grew up, and he sought to be a more involved father than his own, who Wiles says spent time in different prisons. By 1993, he responded to a lack of parental interest at his oldest son's high school by starting the South High School Booster Club and leading the PTO. He also got a reputation for

his no-nonsense, I-don't-care-who-I- defend-if-I-get-things-done attitude.

His involvement soon spread outside his neighborhood as he served on the Columbus school district's Facilities Master Planning Committee and as president of the Council of South Side Organizations. At one point, Wiles was told by former school board president Mark Hatch, "We're going to make a candidate out of you yet." Wiles said no. "I said, 'I have no desire. Do what you are supposed to do, and I'll go away,'" he recalls.

But a stretch of perceived unfulfilled promises by elected officials left Wiles frustrated enough to run.

A Republican, Wiles met in 2004 with the Franklin County Central Committee for an endorsement, and he chuckles as he recalls being asked the standard questions all candidates face about past actions that might hinder electability: imprisonment, financial hardship, authority issues.

Wiles answered "yes" to every one.

"I've got it all," he says. "I've been bankrupt, been in jail, went AWOL from the military and have been fired from about 12 different jobs. The difference is, all my stuff is out there. I got no secrets. When people have all their ducks in a row, they are compliant. They do what they're told. I move to

the beat of a different drum. I don't do what people tell me to—I do what I think is right."

He earned the GOP committee's support and endorsement.

"Mike is unlike anyone else you will see in public office," says committee chairman Brad Sinnott. "He is a man with a great commitment to improving Columbus public schools. He wanted to make a difference in his community through service on the school board, and that was his only agenda. That won us over."

"There is no doubt Mike doesn't fit the Republican stereotype," Sinnott adds. "He doesn't fit the stereotype of any elected official in a major city. At the same time, he is real-world proof that you don't have to come from a particular mold in order to serve a community well."

That is not to say the Republicans loved what they saw. GOP political consultants suggested a few changes to their candidate—cut your hair, wear long pants and put in your dentures. Wiles, pun intended, wasn't biting. "I told them, 'If I do all those things, then I've already changed,'" he says.

And Wiles's unwillingness to compromise his values is what makes him such an important member of the board, Groce says.

Groce, who has been the board's most



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controversial and polarizing figure because of her frequent—and often isolating—challenges to superintendent Gene Harris, has enjoyed an ally in Wiles on many votes. She insists, however, that Wiles is his own man.

"I remember the first time I met Mike. I told him, 'I'm not fooled by your rough or scruffy appearance, and no one else should be either,'" she says. "He is smart, he knows the issues and he has . . . the drive to get things done. He is in it for all the right reasons. He wants our schools to improve."

Wiles's drive has led him to fight against the superintendent's cancellation of COTA bus passes for Columbus high schoolers and to oppose a three-year teacher agreement that would have allowed the district to operate in the red for the final year. He successfully petitioned to make it mandatory for students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance every school day, citing it as a civics lesson and also a sign the board can make its own policies—not simply rubber-stamp suggestions from Harris.

He even is starting to convert critics.

Linda Henry, who often encountered Wiles in their parallel paths as south-side activists, said in a 2009 *Dispatch* story that she found his appearance and approach so embarrassing that, "Before I would vote for

him to sit on the school board, I would elect a crack head." But she recently gave him credit for his willingness to challenge Harris and speak for residents who often feel they have no voice.

"He stands his ground for what he feels is right on the school board, and you don't see that too often," Henry says. "If he can continue the work that he has been doing, more power to him. He's not just sitting back and smiling at meetings. He is actually doing something."

That doesn't mean everyone is enamored with his style. School board president Carol Perkins has found Wiles on the opposite side of many board votes and issues, and when asked for an example of a time they disagreed, Perkins could only say with a sigh, "There are too many to count."

She admits his directness can be a challenge. "Mike is really focused on what he is feeling or thinking about on particular issues, and he's not subtle," Perkins says. "He is very blunt. He, like everyone on the board, is provided the opportunity to share his ideas and issues, and then we take it to a vote. Some people just have their own way of doing things."

"Mike is very passionate about the district," she adds. "He, as well as others, genuinely cares about our students and our ed-

ucation system. His method or way of doing things might be a little different, but I am very confident he is concerned about the business of the district."

One of his campaign promises was to create area education commissions to advise the board (patterned after the neighborhood ones that work with Columbus City Council). It has yet to gain any traction, but he vows to use the next two years before his term ends to try to push it through—or beyond, if he runs and wins in 2013 (preferably, in his eyes, not by a fluke). Groce says he has more than earned that opportunity.

"The fact is, performance is more important than appearance," says Groce. "Anyone in a suit can shake your hand and tell you what you want to hear, but not get anything done. That's not what you want on your school board. You want someone who will work for our families and kids, who will fight for them. That is Mike."

"He is the accidental school board member," she says. "Thank heaven for that." ■

Nicole Kraft, who teaches journalism and social media at Ohio State University, is a freelance writer.



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