

Concord kids travel the state meeting presidential candidates

By SUSAN DOUCET / Monitor staff

Like many New Hampshire residents, Gregory and Annabelle Watson are methodically attending the campaign events of as many presidential candidates as they can. They check campaign schedules, research the candidates's history and policies, and arrive at events prepared with articulate, detailed questions.

As they wind through the Democrats and Republicans who stop in the state, the Concord residents are winnowing down their list of who they would cast a ballot for in the primary – if only they could vote.

Annabelle is 12, Gregory 10.

“You get to see other sides of the candidates as a kid (that) an adult might not see, which is also very interesting because it makes it easier to see where they're actually coming from and whether they're a good person or not,” Annabelle said.

She and her brother are taking an active role in the first-in-the-nation primary through an ongoing homeschool project that requires them to learn about the candidates as they come through the state.

“It's hard to teach,” said Miriam Watson. “It's hard to teach politics without really experiencing it.”

Miriam, the mother of Annabelle and Gregory, is also their teacher. She homeschools Annabelle, a seventh-grade student, and Gregory, a fifth-grade student, weaving a first-hand political experience into this year's curriculum. Once an influx of presidential hopefuls arrived in the Granite State this year, Miriam and her husband, Bill, decided they wanted their kids to learn from the primary process happening close to home.

“It started, somehow over the summer, seeing the different candidates and some of their extreme beliefs. I thought, ‘well how would I be if my kids came home and supported some of these candidates?’” she said. “So I thought, here we've got this opportunity where we've got an open election, we're going to hear a lot of very different ideals and very different things, and it would be a great way to support what we do in our homeschool curriculum, but also to let them know that they can formulate their own opinions, they don't have to regurgitate mine or my husband's.”

The project began as a civics lesson, she said, but has evolved into a multi-faceted learning experience, encompassing political science, writing and research, and even some science and math.

So far, they've met three Democrats and nine Republicans, recording it all on their blog, campaignwatch2016.wordpress.com. Most recently, they met former Maryland governor Martin O'Malley, a Democrat who spent Thursday and Friday touring the state.

"You're our 12th," Annabelle told O'Malley to applause from the audience at NHTI in Concord on Friday, before launching into her question: "In Baltimore, you created a program called CitiStat that keeps track of phone records and past crimes. When you became governor of Maryland, you used the same program statewide. If you were to be elected president, would you attempt to implement CitiStat for the whole country?"

Without hesitation, O'Malley said yes.

"I'm looking forward to bringing FedStat, Annabelle, to a White House near you," he said. The program created when he was mayor of Baltimore measures the outputs of government, not just the inputs, he said.

Gregory inquired about an issue that many Americans have recently been analyzing: gun control.

O'Malley, who supports the expansion of gun control, complimented Gregory on his subject.

"That's the sort of question that reporters design, Gregory, after years of experience. So you're right on to it," he said.

Climate change – a priority for O'Malley – is also one of Gregory's top priorities when analyzing candidates.

"Because I really like penguins," Gregory explained. "I know that in this century, nothing will be the same if global warming takes over, and I just don't want that."

Annabelle and Gregory's interaction with O'Malley was a positive one, but not all of their candidate encounters have gone as well. Neither of them is a fan of Ohio Gov. John Kasich, who they met last month.

"I didn't like Senator Kasich because he underestimated my abilities, and that didn't make me feel good. Also, he only answered half of my question," Gregory wrote on the blog.

"How a candidate responds to a child versus how they would respond to an adult, that's very telling about their character," Miriam said.

And former Florida governor Jeb Bush is not likely to find support from Annabelle or Gregory.

“He seems like a pile of firewood just waiting for a match, and that’s not the type of person I would want as president,” Annabelle wrote.

Former New York governor George Pataki, though, has support from both Annabelle and Gregory as of now.

“He’s my new favorite,” Annabelle said, though she also likes Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. “I liked what Bernie had to say. I’m not sure if he’s actually someone I would vote for though, cause he doesn’t seem like he knows how to pay for it all.”

The Watsons met Pataki at the Lebanon Diner on Oct. 6.

O’Malley, though he didn’t top Pataki, made both of their short lists.

“He also seemed like a very nice person,” Gregory wrote on the blog. “I think that we really need a nice person for president.”

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