

Griffith calls for universal health care

State Senate candidate enjoys campaign trail: No crowd is too small

By **CHALLEN STEPHENS**

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Starting last year, Parker Griffith draped himself over the political meetings and community gatherings of northern Madison County.

Shaking hands with Huntsville police officers at a memorial service. Helping citizens at an Alabama A&M University forum prepare a list of covenants to improve black neighborhoods. Hosting a Christmas get-together for the Daughters of the American Revolution.

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Always pitching universal health care. To retirees. To northeast Huntsville homeowners. To PTA parents. To all who would listen.

Blue Cross/Blue Shield has a monopoly on health insurance in Alabama, he said, and this state can change that by following Massachusetts in offering guaranteed coverage and, therefore, better preventive care for all residents.

A retired cancer specialist and businessman who ran for Huntsville mayor two years ago, Griffith now hopes to represent District 7, which includes much of Huntsville and some parts of northern Madison County, in the state Senate. To do that, he first has to beat businessman Phil Dotts in the Democratic primary on Tuesday.

Cheryl Baswell-Guthrie, a local lawyer, is the lone Republican candidate in the November general election. Democrat-

ic state Sen. Jeff Enfinger is not seeking re-election.

Alabama, Griffith said, should protect uninsured workers from the bankruptcy and missed work of a simple broken arm. His plan calls for tax credits for employers that offer insurance and a bare-bones health insurance package for all uninsured workers.

"I think that's something we can do," Griffith said. He says it often and is prepared to shower the listener with figures about the number of uninsured and the cost of emergency room visits.

"We're selling something that the Legislature is probably going to enjoy selling," he said recently.

But for Griffith, who began campaigning months ahead of Dotts, no crowd is too small.

"I raised my family here," he explained to six members of an adult education class at Northwoods homes. "And I ran for mayor, but I did not make it. I enjoyed being among the people."

Even there among a small audience of adult education

students, all of whom are black, he was comfortable talking about tough issues of race and class and the growing gap in wealth. He spoke about high school dropouts. "They're smart children. There is nothing wrong with their brains," he said, taking a medical perspective, as he often does.

But kids become distracted by sex by middle school, he said. If they aren't reading on grade level at that point, Griffith said, they never will.

He would offer at-risk students an extra year of study before first grade. He said teachers can make predictions of which tiny children will be successful based on whether their mothers graduated from high school and whether they are poor.

"We needed the whole community in here to hear this," interjected Kermit Elliott, who teaches the adult education program for the Huntsville Housing Authority.

Griffith often makes the same speech about young children, but it isn't always received as well. During a meeting with *The Times* editorial board,

when pressed for details, Griffith said he has no definite program for early childhood intervention. He said educators and college professors would have to design that.

Born and raised in Baton Rouge, La., where his father ran a drugstore, Griffith initially taught the seventh grade after graduation from college. He then went on to medical school in Louisiana. About 30 years ago, he arrived here to become Huntsville's first radiation oncologist.

He has since retired as a doctor and now co-owns Green River Enterprises, which includes a variety of enterprises, from nursing homes and funeral parlors to doctors' offices and real estate development.

For Griffith, a failed run for mayor did not slake his thirst for the campaign trail. As he said, when first stepping to the microphone at a breakfast with Leadership Huntsville/Madison County: "It's awful quiet in here. This is politics. This is fun. This is a sport in Alabama."