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NICE GUYS FINISH BEST

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Harvey Kenton and Russ McCabe had to be the friendliest opponents in the last election, two guys running in Sussex County for the state House of Representatives.

Not that they actually had much competition in the friendly department. The 2010 campaign season was for screaming. Tea Partiers, birthers, Wall Street cheaters, it had everything up to and including death threats against the Republican state chair.

As if anyone would think the "Miss and Mister Congeniality" title should have gone to Christine O'Donnell and Mike Castle?

Kenton and McCabe were in their own little bubble. Kenton was the Republican, and McCabe was the Democrat in a race for a rare prize -- the 36th Representative District, a Milford-Milton seat that had not been open since George Carey, a Republican who was retiring, won it 26 years earlier.

Kenton and McCabe fell into a sociable rhythm of campaigning. One evening they even took their wives out together for ice cream. There have been rougher games of hopscotch.

Kenton won comfortably, polling 54 percent. This was not much of a surprise, not with the outpouring of conservative voters in Sussex County, even as a surge of moderate voters upstate carried the Democrats statewide, like Chris Coons for senator and John Carney for congressman.

Besides, Kenton, a 69-year-old salesman from Milford now full time in the Delaware General Assembly, had "Sussex County legislator" written all over him -- from his flat-top haircut to his connections with the Delaware State Fair, the farm bureau and his local volunteer fire company.

McCabe, who lives outside Milton, nevertheless made his mark. He lost by only 800 votes while O'Donnell was bashing Coons in the district by 1,500 votes. It was a reminder of how familiar people are with McCabe -- retired at 54 from his prominent post as the state archivist, as well as a former one-term recorder of deeds.

McCabe is also easy to spot, being a little hipper than the average Sussex Countian. Tom Carper, the Democratic senator, was once heard to say that McCabe looks like one of the Bee Gees.

The weekend plans for Kenton and McCabe crossed Saturday, when both of them stopped by the Summer Bash in Milton. Now in its eighth year, the Summer Bash has become a staple of the political calendar. It was once deeply Democratic, but now it just has Democratic tendencies. It is fine that Tom Wagner, the Republican state auditor, is a regular.

The Summer Bash is a musical miracle. It turns Little Ole Milton into the Grand Ole Opry by bringing a country star -- this year it was Aaron Tippin with his hits like "You've Got to Stand for Something" and "My Blue Angel" -- to a giant tent in a field amid houses right in town. It drew 450 people.

The Summer Bash is the creation of Corey Marshall-Steele, the administrator for Woodburn, the governor's house in Dover. He is also a gay rights leader and a crackerjack campaign operative, mostly for Jack Markell, the Democratic governor, but for McCabe, too.

Kenton came to the Summer Bash bringing a little something for McCabe. It was a map of the newly drawn 20th Representative District, proposed to move from New Castle County to Sussex County to account for all those people who have settled in Sussex since the last redistricting a decade ago.

In the maps proposed by the House's Democratic majority, Kenton would be in the old 36th District and McCabe would be in the new 20th District. How nice.

"He had never seen the proposed map. Politically we were opponents, but we like each other," Kenton said.

If the maps are adopted, they could be colleagues, so much the better to like each other.

McCabe certainly would not be the first candidate to make an impression in one election and find himself in a district to call his own by the next one, courtesy of redistricting. Bethany Hall-Long, for example, nearly took out a Republican representative in 2000 and then became a Democratic representative in a new Middletown-area district in 2002. She is a senator today.

Maps can change, so McCabe was being cautious. Marshall-Steele was not.

"Representative," Marshall-Steele greeted McCabe.

"Citizen," McCabe said.

"We have 50 or 60 volunteers here for Russ," Marshall-Steele said.

"Friends," McCabe said.

Marshall-Steele was having none of it. Politics is nothing if not capricious, but in the last month it has brought him a civil union bill, signed into law by the governor he works for, and a favorable redistricting proposal, so he was enjoying it while he could.

"Welcome to the 21st Century and the 20th District," Marshall-Steele cracked.