

Is Lamontagne too good for politics?

ASK ANYONE who knows Ovide Lamontagne personally and you'll hear the same thing over and over: He's a good man. Some add a backhanded caveat: Too good a person for politics.

It's a political paradox. We lament that politics attracts a disproportionate number of scoundrels and half-wits and not enough selfless community leaders of deep character. Then when good people step into the public square, some dismiss them with the observation: Nice guys finish last.

Lamontagne formally declared his candidacy for the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate this week, and being the good man in politics isn't the only paradox he brings to the campaign. Another is how someone identified as a strong conservative puts so much of his time, talent and treasure into social service organizations not thought of as conservative causes.

Lamontagne is the model of the compassionate conservative. He's been a leader in Easter Seals, Catholic Charities, Court Appointed Special Advocates, the Boy Scouts and the list goes on. Whenever a Manchester nonprofit has a capital campaign to fund, they want Ovide on the committee. Nonprofit leaders describe him as an invaluable connector and catalyst.

These causes are a more

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personal commitment for Ovide and his wife, Bettie, than many may be aware. After getting married at age 21 — the Lamontagnes recently celebrated their 30th anniversary — the couple adopted their first child through Catholic Charities. Two years later, they were approached privately on behalf of a young woman who was pregnant, and in time they adopted a second baby.

In between, a foster child came into their lives. The infant was placed in the Lamontagnes' care after spending several weeks in the hospital during which his natural parents proved unable to care for the baby themselves. At first the boy seemed healthy, but after several months it became apparent he was not developing normally. He was physically and mentally disabled and prone to self-abusive behavior. The Lamontagnes raised the boy as foster parents until he was 6. He never learned to talk and requires 24-hour care, which he receives today as an adult in a community setting. The Lamontagnes have continued as his educational and legal guardians.

Lamontagne's commitment to nonprofit work has contributed to another paradox. At least two of his opponents for the nomination are millionaires

expected to self-finance their campaigns. Had Lamontagne, 52, not chosen to conduct his personal affairs so much like a nonprofit himself over the span of his accomplished law career at a prominent firm, giving away literally years of billable hours to nonprofits and being a generous donor to countless causes, Lamontagne would probably be in a position to self-finance his campaign, too.

"Making money was never something that motivated me," Lamontagne says. "I'm more interested in the service I do. I told the firm (Devine Millimet), 'You have to let me do public service or else I will suffocate.'"

So instead of getting rich and moving to a big house in Bedford, the Lamontagnes live in the same home in the modest Manchester neighborhood he grew up in. His parents, who raised eight children, live literally next door. The neighborhood has changed over the decades — last week's violence on Hayward and Wilson Streets occurred a few blocks away — but the Lamontagne family stayed within St. Anthony's parish. His children attended the same parochial schools, including Trinity High, that he did. A person who is conservative in such ways in his personal life can be counted on to stay that way in public office.

Lamontagne understands the political reality that winning the Republican nomina-

tion will require someone to give frontrunner Kelly Ayotte a political punch in the nose. He recognizes that some think Lamontagne, who was recently named Man of the Year by the Boy Scouts, is too much of a boy scout himself to throw that punch. He knows he has to prove he can raise money, that polls will likely always show him behind and that there is no point to winning a primary in a manner that prevents him from winning a general election.

Which raises a final paradox: Despite the law partnership, the nonprofit boards, a vast personal network, a sunny disposition and being respected and well-liked, Lamontagne has never been the establishment's candidate. He wasn't in 1992, when he turned heads by taking nearly 40 percent against an incumbent congressman in a primary. He wasn't in 1996, when he wrested the Republican gubernatorial nomination from the establishment candidate in a major upset.

Lamontagne has always had plenty of faith. First the establishment ignores you. Then they laugh at you. Then they attack you. Then they attend your swearing in.

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