

Pat Rice: Area Democrats could use a Tony Ledbetter

When it comes to street-level politics, Ledbetter gets it.

Early on the evening of the Fourth of July, I found myself at Rockefeller Gardens Park at the southeast corner of the Granada Bridge in Ormond Beach.

I was there with my sweetheart, Joni Hunt, waiting for the fireworks to start, enjoying the breeze off the Halifax River, and chatting with the occasional person we knew. A band at the south end of the park started playing “Sweet Home Alabama.”

I turned toward the band, and there stood a familiar figure holding up a “Trump for President” sign. He was also wearing a white Trump hat, a white Trump t-shirt, black shorts, white socks pulled up over unusually white legs, black shoes, and a slight smile.

It was Tony Ledbetter, chairman of the Volusia County Republicans and perhaps Donald J. Trump’s truest believer in Florida.

If it seems like I’m having some sport with Ledbetter’s appearance, well, I probably am. He can come off as a little unsophisticated. He’s not a stylish dresser. He’s not a polished speaker. Occasionally he can be too partisan, and too obstinate.

One of the more memorable News-Journal photos in recent memory was taken in early 2015, at the last Volusia County School Board meeting of former Superintendent Peg Smith, who resigned after getting at cross purposes with some school board members. At one point, the entire audience stood and gave Smith a standing ovation for her service. Except for Ledbetter, very much not a Smith supporter, who sat in the front row with his arms crossed and a frown on his face.



Ledbetter, 69, is also unabashed about injecting party into supposedly “non-partisan” local political contests, and being a bit of a kingmaker. The area Republican Party Executive Committee essentially auditions candidates for their support, then creates a list of candidates they urge the party’s faithful to vote for. This doesn’t sit well with Republican candidates who aren’t selected. And sometimes the committee sidesteps important races altogether, such as the current races for Volusia County chair and sheriff.

But anyone who underestimates Ledbetter’s effectiveness does so at his or her own peril. When it comes to street-level politics, Ledbetter gets it.

You want proof? Drive through the Daytona Beach area and try to count the number of Trump signs in supporters’ yards. They are everywhere.

While you’re noticing all those Trump signs, ask yourself, where are the signs for presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton? On my six-mile drive from home to The News-Journal, I don’t see a single Clinton sign.

That disparity is all the more remarkable in Volusia County, which has slightly more registered Democrats than Republicans.

Ledbetter also understands social media. His personal Facebook page is a virtual shrine to two efforts: Electing Trump, and defeating Clinton.

I spoke with Ledbetter briefly on Friday, as he and his wife, Toni, were preparing to drive to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland. Until we spoke, I had assumed that anyone who spends as much time as Ledbetter on politics must be retired. Not true. He and his wife own and run Miracle Lace Visor, which manufactures “no headache” women’s hat wear.

I’m a political independent who’s definitely not a Trump fan, and definitely not a Clinton fan. It’s a dilemma, I know.

But — while I don’t necessarily agree with him — I am a fan of Ledbetter’s approach to politics.

He works. Area Democrats could learn from him.