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Small-town banker moves up GOP ladder

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INEZ, Ky. - Mike Duncan was only eight years old when he first got a taste of politics. Going door to door in Scott County, Tenn., he helped his uncle campaign for superintendent of schools.

Clarence Smith wasn't elected back then, but Duncan was hooked.

"At an early age, I was exposed to politics and fascinated by it," said Duncan, at his office in his hometown of Inez, a small Appalachian town in eastern Kentucky.

Nearly 50 years after campaigning for Uncle Clarence, Mike Duncan has moved up the ranks of the GOP and was tapped recently by President Bush as the next chairman of the Republican National Committee.

Bush also selected U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez of Florida as general chairman, to serve as the face of the party, focusing on fundraising, outreach and travel to promote the Republican agenda, while Duncan focuses on the everyday operations at the party's Washington headquarters.

Though Duncan has never run for office, he has campaigned for major Republican players for more than three decades. He's a longtime fundraiser for Sen. Mitch McConnell and has campaigned for Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush.

He also worked for the 2000 Bush-Cheney campaign and chaired the transition team for Ernie Fletcher, the first Republican governor elected in Kentucky in 36 years.

And both McConnell and U.S. Rep. Hal Rogers of Somerset – two influential Republicans in Congress - stated their support for Duncan filling the post.

It's an impressive resume with very humble roots.

Duncan grew up in McCreary County, a staunchly Republican community amid the rural coalfields along the Kentucky-Tennessee border. His father ran a general store in Strunk, which he still operates today.

His childhood was immersed in politics and conservative values. Duncan has fond memories of attending "speakings" at the store, at which local candidates could talk to the community about their concerns.

At home, his family welcomed political discussions and debate over the dinner table.

"I can remember my dad quizzing me on who was secretary of state at the time," he said.

After meeting his wife, Joanne Kirk, at the University of Kentucky law school, the couple settled in her hometown of Inez, where her father ran the Inez Deposit Bank.

Duncan had big dreams of working in politics, but never left Inez – the same 500-population town where President Lyndon Johnson declared the "war on poverty" in 1964.

"This is where his business is, where his child was raised," said John R. Triplett, a longtime friend

and fellow Republican who works next door to Duncan.

Duncan said his love of politics never overshadowed his love of Appalachia and Inez, and that his small-town roots never hindered his work in politics.

"I love the Appalachian area because it's home," said Duncan, now head of the Inez Deposit Bank. "I grew up around people all my life and I have a pretty good flavor of what rural America is."

It's an understanding of entrepreneurship, lower taxes and less government involvement, he said. "I've lived those values all my life."

Since establishing himself in Inez, he's worked as a fellow at the White House, chaired Jim Bunning's successful U.S. Senate campaign, served as RNC treasurer and been appointed by Bush this year to the Tennessee Valley Authority's board of directors.

"He's a solid, methodical, hardworking fellow," Triplett said.

Duncan also has made some \$134,000 in contributions to various arms of the GOP over the past 15 years, including \$10,000 to Bush, \$13,000 to McConnell and \$45,000 to the RNC.

Duncan's ambition and support in the party begs the question of why he never ran for any office himself. Duncan said he's considered it, but the timing has never been right for him and his family.

Even his latest jump from general counsel of the RNC to chairman concerned him about time away from his family and his community in Inez. However, "this is a two-year-term, this isn't forever," he said.

Those who know him say he leads by example and doesn't need to take office.

"He's not what you consider a politician - he's a professional," said Dr. Raymond Wells, who has known the Duncan family for nearly three decades.

"He's got the personality where he can talk to anybody. You can be comfortable with him," said Jack Horn, circuit clerk for Martin County who works a block away from Duncan's office.

"He's worked hard to get there, and it reflects well on Kentucky."