

UNDERDOG WITH THE FIGHTING CHANCE

*Meet GOP Bruce Wilson
who will take on Kennedy
for 12th District
state Senate seat*

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By Lisa Reisman

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Bruce Wilson, the Republican candidate for the 12th District state Senate seat, will tell you he was let go from his job last year after Clorox acquired his company, Aplicare, Inc. He will acknowledge that he's been a member of the Madison Board of Education for all of nine months. And that his wife, a certified addiction counselor, is a regis-

tered Democrat.

As for his opponent wielding one of the most formidable names in American politics — well, he's fine with that.

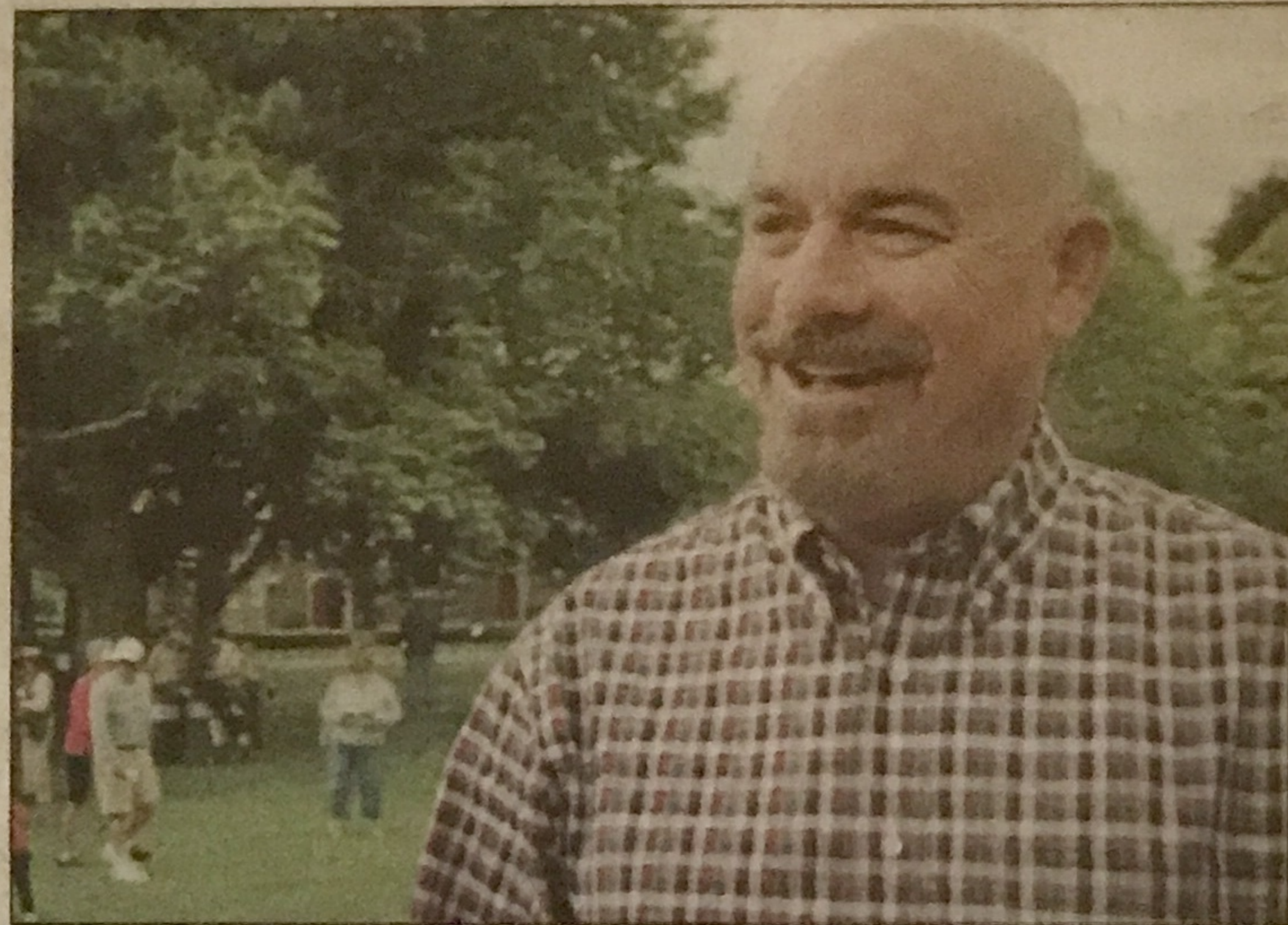
For all the odds seemingly stacked against him in a district that includes Branford, Durham, Guilford, Killingworth, Madison and North Branford, the former CEO of roughly 150 employees who made it a regular practice to bike the 22 miles from his Madison home to his Meriden company and home again, seems energized by the challenge.

"I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think I had a legitimate chance," said the affable, self-proclaimed stay-at-home dad in a re-

cent interview at Branford's G Cafe Bakery, as he polished off an Espresso. "I wouldn't be in this race if I didn't think I could bring value."

Specifically, his expertise in small business. With nearly three decades of experience in manufacturing of medical devices and pharmaceutical products, 22 of those in Connecticut, "I can look at a piece of legislation and think can this help me, can this hurt me, as a business person," the square-shouldered 50-year-old said.

"I can evaluate whether a piece of legislation will foster a business environment that creates jobs or



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bruce Wilson, the Republican candidate for the 12th District state Senate seat.

Wilson

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one that stifles growth.”

He's been there, in short. After determining that working on a fishing boat in Kennebunkport, Maine “might not be the most stable career path,” as he put it with a twinkle in his eye, the graduate of Bates College in Maine got his start in 1991 at Aplicare, a homegrown Meriden-based Connecticut company that makes pre-packaged antiseptic products.

Full-time, that is. While at Bates, the chemistry major acted as janitor and worked in the Compounding Room, mixing chemicals, at the behest of his father, Bruce Wilson Sr., a founding partner of Aplicare in 1983.

“I did all the jobs that the company didn't want to pay anyone for,” Wilson said with a laugh.

Once hired, he began as a salesman, rising steadily through the ranks, until he was named CEO in 2007. His appointment was not, however, pre-ordained. “Everyone knew that Bruce Sr. wasn't going to hand his son the keys to the boardroom,” said Steve Burg, a facilities manager at Aplicare for the last 18 years, in a telephone interview. “He was going to have to earn it.”

By all indications, he did. From early on, “he always had a knack for being able to discuss issues with people,” said sales specialist Sheila Kimball, a 22-year Aplicare veteran. “He had a way of narrowing in on what the real issues were, of being able to communicate them and getting other people to understand them.”

No more so than when the company, which was having kits assembled by a contract packager in Mexico, brought the work back to Connecticut, creating, in a feat of “reshoring,” a new production line in Meriden and about 20 new jobs.

As he had at regular intervals during his tenure, the CEO, according to Kimball, “took the time to sit down with small groups of employees,” detailing why the enterprise was important to the health of the company, describing how their work impacted it, and soliciting questions and feedback.

“I've watched what good companies can do and the jobs they create and the lives that depend on them, and certainly I've watched people raise families while they worked at Aplicare,” said the former Hammonasset lifeguard and father of three.

“And one thing I know is that employees are the most important asset a business has. We paid to keep people, we invested in people, in their training, we tried to make it a good place to work.”

Which was why, in spite of knowing “my skill set would probably be redundant,” Wilson negotiated an acquisition to Clorox in January 2012. “The price was in alignment with what we thought we were worth,” said Wilson. Because “they didn't have any other business that looked like Aplicare, we pretty much knew they were going to have to keep the plant and the employees to maintain the business.”

The sense of granite-like decency that Wilson displayed in safeguarding his employees' livelihood impressed Jean Fitzgerald, the Republican chair of Madison's Board of Education, where Wilson heads up the board's policy committee. The candidate, she wrote in an email, “has proven that he has the integrity, personality, and work ethic needed to appropriately serve the best interests of all he represents.”

That none of the other eight Republicans or Democrats populating the Board replied to emails seeking comment on Wilson's candidacy may suggest a group

that thrives on a consensus-driven approach rather than one of resistance. At the same time, though, it signals an issue routinely faced by CEO politicians seeking public office.

Even in a state legislature with a long tradition of avoiding bitter bipartisan gridlocks, there's no denying that, as J.P. Donlon, editor-in-chief of Chief Executive magazine, put it to NPR in August 2011, “when you're running a corporation, everyone by definition is pulling in the same direction.” In politics, in contrast, you have to have the patience and wherewithal to contend with all the push-back and competing agendas that lawmakers “have to undergo and suffer through.”

Whether Wilson can remold himself from a successful leader of business into a persuading, cajoling, arm-twisting politician in what will likely remain a Democratic-controlled statehouse is anyone's guess. Whether his pledge to keep “educational decision-making in the local community” and away from Common Core standards resounds in the state Senate chamber remains to be seen.

What's clear is that Wilson believes he's qualified to succeed retiring state Sen. Edward Meyer, D-Guilford. And he's determined — and “excited” — to prove it.

What's also clear is that his standing, ironically, is enhanced by who he isn't. Just ask Daniel Kellner of Guilford who met the former CEO at Guilford's 375th anniversary celebration last Saturday. Informed by Guilford First Selectman Joseph Mazza of the Democratic candidate for state Senate, Kellner didn't skip a beat. “This guy's got my vote,” he said, pointing at Wilson.

As for his wife, the registered Democrat, “she better vote for me,” said Wilson. After all, “she was the one who convinced me to run,” he added, flashing a grin.