

*Virginia Republican Dave Rexrode ('01) and Democrat David Mills ('02) — who graduated from JMU within a year of each other — hold mirror positions as executive directors of the two primary Virginia political parties. Madison recently caught up with the alums to get their take on the pulse of their respective parties, as well as issues facing the Commonwealth of Virginia.*



## Red, Blue and JMU:

VIRGINIA REPUBLICANS VS. VIRGINIA DEMOCRATS

*JMU alums and party executive directors face off* BY SANDE SNEADE ('82)

**Madison:** What are the top three challenges facing Virginia today?

**Virginia Democrats Executive Director David Mills ('02):** The economic recession affects everything in the state and the country. It's global and has slowed growth everywhere. The challenges this creates for the commonwealth are: No. 1 transportation, No. 2 education and No. 3 our economic identity. In other words, we must figure out how to establish ourselves as a 21st-century business destination.

**Madison:** What is the top challenge facing Virginia Republicans?

**Virginia Republican Party Executive Director Dave Rexrode ('01):** At the state level, achieving a balanced budget is always a challenge, but it's a good one to have. The governor started with a \$1.6 billion deficit and has just announced a \$400 million surplus. He did that without raising taxes and by working with Democrats and Republicans to balance the budget. It's a good message of how he

turned around the budget challenge without picking the pockets of hardworking Virginians.

**Madison:** What is your primary job as executive director of the Virginia Republican Party?

**Rexrode:** My job is to help elect Republicans at all levels, from school boards to president of the United States. I also advocate our core principles and build grassroots efforts to help candidates get elected.

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**Madison:** You didn't mention fundraising.

**Rexrode:** Fundraising is a big part of it. You have to have funds to get your message out. You need volunteers to take the message out and to make that personal door-to-door contact and make those phone calls. By June of last year, we made more personal contacts than John McCain did in all of 2008.

**Madison:** How did you get this position?

**Mills:** I was involved in Gov. Tim Kaine's election in 2005 and gained a lot of experience from 2006 to 2008. In 2008, I left the state to work on other governors' races. Our staff was divided into three races, but 2009 didn't go well for us. I was done for a time and was looking forward to the time off, but then was told that my leadership was needed at the state level. I started as the financial director first; and then after a long interview process I became executive director.

**Madison:** What are the best and worst parts of this job?

**Mills:** The worst part is also the best. Managing people is both rewarding and difficult. When you work on a campaign, you feel like you have a lot of control. You are part of a team, and if you work hard enough good things will happen. But the truth is that there are some things you can't control. The most challenging thing is figuring out what you can control and focusing on it.

**Madison:** You're both married and have young children. How do you make it all work?

**Mills:** My wife, Jennifer McClellan [Virginia House of Delegates, 71st District], and I had our first child, Jack, in August 2010, so it's going to be interesting. Most people live a kind of moat lifestyle. When you leave work, you cross the bridge to your home life and leave that other world separated. But when both spouses are involved in politics, there is little or no separation between work and home. It's great to have a spouse who understands the sacrifices that politics and public service demand. I have an aggressive schedule. But, when Jenn is on the ballot for re-election, I come home after a week of traveling, and we spend our weekends out shaking hands.

**Rexrode:** My wife, Kathryn Scott Rexrode ('00), is the communications director for Congressman Bob Goodlatte. It really helps that she's in politics, too, and she gets it. She commutes to D.C. every day while I commute to Richmond. She takes our daughters to the House of Representatives Day Care Center, which is a phenomenal facility. That helps tremendously.

**Madison:** You drive your own car every day? No Amtrak?



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— DAVE REXRODE ('01)

**Rexrode:** My schedule is too unpredictable to take the train. I drink a Red Bull in the morning and I'm dressed and out the door. Plus, my car has multiple JMU stickers, so I give the Dukes free advertising up and down the interstate. I like getting thumbs up for that.

**Madison:** How unlikely do you think it is that Virginia has two Daves in mirror positions as executive directors of Virginia's two primary political parties?

**Mills:** If you had told me in 2000 during Dr. David A. Jones' political science course on Elections that 10 years later I would be in this position — and married to someone in the Virginia legislature and

have kids — I would not have believed it. Crazy things happen in politics.

**Madison:** What's been the biggest triumph for you in the job?

**Rexrode:** President George W. Bush's re-election in 2004. I was working in his national headquarters but was sent to Ohio for the last eight weeks of the campaign. On Election Day 2004, the president flew in and spent about 15 minutes in our office. That's the best campaign I've ever worked on at the national level.

**Madison:** What's been the biggest thrill so far?

**Mills:** Jack being born was pretty awesome. But the biggest thrill on the job has been meeting other states' Democratic Party executive directors. It's a little bit like a club. They are going through the same things you are experiencing, so it's nice knowing you are not alone.

That and JMU beating Virginia Tech!

**Rexrode:** Election night for Gov. Bob McDonnell. I was in a suite in the Marriott in Richmond watching the election results with people I have worked with for a decade. All of us grew up in politics together. It was just thrilling when they called the race and he won Virginia — especially in such a spectacular fashion.

**Madison:** How did JMU prepare you for your present position?

**Rexrode:** JMU's political science department is phenomenal. We have a great group of professors. The unique thing about JMU is that professors encourage people to find opportunities to lead and to do things outside the classroom.

**Madison:** How well do you know David Rexrode?

**Mills:** Dave and I have a good relationship and a healthy respect for each other. When issues come up on the trail, or when a staff person or volunteer is out of line, we tend to pick up the phone and talk to each other. We get it resolved because of our relationship as opposed to some anonymous adversary.

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Virginia Republican Party Executive Director Dave Rexrode ('01) and Virginia Democrats Executive Director David Mills ('02) both say the faculty in the JMU Department of Political Science prepared them well to serve Virginians and lead their respective political parties.



**Madison:** What challenge would you like to issue to David Mills?

**Rexrode:** Come up with as strong a pro-JMU family ticket as we have for your next gubernatorial race. Gov. McDonnell's daughter was a cheerleader at JMU and she graduated in May. Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling's son was a Marching Royal Duke and he graduated in May. Attorney Gen. Ken Cuccinelli's wife is a JMU grad, and Sen. George Allen's daughter also graduated from JMU in May. We had the most pro-JMU ticket in Virginia history.

**Mills:** I accept that challenge.

**About the political leaders** Virginia Republican Party Executive Director Dave Rexrode ('01) serves on the JMU Alumni Association Board of Directors and is a member of the Duke Club. The public policy and administration major is a JMU legacy (grandmother was Class of 1941), and he was involved in University Unions and Theta Chi as an undergraduate. He lives in Stafford with his wife, Kathryn Scott Rexrode ('00), and their children. She is communications director for Congressman Bob Goodlatte (R).

Virginia Democrat Party Director David Mills ('02) was involved in the Student Government Association and the Senior Class Challenge as an undergraduate. The political science major lives in Richmond with his wife, Jennifer McClellan, who serves in the Virginia House of Delegates representing the 71st district. They have one son, Jack.

**Madison:** What do you do in your spare time other than sharing with family?

**Rexrode:** I love golf and being outside, and I'm a diehard Dukes fan. My favorite color is purple. My grandmother was Class of 1941 and I met my wife at JMU. I chair the JMU Alumni Association Marketing Committee, and I'm a member of the Duke Club.

**Mills:** Before Jack, it was golf. Jenn and I like to travel a lot as well. Now, because the job has me traveling so much, we just find something fun to do wherever we are. At home, we like to see old movies at

the Byrd Theatre, walk our two big dogs around Maymont Park or go to museums.

**Madison:** What's one thing most people don't know about you?

**Rexrode:** I was president of Theta Chi fraternity for two years. One of the things I'm most proud of is that I started the "12 Days Project," where our fraternity would sleep on The Commons and collect money and toys for Harrisonburg children. The first time we did it, it felt like it was 20 degrees below zero, and all we had was a tiny camper. It snowed halfway through the event, so I wasn't real popular. But we raised \$5,000 and collected 3,000 toys. My fraternity brothers are still doing this project today.

**Mills:** I'm allergic to salmon. It's my kryptonite. Next time Dave and I have dinner, watch it be salmon. 🍣

\* Learn more about the JMU Department of Political Science at [www.jmu.edu/polisci](http://www.jmu.edu/polisci).