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# Gerth: Why Jamie Comer's latest foe is like no one he's ever faced



**Joseph Gerth**

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In his four previous races for his first district congressional seat, Jamie Comer hasn't faced the tough questions that derailed his bid for the governor's office in 2015.

In that race, he told the Lexington Herald-Leader that he had never hit a former college girlfriend who he was rumored to have abused.

After he did that, the former girlfriend came forward and told the Courier Journal that not only did he hit her, he took her to obtain an abortion in Louisville after she became pregnant.

He lost the Republican primary for governor that year by just 83 votes, but the issues of abuse and an abortion hasn't come up much since.

His streak of luck may be coming to an end if Erin Marshall, a 29-year-old single mom from Frankfort, wins the Democratic nomination for the seat.

As of Friday morning, the day of the filing deadline, no other Democrat has jumped into the race.

Comer has repeatedly denied that he hit the former girlfriend or that he took her for an abortion – and his supporters argue that she has never provided any proof of her allegations.

His lawyer threatened a “devastating lawsuit” against The Courier Journal, but he never filed one.

None of that is likely to matter to Marshall, whose campaign manager says she takes personally Comer's position opposed to abortion rights along with the allegation that he took a former girlfriend for an abortion.

Marshall was living in Cincinnati when she was 24 and learned she was pregnant. About that time, she and her boyfriend broke up.

She could have gotten an abortion, especially since there were signs the pregnancy was a high-risk one. But she decided to return to Frankfort and have her son, according to the campaign.

“She just thinks every woman should have the same choices she had,” said Mark Nickolas, her campaign manager.

“Erin is an incredibly unique candidate,” Nickolas said. “She is a single mom who is motivated by this abortion issue that we're having in Kentucky. ...”

“Comer has two abortion problems. The first, he’s an extremist on the abortion issue. The second he’s a hypocrite; he’s one who says one thing and lives another. He’s got the Herschel Walker problem.”

While she’s a first-time candidate, Marshall isn’t completely new to politics. She’s worked on campaigns and in 2022, and she starred in a commercial for Franklin Circuit Judge Phil Shepherd in which she labeled Shepherd’s opponent, Joe Bilby, an extremist on abortion.

They’ll hit that message hard again in this race.

“I think it (abortion) is going to be the seminal issue certainly in this race and across the country,” Nickolas said.

The odds against Marshall are long.

The district’s makeup is 44% Democratic and 47% Republican, but it often performs much more Republican than that. In the two elections Comer was on the ballot with Donald Trump, Comer has won by more than 135,000 votes.

But in the last two elections – in 2021 and 2022, there were signs the district, which was traditionally Democratic until 30 years ago, was stabilizing and perhaps moving a little more to the left.

When an anti-abortion amendment was on the ballot in 2022 after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade*, 43% of voters opposed the amendment.

And last year, Gov. Andy Beshear got 44% of the vote in the district, which stretches from the Kentucky Bend in West Kentucky, across the bottom of the state and then, looking a bit like a scorpion’s tail, reaches up to Frankfort.

The abortion issue has energized Democratic voters and women across the country and is largely responsible for Beshear winning reelection. He ran a campaign that in the last two months was almost entirely based on an ad featuring a young woman who had been raped and impregnated by her stepfather.

Nickolas argues that the abortion issue has created “fractures” and “fissures” in the Republican voting coalition like we’ve never seen.

And the one thing that Marshall might have going for her that Comer’s opponents didn’t have in past elections is money.

The district is very expensive to run in because it reaches into five media markets a candidate must buy to compete – Louisville, Lexington, Nashville, Paducah and Evansville.

But Comer’s role as the chief inquisitor of Joe Biden raises his profile and will likely make him a target for Democratic donors nationally. And her campaign manager, Nickolas, has a history of bringing in lots of national money for women candidates in Kentucky.

In 2018, he ran Amy McGrath’s congressional campaign, which raised and spent \$9 million, and two years later, he ran her U.S. Senate race, which raised \$88 million.

McGrath lost both of those races, but she made her Republican opponents spend enormous amounts of time, energy and money fending her off.

Nickolas expects a fully funded campaign will cost at least \$5 million, which he said Marshall won't have any trouble raising.

She could raise double that and she'd still be a long shot in such a rural, conservative district.

But she can make Comer work and – like no Democrat ever has – she'll be able to tell the story of that day about 30 years ago when he allegedly drove his college girlfriend to Louisville so she could get an abortion.

*Joseph Gerth can be reached at 502-582-4702 or by email at [jgerth@courierjournal.com](mailto:jgerth@courierjournal.com).*