

**ZELLER**

Continued from 1A

Despite his passion and a proud family tradition of military service, Zeller may have never followed up on his good intentions to serve his country had several people in his life not pushed him to test his limits.

Perhaps the first person in Zeller's life to push him was Ted Hunt, his history teacher and soccer coach at Allendale Columbia in Rochester.

"Ninth grade hit and I figured out that I could coast," Zeller said. "I figured out that tests and papers were due on Mondays and Fridays and I could skip those days and delay assignments. I coasted with Cs. I went from being an A student to being a C student."

Hunt found that unacceptable.

"Of all the courses in school, AP U.S. History class was the one he wanted to take the most," Hunt said. "I told him the first thing he had to do was come to school. Once I laid down the law for him, he didn't miss another day until a month before he graduated. It was clear he had the self-discipline. He became almost over-dedicated to doing everything he set his mind to."

Hunt said he caught a glimpse of Zeller's determination from soccer practice.

"Physically, when he was here, he was not in great shape," Hunt said. "He was carrying a few extra pounds. I admired his gumption going out for soccer. He did all the



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**Matt Zeller talks with constituents during a parade on the Fourth of July.**

conditioning work and attended practice even though he did not play that much. He did it because he wanted to be on the team."

Zeller said his coach was being generous by saying he was "carrying a few extra pounds."

At 17 years old he weighed 250 pounds. A three-week stint with Outward Bound, however, changed all that. On the fourth day of an 80-mile hike in the Colorado Rockies, Zeller had reached his breaking point.

"Physically, I was exhausted," Zeller said. "I had altitude sickness for

three days. I was miserable. We were going up the side of a mountain to get to the ridge line. I tripped over this root and fell down and I started screaming 'I quit. I'm done. I want to go home.'"

Fortunately for Zeller, the guide, named Taz, talked him out of quitting.

"He said 'Your entire life you seem to figure out something is too difficult and you decide not to attempt it,'" Zeller said. "Life is like a mountain. Sometimes you aren't going to make it to the top. You need to recognize that every step

forward is a success. There is success in trying.' That kind of became my life's mantra. Every step forward is a success."

It was during Zeller's sophomore year at Hamilton College that the defining event of his life occurred.

"I was taking a history of the Silk Road class," Zeller said. "On the way back to my dorm I stopped in the student center to get my mail and they had this television set up in the hallway. I really didn't pay attention at first until my brain registered that something didn't look right. I stopped and looked at the screen and there was a shot of New York City and the screen said the World Trade Center, but there was only one tower. I turned to this girl and said 'Where's the other tower?' She just had this 1,000-yard stare and she said 'It's not there any

more.' And then Peter Jennings announced the next tower was about to collapse."

Zeller said his first impulse was to run right out and join the military, but as a compromise to his mother, he enrolled in the Army Reserve, which allowed him to finish college before being shipped off to Afghanistan.

He said his 18 months in Afghanistan changed him in several ways.

"What the Army taught me is management," Zeller said. "I challenge most people to name me a time in their life when they had a \$26 million budget and were responsible for 4,000 people. When you're entrusted with someone's life in combat, there's no greater responsibility. The American people have already entrusted me with their sons and daughters in a war."

Master Sgt. Al Smith, who served with Zeller in Afghanistan, said Zeller's personality and skills allowed him to excel as an intelligence officer.

"He was able to communicate well with people," Zeller said. "He was very outgoing, very personable. He had a sensitivity to him. At the same time he would not allow them to walk on him. He was able to treat the Afghans as human beings to get closer than most of us could."

Zeller said it was his ability to win the trust of the Afghans that ultimately saved many lives.

"The more the population saw us doing some discernible good on their behalf, the more likely they were to tip us off we were about to be attacked," Zeller said. "That's the proudest accomplishment of my life. On my officer evaluation report for the end of the tour, my rater wrote, 'Lt. Zeller's efforts in no uncertain terms contributed to the fact that, despite running over 400 combat missions, we are coming home without a single loss of life or limb.' He said it was my effort that kept people alive."

Although he always

**Top five songs on your iPod:**

1. "The Best of What's Around" by The Dave Matthews Band
2. "Free" by the Zac Brown Band
3. "Sunset and the Mockingbird" by Duke Ellington
4. "One Day Like This" by Elbow
5. "Clair De Lune" by Debussy

had an interest in politics, Zeller said he decided to enter the race for the 29th Congressional District after his combat tour was over.

"I came to Canandaigua last October and I saw all the going-out-of-business signs," Zeller said. "It angered me. I realized I always talk about 'what if,' and I'm sick and tired of voting for the lesser of two evils on the ballot. I'm going to put my money where my mouth is and dare to do something great."

He considered the county or state legislatures, but fate intervened and U.S. Rep. Eric Massa announced his resignation amid allegations of ethics violations.

"This is going to be the way I can do the most discernable good in one move," Zeller said.

"County or state governments would not have nearly the impact this would."

Zeller has made some amazing and impressive transformations in his life - from out-of-shape teenager to rail-thin



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Army reservist, and from C student to only missing one class his last three years of high school.

Perhaps the most improbable transformation Zeller has undergone, however, is from young Republican to Democratic congressional candidate.

"When he was here, he was renowned for being an outspoken Republican," Hunt said. "His hero was Ronald Reagan. During the 2000 primary season, he was volunteering for John McCain." Zeller said he didn't leave the Republican Party, the party left him.

"You can't be a moderate

Republican these days," Zeller said. "I think there's a lot of Republicans in the district who feel the same way. There are people who are predominantly pro-choice. They want to be left alone. They want government to not interfere with their lives. They don't want to be taxed to death. That's where I fall."

"The day we start having morality debates, the closer we get to people telling us what we can and can't think. (former U.S. Rep. Amory Houghton Jr., R-Corning) is a breed of Republican that no longer gets elected. If this was his first time and nobody knew who he was, getting out of the county committees would be too hard. You have a lot of people who are too far right."

If Zeller can appeal to moderate Republicans and independents, he might just be able to pull off the most drastic transformation of his short life - from unknown political neophyte to U.S. congressman.

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