

***Ms. Cahill for Congress***  
**A Reader's Guide**

In September 1999, Tierney Cahill was a young, energetic, and dedicated sixth grade teacher at Sarah Winnemucca Elementary School in Reno, Nevada. She was also a single mother of three young children, struggling to provide for her family. While teaching her students about the ancient Greeks and the development of democratic institutions, Cahill and her students turned their attention to representative government in the United States. Heather, a young girl in Cahill's class, asserted that, "You can't run for office in this country unless you're a millionaire or unless you know a lot of millionaires." (4) When Cahill argued that the democratic process is far more open than that, Heather threw down the gauntlet. She insisted, "Well, then, why don't you prove it, Ms. Cahill. Why don't you run for office?" (5) Not one to shy away from a challenge, that is just what Tierney Cahill did.

*Ms. Cahill for Congress* is Cahill's account of the journey that began that fall day in 1999. With her students as her campaign committee, with a budget that was bare-bones, at best, and with very little assistance from local and state party officials, Tierney Cahill spent the next year as a candidate for the United States House of Representatives from Nevada's 2<sup>nd</sup> congressional district, a vast swath of land comprising most of Nevada. Running as a Democrat from a largely Republican district, Tierney had little chance of winning this election. But in many ways, she and her students did emerge victorious. They learned firsthand about American government. They took great pride in garnering far more votes than anyone expected. They gained organizational, social, and academic

skills and confidence beyond measure. They integrated their efforts for the campaign into lessons on history, government, geography, and even mathematics. They learned about their community and themselves. While on this great adventure, Cahill, who also held down two other jobs, experienced a gamut of emotions, from exhilaration to anger to desperation. Neither Cahill nor her students anticipated just how demanding and difficult this campaign would be. But as the November 2000 election came to a conclusion, none of them regretted taking on the challenge that Heather had made that September day 14 months earlier.

### **About This Guide**

This guide is designed to encourage readers of *Ms. Cahill for Congress* to think about the issues raised by the author as she takes us from the decision to run, to the initial planning for her campaign, the September 2000 primary, and finally to the election in November 2000. A brief discussion of Cahill's narrative, divided into four sections, is followed by a more detailed discussion of the key issues Cahill addresses.

### **The Story of Tierney Cahill and Her Students**

Cahill tells us her story in 24 chapters which fall naturally into four parts.

#### **Ch. 1-3      The Decision to Run**

Cahill introduces us to her and her students. She relates her personal story of growing up in Reno, studying at the University of New Mexico, her failed marriage, her three children, and her decision to become a teacher. She shares her philosophy of teaching and her dedication to her students. She introduces us to her hometown of Reno. She ponders

a run for office, taking into consideration her family and some serious questions raised by her school's administration. At the end of this section, she convinces her supervisors and her students' parents to allow her class to participate in the campaign and pledges to them that she will use her run for office to teach mandated standards and will avoid discussion of her personal views – a tough task for a candidate for a major office.

#### **Ch. 4-13      Laying the Groundwork**

Cahill, who initially considered a Senate run, decides to run for Congress instead. Her students rally to the cause and form committees to deal with everything from fund raising to t-shirts. Cahill and her students often receive a rude awakening as they begin to comprehend just what they have taken on. She realizes she has to talk with everyone from union leaders to businessmen who make a living from prostitution – all the while being sure not to get her students involved in partisan issues. Cahill realizes that her campaign is woefully short both on money and ways to raise it and that the Democratic establishment is less than thrilled with her candidacy. Throughout all of this, Cahill's personal life moves from “difficult to daunting,” (120) as she endures continued financial difficulties, surgery, an abusive relationship, threatening phone calls, and a home burglary.

#### **Ch. 14-16      The Primary Campaign**

Two rites of passage mark the beginning of this section. In May, the school year ends, so Cahill's campaign will soon be managed by a new group of sixth graders (the school is on a year long schedule, and her new students return in July), and she files the paperwork

to ensure that her name will be on the ballot for the September primary. The Cahill for Congress campaign is now official. She bids a wistful farewell to the students who set her on her path to the election, students who have learned so much from their work together. Despite the fact that the campaign began months earlier, Cahill is not prepared for the media blitz that accompanies her official filing. Cahill's primary opponent proves to be a weak candidate, and of course he does not have a class of sixth enthusiastic sixth graders moving his campaign along. So on September 5, 2000, Cahill wins the primary and begins preparing for the general election in November.

#### **Ch. 17-24     The General Election**

Cahill has little time to savor her win before the "slight sense of terror about the real battle ahead" (163) sets in. From now until November, she will have no time for herself and little for her family – although Cahill often takes her children to campaign events. She sends position papers to every interest group that calls and appears at dozens of functions across her huge district. The teacher who has the audacity to use a run for Congress as an extension of her classroom even garners national attention. Even though Cahill's personal life continues to be agonizingly difficult, she is determined to see this campaign through to the very end. To her surprise, she even begins to get official Democratic Party support, though she remains angry at the treatment she has received from the party to whom she has been so loyal. Election day arrives and, not unexpectedly, the Republican incumbent defeats Cahill. But despite her and her students' disappointment, they realize that they have accomplished what many thought was impossible. And they did it with hard work, enthusiasm, and commitment to each other

and to ethical campaigning. Cahill does not make it to Congress, but she and her students are winners anyway, in their own eyes and in the eyes of their community, and beyond.

### **The Themes in Ms. Cahill for Congress**

Cahill's book provides us with ample opportunity for thoughtful consideration and discussion. Woven throughout the narrative are several themes which serve as a guide for the reader, whether he or she is a member of a book club, an educator, or anyone interested in the important questions brought to bear here.

Here are several of the themes Cahill emphasizes in her book.

- Democratic values and political campaigns
- The role of political parties and other interest groups
- The characteristics of a successful teacher
- Federal education policy
- The uniqueness of place
- Cahill's personal and professional struggles: teacher, parent, and candidate – how to do it all

### **Democratic values and political campaigns**

**From Cahill's Perspective** Cahill questions whether the “democratic process” is truly democratic. It is clear that her campaign's lack both of resources and support of party leaders made it much more difficult for her and her students to meet the challenge of

seeking office. She also addresses the “marketing” of candidates and the problem of emphasis on image rather than substance. It is clear that as the campaign progressed, she learned more about being a successful politician as she dealt with her concerns about positive and negative campaigning, understanding one’s constituency, zeroing in on the issues, different approaches for the primary and general elections, and much more.

### **For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

- Is it easier for wealthier Americans to run for office? Is there any way to address inequities in the election process?
- Do candidates for public office emphasize style over substance? View a television news report or read accounts in newspapers or magazines and examine the campaigns of specific candidates to see how they present themselves.
- Cahill spoke with her students about the importance of symbols and the need to place American symbols on her logo and t-shirts. What symbols did she choose and why? Which would you select?
- Cahill found that other candidates for Congress spent 100 times what she did on their campaigns. Examine campaign financing laws. Are they fair? Do they violate the right of Americans to support the candidate of their choice?
- Cahill notes that, “The more meetings I went to, the more I realized that I had to understand the concerns of my constituency?” (96) What did she do to try to reach that understanding? Does a member of Congress have an obligation to reflect the views of his or her district, or does he or she have a greater

responsibility to the nation? Should an elected official vote his or her conscience if that conflicts with the views of his or her constituents?

- Nevada's election laws mandate a closed primary. What are the advantages and disadvantages of open and closed primaries? Examine the 2008 presidential primary campaigns. Did it matter if a state had an open or closed primary?
- Cahill put her home phone number on campaign materials. Why did she want to make herself so accessible to her constituents? Was this a wise thing to do? Examine how candidates in other elections have dealt with the accessibility issue.
- How did technology such as email affect Cahill's campaign? What are some additional ways in which candidates use technology? How does mastery of up-to-date technology help shape the image that candidates project to the public?
- Cahill's campaign obviously brought young people into the political process. Why is it that young Americans do not participate in the electoral process to the degree that older citizens do? What has been done in recent elections to encourage young people to participate?
- Cahill's campaign garnered far more votes than expected. Account for this.

### **The Role of Political Parties and Other Interest Groups**

**Cahill's Perspective** Cahill and her family have been Democrats for as long as she can remember. She believes in the principles and policies of the Democratic Party, so she expected that the party establishment would support her – with money, manpower, and advice. She was shocked when these did not materialize. Cahill was also a longtime and loyal member of the National Education Association and thought that NEA support

would be easier to get than it proved to be. She found it necessary to deal with many other interest groups: gun rights advocates, casino owners, the mining industry, and others. She learned that she had to cast her position papers in language that would appeal to the specific group she was addressing.

### **For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

- Account for the Democratic Party's lack of support for the Cahill candidacy. How much of the tension between the party and Cahill was due to her naiveté in the ways she approached party leaders? Was there bias due to race (her children were biracial), gender, or social status?
- After the primary, Cahill was besieged by interest groups and their lobbyists. Do special interests have too much influence on American politics? If so, what attempts have been made to limit this influence? What else should be done?
- Cahill was a member of the National Education Association for many years. What advantages does union membership bring to educators? Do teacher unions wield too much political clout? What was the Nevada NEA's position on Social Security? Why did it hold that position? What other issues concerned the Nevada NEA during Cahill's campaign? Examine the role of other education-related interest groups in the 2008 election.

### **The Successful Teacher**

**Cahill's Perspective** Cahill believes that the classroom truly needs to be student-centered, that individual student learning styles and other academic and personal needs

must be met. The classroom must be a safe place for students to share their ideas and their concerns. Obviously, Cahill advocates meaningful experiential learning. Subjects should not be taught in isolation but should form an integrated whole. Lessons must be developed to teach social skills like the importance of teamwork and accepting personal responsibility. Cahill demonstrates that teaching is not a 8 to 4 job, but can be all consuming, sometimes to the detriment of the teacher and her family.

### **For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

- Instead of directly answering students' questions, Cahill often responded by asking the students more questions. How did she use this technique in her classroom? Was it effective?
- What strategies did Cahill employ to ensure that students were fully engaged in her class?
- What efforts did Cahill make to tailor her teaching to individual students? What factors make this difficult to do?
- How effective were Cahill's efforts to integrate disparate subjects together in one lesson?
- Cahill seemed to develop close personal relationships with her students. Is this sound educational practice?
- Cahill taught sixth graders. Are her teaching strategies appropriate for older students, especially those in high school?

- Cahill did not make extensive use of textbooks. What are the best ways to use texts in a classroom? Should students be required to read extensively from their texts?
- Cahill’s campaign became “a lesson that never ended.” (101) Explain how this happened. What specific lessons did her students learn from their participation in the campaign? What are some additional ways in which teachers can structure never-ending lessons?
- What important social skills and character traits did Cahill reinforce in her classroom? Is it the job of our schools to teach these? How effective are programs like Character Counts and D.A.R.E.? What objections might some parents have to character building programs in the schools?

### **Federal, State, and Local Education Policy**

**Cahill’s Perspective** Cahill has some serious concerns about mandated testing and overemphasis on standards. She believes that teachers in the trenches should have an active role in planning and implementing curriculum. She defends public schools and argues that teachers are blamed too often for problems that are beyond their ability to solve.

### **For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

- What impact did the No Child Left Behind legislation have on the daily operation of Cahill’s classroom? How effective has this legislation been in improving education in the nation’s school? What changes have been proposed to NCLB? What changes should be made?

- Cahill notes that state policy mandates that every year sixth grade teachers teach 40 math standards. (33) This is, of course, in addition to the standards mandated in other subjects. Is it reasonable to mandate so many standards? In mandating these standard, does the state run the risk of limiting instruction in courses like art, music, and physical education? What should the balance be between the more academic subjects and others?
- Cahill notes the emotional impact of mandated testing on her students and her own daughter. She argues that students should not be denied a diploma because they failed a mandated examination? What purpose does mandated testing serve. Is there too much emphasis on this testing?
- Cahill opposes school vouchers. Do parents have the right to use public funds to education their children in private schools? Where do the 2008 presidential candidates stand on this issue?
- Cahill's district only allowed one day a year where teachers could take leave to tend to personal business. What should be a school district's policy on teacher leave? What is the policy in the district where you live? What changes would you recommend?

## **The Uniqueness of Place**

**Cahill's Perspective** Although there are common threads that weave through all political campaigns, the unique features of each community shape the nature of politics in that community. Cahill helps us to know Reno better. On one hand, her hometown is a village where one's private affairs are not very private. On the other hand, Reno is a city bent on expansion and facing the problems that come with growth. Reno is also a land of contrasts, not the least of which are the geographic features of alpine mountains mixed with desert climate and vegetation. It is a place of small town conservative values with an economy largely dependent on the gambling industry. The characteristics of Reno and the many counties further afield that comprised Cahill's congressional district helped to shape her campaign.

## **For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

- Cahill observes that, "Campaigning in Reno gave me a new sense of the city where I've spent most of my life." (150) What factors have shaped Reno's identity? What paradoxes does Cahill see in her town? What factors shape the identity of your community?
- How did Cahill's address the peculiar characteristics and needs of her community as she campaigned? ? What economic and social factors did Cahill attempt to address during her campaign?
- Account for the libertarian bent that Cahill sees in her state and that is commonly highlighted when analyzing politics in western states.

- What changes occurred in Reno in the past several decades? In what ways did government attempt to address these changes?
- What can local governments do to build a sense of community? What does your local government do to foster a shared identity for its residents? Is there truly a role for government in addressing the ways residents view their community?

### **Teacher, Parent, Candidate: Cahill's Personal Crises as She Tried to Do It All**

**Cahill's Perspective** Cahill is very forthright in sharing with her readers the professional and personal dilemmas and crises that she faced. Professionally, she had to determine where to draw the line between her responsibilities to clearly delineate her positions to the voters in her district and her pledge to maintain political neutrality in her classroom. She was dealing with 11 and 12 year olds, many who came from conservative families that did not share Cahill's liberal positions on so many issues. This became even more of an issue after Cahill won the Democratic primary and moved toward the general election. She had to decide whether to take campaign donations from, for instance, a brothel owner. In her classroom she had to be certain not to devote too much time to the increasingly all-consuming campaign. Personally, Cahill's life was almost always in turmoil. Foremost among her many concerns was money and the fact that her teaching job did not pay enough to cover her bills. At times she took on two extra jobs. How was she to ensure that she spent enough time with her children while holding down two or three jobs and conducting a demanding political campaign? Even with her boundless energy and great competitive spirit, there were times when Cahill wondered how she could do it all.

## **For Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

- Many issues that Cahill addressed during her campaign reflected her personal struggles. But many of the problems Cahill faced were not simply her own but are common to many Americans. Cahill believes that the American middle class is under siege. What does Cahill view as the issues most affecting middle class American workers and their families? What solutions does she propose?
- Which of the issues with which Cahill grappled in 2000 are still being debated today? In what ways has the 2008 election reflected the same economic and social issues that troubled Cahill so much?
- Cahill questions whether the “American dream” promoted by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Horatio Alger stories still can be achieved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Read one of these stories. What characteristics does Alger view as necessary to personal and financial success? Are these still relevant today?
- Cahill is a woman of Irish Catholic descent and was married to an African American with whom she had three children. How does her story reflect issues of gender, ethnicity, religion, and race? In what ways has the 2008 campaign reflected these issues?
- What concerns are central to the lives of single mothers? How did Cahill address these concerns? Is there any advice you would have given her as she struggled to keep her family afloat?

## **Epilogue**

Tierney Cahill's story is a very personal account of the one woman's triumphs and tragedies, but in many ways her life follows a narrative common to all Americans, as they struggle to carve out their personal and professional identities, often in difficult times. Cahill's venture into politics reflects another imperative that must be confronted by all who live or dream of living in a democratic state. That is the question of how we foster, form, and maintain an active citizenry. The American body politic cannot function without citizen participation. The nation and its citizens must continually strive to channel their enormous energy, limitless abilities, and extensive resources into political participation, especially among the young. That effort, on a very small level, is the essential contribution made by Tierney Cahill and her sixth graders.