

# [***Oath Keepers' son emerges from traumatic childhood to tell his own story in a long shot election bid***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BMJ-4271-DYMD-63PH-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** AMY BETH HANSON, Associated Press

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**Body**

KALISPELL, Mont. — The eldest son of one of America’s most infamous seditionists is building a new life since breaking free from his father's control — juggling work, college classes and volunteer firefighting.

And Dakota Adams has tossed one more ball in the air this year: a Democratic campaign for Montana's Legislature.

He also plans to sell the rifles, body armor and tactical gear he used to wear to anti-government protests alongside his father — [*Stewart Rhodes,*](https://apnews.com/article/oath-keepers-founder-jan-6-trial-4372b311695c401255c6881111ff4f41) founder of the Oath Keepers. It's all part of an effort to push away the last vestiges of what Adams describes as an isolating and abusive upbringing that nearly ruined him, his mother and his siblings.

“I decided that I’m going to double down on betting on the electoral process," Adams said in a recent interview.

Adams knows it won’t be easy running as a Democrat for the House in the deep red northwestern corner of Montana. The district covers northern Lincoln County, a mecca for militia members or sympathizers and doomsday preppers. Republican Donald Trump won 74% of the county vote in the 2020 presidential race.

While Adams' campaign may look like a fruitless undertaking, he doesn't see it that way. For him it's a chance to tell his own story — that of an “honest weirdo” who emerged from a traumatic childhood to find his own way in life. It's also a chance to make the case for his own vision of how democracy and personal responsibility intertwine.

Win or lose, Adams' campaign is built on his belief that people sympathetic to extremist groups might be open to seeing things differently.

**A DARK CHILDHOOD**

Adams, who uses his mother's maiden name and refers to Rhodes only by his first name, was raised in the shadow of one of the nation's most notorious conspiracy theorists.

Rhodes [*graduated from Yale with a law degree*](https://apnews.com/article/oath-keepers-founder-jan-6-trial-4372b311695c401255c6881111ff4f41), but Adams called him lazy, paranoid and a grifter who had an exaggerated sense of his own importance as a threat to the government. Rhodes started Oath Keepers in 2009 after Democrat Barack Obama was elected president.

In their lives, as Adams tells it, Rhodes had his family living in constant fear that the government was spying on them and that the apocalypse was always just months away. Rhodes sabotaged his children's home schooling and wouldn’t let them speak about their home lives in public, Adams said.

Rhodes’ “leadership” of the Oath Keepers was inconsistent, even erratic, Adams said. Rhodes burned bridges with members, as well as with employers and creditors, leading to repeated moves for the family of eight.

“Basically until I’m an adult it’s all one continuous gray time of survival and moving boxes,” Adams said. “We lived in extreme isolation in one particular cultural bubble in increasingly paranoid and militant right-wing political spheres everywhere we moved in the country, until eventually we ended up in Montana."

They escaped Rhodes in 2018, when Tasha Adams filed for divorce.

Rhodes is now serving an [*18-year prison sentence for seditious conspiracy*](https://apnews.com/article/stewart-rhodes-oath-keepers-seditious-conspiracy-sentencing-b3ed4556a3dec577539c4181639f666c) for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol that sought to keep Trump in power after the then-president lost to Democrat Joe Biden. Rhodes declined through his attorney to comment on Adams' story.

Adams said Rhodes' involvement in the riot didn't surprise him and that Jan. 6 contributed to his decision to run for office.

“It served as a sobering wake-up call in terms of how much danger we are truly in and how the Republican Party enabled a president to become an active danger to this republic,” he explained. "I was forced to reevaluate a lot of beliefs and face hard questions about what I really stood for.”

**‘FIGURING MYSELF OUT’**

Adams, now 27, has spent his early adult years catching up on his education and participating in therapy to learn about the “long-term effects of living in a toxic or dysfunctional household.” His goal, he said, has been “figuring myself out.”

He’s working in construction and taking college classes with a plan to study political science.

While he read voraciously — mostly history — Adams didn’t learn his times tables until he was 19, so he could pass a high school equivalency exam.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be fully caught up to where I would have been in life if I’d had a semi-normal childhood," he said.

He's gotten encouragement in his bid for the Legislature from Democrats, and some voters in his district have agreed to put signs in their yard. Scott Rodich, the vice chair of the county Democratic Central Committee, said Democrats have been hesitant to run in the Republican stronghold, so party leaders are glad to have Adams on the ballot.

Adams has also appeared at campaign events with Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ryan Busse. Adams met former Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, one of the state's most prominent Democrats, at the party’s Mansfield-Metcalf dinner, and found it “incredibly weird” that Bullock knew who he was.

“It sometimes feels very unreal, because I have a normal life 95% of the time. And then 5% of the time, my personal life is relevant to a national news story," Adams said. "The disconnect feels incredibly strange.”

Adams sees ***politics*** as an extension of community service, like his work with a volunteer fire department and being a responsible gun owner. He owns a pistol, but doesn't carry it because he hasn't kept up with his training.

"American gun culture needs to be rehabilitated from an egotistical and vanity-based, hyper-individualist ego trip culture to civil service and solemn responsibility to the community," he said.

Adams opposes gun control laws, saying they could be used to prevent disadvantaged groups from protecting themselves.

**CONNECTING WITH VOTERS**

In campaigning, Adams has discovered that he’s “actually decent” at talking to people. That came as a surprise because he's struggled with long-term friendships and interpersonal relationships and "normal social skill development like interacting with people as my genuine self and not as a performance I’m putting on.”

So he campaigns wearing a leather jacket, band T-shirts and a skull ring that doubles as a bottle opener — a good icebreaker, he said. Adams has long hair and wears dark eye makeup and black fingernail polish.

That may seem out of step with the conservative voters Adams is courting, but it's who he is.

“I have refused to tone any of this down since deciding to run for office," Adams said, gesturing at his clothing, “because I spent so long as a child conforming to a little character to enhance my father’s political ambitions and image that I refused to do it ever again for any reason.”

Driving home the point, he said: “I feel like being an honest weirdo is a lot better to a lot of people than being a Spirit Halloween cowboy when you’re asking for their vote."

Adams feels he might be able to sway far-right voters as Democrats try to cut into the GOP supermajority in the Legislature.

“I'm not starting out from a place of attacking anybody for what they believe,” he said. “Because of how I grew up, I understand a lot of the lexicon."

Adams tries to turn conversations away from cultural and social issues to more practical concerns such as housing costs, rising property taxes, inflation and abortion rights.

“There has to be a consistent eye on ensuring that people can afford to still live here who are not moving in with $200,000-a-year remote jobs," he said. “If it's too expensive to build a life in Montana, then everybody who's trying to do that is going to leave.”

He said the state needs a plan to cope with growth so it won't be “consumed by urban sprawl and golf courses."

Adams is realistic about his chances of winning. He said his opponent, Republican Rep. Neil Duram, has a “solid reputation” and even got Adams' vote in 2022.

So Adams has his eye on a threshold set by Bullock, who received 37% of the votes cast in Lincoln County in 2016. But even if he doesn't meet it, he says he'll be back.

“Regardless of what happens, I’m trying again,” Adams said. “I think this is going to be a lifelong thing.”

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