

NEWS

Meet Gavi Begtrup: A scientist and start-up founder running for Cincinnati mayor

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The newest Cincinnati mayoral candidate has something on his resume no other candidate for the city's top job has: He's a scientist.

He went to college at age 14, has two physics' degrees and founded two start-up tech companies before targeting the 2021 mayor's race as his next job.

In other words, he's not a City Hall insider. And, he said, he believes that's exactly what Cincinnati needs right now in the wake of three council members being arrested on federal corruption charges.

"It's time for a leader in City Hall that is a leader for all of us," Begtrup said. "And not a person just looking for their next office."

Begtrup, 36, of Mount Lookout, will be on the ballot as a Democrat after garnering the needed signatures. He joins Democrats Herman Najoli and Raffel Prohett, who also have the needed signatures. Several others have announced runs, including Cincinnati City Council members Wendell Young, Chris Seelbach and David Mann. State Senator Cecil Thomas, community activist Kelli Prather and tech entrepreneur Adam Koehler have also announced runs. All are Democrats.

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Begtrup grew up in Nashville, Tennessee. His dad is a doctor and his mom is a physical therapist, and both are U.S. Army veterans. He said his dad was a Green Beret.

Growing up, Begtrup was so smart he skipped 5th grade and then dropped out of school in the 7th grade because, he said, he didn't fit into a normal school system. He home schooled and went to community college, finishing all those classes in two and half years.

At age 14, he went to Western Kentucky University, eyeing a career as an engineer like his older brother. But he fell in love with physics and pivoted to science.

He graduated at age 18 in 2002, and then earned a doctorate in physics from the University of California Berkeley. He said he was working in nano technology, focused on how to make computers better.

It was work he hoped would later do good for the world, but it wasn't impactful in moment. He said he wanted to make a difference.

When his wife, Amber Begtrup, a geneticist, took a job at the National Institutes of Health, the couple moved to Washington D.C. Begtrup worked as a contractor, but government policy work was an intriguing way to make the impact he was seeking.

Begtrup landed a congressional fellowship, where he met Gabby Giffords, Democratic House Representative from Arizona, who brought Begtrup on staff in 2009. Giffords wasn't known then; that would come later when she shot in an assassination attempt in 2011.

Begtrup worked on budgets, including NASA's, which he said is a good foundation for the job of mayor.

On Jan. 8, 2011, Giffords and 19 others were shot outside an Arizona grocery store. Begtrup wasn't with Giffords at the time, but his co-workers, who were also his friends, were among those shot. One of them, Gabe Zimmerman, died.

"It was the biggest moment in my life," Begtrup said. "It's the kind of moment in your life that makes you wonder what it's all about. Gabby had nearly given her life to the country. My friend died. It kind of broke me for awhile."

Giffords, who suffered a massive brain injury, resigned in 2012. It was time for Begtrup to move on, he said.

Amber Begtrup took a job at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, and the couple moved to Cincinnati in 2012.

Begtrup did consulting work on innovation hub issues. He got to know the start-up community and said he knew that was where he belonged.

He first created WaveTech, a short-lived company (2013-15) that focused on harnessing sunlight to optimize growing. The company, made up of Begtrup and two other founders, along with one employee, won federal and state grants after he moved his company to Covington. It taught him how to manage a small company. But while the technology worked, it was too expensive to make business sense.

Begtrup moved on to his next big idea – using sweat, instead of blood, for medical diagnostics. He thought it could be a game-changer because it was non-invasive and could be analyzed in real time, not sent to a lab. Silicon Valley was intrigued.

For his new company, Eccrine Systems, started in 2014, Begtrup said, he raised \$27 million and the technology has over 70 patents. Still, the company struggled. The pandemic hit. Venture capitalists pulled out. Begtrup couldn't travel and find alternative funding.

The company closed in 2020. Eccrine is working with the state to sell company assets as part of an outstanding \$1 million loan.

The company is not actually dead because the technology still exists, he said. He said he is prohibited from talking about what will happen next, though it isn't running that actual company. The 50 employees were laid off, the company's doors closed, but he expects others to use the technology the company created.

"Anybody who has started a business has had their ups and downs," Begtrup said. "What Eccrine was doing was we were swinging for the fences. You can hit a home run or strike out. We led the world in our field. And the world looked at Cincinnati as it could build the next big thing."

As mayor, Begtrup said, he wants the world to keep looking at Cincinnati as the place that could be home to the next big thing.

All the while, Begtrup was helping launch the Spencer Center for the Gifted and Exceptional in Walnut Hills, a Cincinnati Public School. He was on the board and helped grow the school from 0 to 350 students with a diverse student body.

Begtrup said his policy work in Washington on budgets, managing a small company and then a multi-million-dollar one prepared him to be the mayor.

"What is holding Cincinnati back is visionary leadership," Begtrup said. "I bring that to the table."

Begtrup may be just announcing, but his campaign started awhile ago. He has raised \$65,000.

"I think only an outsider can do this," he said of mayoral race. "I have knocked on thousands of doors. People are fed up with City Hall. They are fed up with the squabbling. It's time for new leadership in City Hall."