

'Dream big dreams'

Sheahan Virgin, of Collinsville, grew up with a passion for politics — just like his father, Randy, a steelworker.

In the summer of 2004, father and son drove to Wood River to see then-Senate candidate Barack Obama. Sheahan, now 23, had just graduated from Triad High School.

"This event was held about a month before Mr. Obama became a national sensation for his keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston on behalf of Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry."



Obama and Sheahan

Sheahan (pronounced SHAY-yen), who graduated from Grinnell College in Iowa with a political science degree, was impressed by how genuine, down-to-earth and charismatic Obama was, and asked him to sign an "Obama for Senate" yard sign.

"He did so on my back, writing "To Sheahan, dream big dreams." They posed for a photo together.

Obama has a gift, he said.

"He makes you feel that in that one split second you've shaken his hand, he's focusing on you."

His father brought the photo along in January 2005 when newly elected Sen. Obama stopped in at the labor temple in Granite City. Obama wrote, "To Sheahan, Thanks for all the hard work in Iowa!" Sheahan campaigned for John Kerry and other Democratic candidates when he was a college freshman at Grinnell.

In December 2007, during the Iowa caucus, Obama spoke at Grinnell. Sheahan was in the first row.

"I got a magazine signed and a handshake."

By now you may have figured, Sheahan is a collector — like his dad.

"I have tons of stuff. I keep a lot in shadow boxes I've invested in. Dad has buttons and things from Kennedy's and Humphrey's campaign. I'm trying to preserve my stuff."

Sheahan hopes the new president will be a uniter.

"I want people to be brought together a little more. What used to turn me off about politics is the divisiveness, the vitriolics. I'm turned on by his message of overcoming that."