



Nick Hagen for The Washington Post

Melissa Gilbert, 51, former "Little House on the Prairie" star, lives in Brighton, Mich., now. She is the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House from central Michigan.

'Little House' actress running for Congress

Melissa Gilbert taps showbiz friends to launch a tough race in Michigan

By STEVE FRIESS
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BRIGHTON, MICH. — Melissa Gilbert is being a bit flip-pant. In her latest role, that of a real-life Democratic candidate for the U.S. House from central Michigan, the veteran TV actress has filled her campaign coffers with fat checks from a nearly bottomless list of celebrity friends.

You can just imagine the attack ad her opponent, first-term Republican Rep. Mike Bishop, could launch: This carpetbagging dilettante and the liberal Hollywood elite want to buy your wholesome Midwestern seat in Congress.

Gilbert, at 51, has a thick skin when it comes to scrutiny — she dated Rob Lowe in the '80s, sued the National Enquirer in the '90s, waged a scrappy public battle for control of the Screen Actors Guild in the '00s — and she doesn't blink at such questions.

She's "really glad that George Clooney's been a friend of mine for 30 years," she says earnestly. And "it's great that Rosie O'Donnell is taking an interest in the 8th Congressional District in Michigan."

A hint of defensiveness creeps in, though, as she notes that 80 percent of her donors are small-dollar locals and that one of her first big donors was a Republican.

"But," she sniffs, "you won't care about him because he's not famous."

True, perhaps — but a funny moral high ground for Gilbert to claim. Were it not for her own fame, it's hard to imagine she could have moved to Michigan from out of state and launched a credible, well-funded congressional bid within two years. Her indelible performances as young Laura Ingalls Wilder in the 1970s TV hit "Little House on the Prairie" are what put her on an unlikely path that could, possibly, bring her to Washington.

The California native relocated to this rural area about an hour west of Detroit in 2013, after marrying her third husband, Timothy Busfield, the Emmy-winning actor best known for "Thirtysomething," who grew up down the road.

During their courtship, she had fallen in love with Michigan's scenery and quieter lifestyle, and, meanwhile, her acting career had slowed.

They first rented a 115-year-old Victorian in quaint downtown Howell, population 9,500, where Gilbert got involved in the failed 2014 Michigan gubernatorial campaign of Democrat Mark Schauer, and local people began confiding in Gilbert about their problems, Busfield says.

"People were knocking on our doors and she was taking the time to deal with them," he recalls. "People were saying, 'My mom is dying.' And I would be like, 'Where are you going?' and she'd be, 'I'm going to their house. Their mom wants to meet me.' I kept seeing somebody who belonged in service. . . . It seemed natural from there that [people] would come to her and say, 'Can you represent us, and are you interested in doing it?'"

Last summer, they

Who gave a donation?

Melissa Gilbert's campaign disclosure reads like an issue of Entertainment Weekly, with contributions coming from a wide array of show business names.

Here's a sampling:

- Clay Aiken, \$1,000
- Alec Baldwin, \$1,000
- Tom Bergeron, \$1,000
- Gabrielle Carteris, \$500
- Sara Gilbert (her sister), \$1,363
- Michael Douglas, \$3,500
- Polly Draper, \$2,000
- Shelley Fabares, \$303
- Jennifer Garner, \$5,400
- Seth Green, \$2,000
- Arlo Guthrie, \$500
- Florence Henderson, \$550
- Peter Horton, \$1,625
- Laura Innes, \$1,000
- Jane Kaczmarek, \$1,000
- Jeffrey Katzenberg, \$2,700
- Juliette Lewis, \$500
- Seth MacFarlane, \$5,400
- Rosie O'Donnell, \$5,400
- Ken Olin, \$1,500
- Amy Sherman-Palladino, \$5,400
- Sarah Paulson, \$1,000
- Elizabeth Perkins, \$1,000
- Linda Perry, \$2,000
- Matthew Perry, \$5,400
- Sam Raimi, \$1,500
- Melissa Rivers, \$1,500
- Katey Sagal, \$500
- Sherri Shepherd, \$1,050
- John Slattery, \$2,700
- Aaron Sorkin, \$1,000
- Daniel Stern, \$500
- Kiefer Sutherland, \$5,400
- Steve Zahn, \$250

moved to a secluded country home in nearby Brighton, population 7,500, and she announced her candidacy. The state party cleared the field for Gilbert, who currently faces no competition for the Aug. 2 primary.

"I'm so impressed with her," says U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D), who represented the district in the 1990s and encouraged her to run. "She's been involved in a number of different issues around health care and children and families, and she's very, very bright, very astute. She'd be a terrific congresswoman."

Gilbert faces an uphill climb. It's a nominally swingy, heavily gerrymandered district that stretches 100 miles from the state capital of Lansing to the upscale suburbs of Detroit with a

mighty plain of farmland in between.

Her opponent spent years representing the area in the state House and Senate.

Still, on the power of her fame and her prodigious fundraising, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee listed "MI-08" as one of its "emerging" new opportunities to flip a seat.

Her main slam on Bishop — like many incumbent challengers, she dubs her rival a "career politician" — is his stance on feminist issues such as pay equity and abortion rights, which she supports and Bishop opposes.

"His voting record is decidedly anti-women," she says, reciting his votes to defund Planned Parenthood and against the Paycheck Fairness Act. "All different kinds of people from all different walks of life, they tell me they believe Planned Parenthood should not be defunded." Stu Sandler, a spokesman for Bishop, retorts that "Gilbert is playing games with procedural votes instead of recognizing [equal pay] is already federal law. This isn't surprising because she demonstrates a lack of understanding on issues."

Bishop, meanwhile, returns again and again to Gilbert's own key vulnerability: Last year she disclosed that she owes the IRS and the state of California nearly \$500,000 in back taxes. Although she has arranged payment plans to resolve it, Bishop's news releases refer to the candidate as "tax delinquent Melissa Gilbert." The actress blamed her financial troubles on a coincidence of calamities including recession-era investment losses, a costly divorce from actor Bruce Boxleitner, and a broken back that left her unable to work.

"It screams excessive, I know, but it is relative to what I was earning at the time," Gilbert says firmly, seated besides her husband.

"You have to bear in mind that I was coming from a place of working really hard as a performer and single mom and earning a great deal of money that then just went ka-boom. However, when that happened, I contacted the IRS and I took responsibility for it. I speak to a lot of people who said to me, 'I had the same problem.'"

Gilbert seems mentally ready for this rough-and-tumble. She's hardly a political neophyte, having served two terms as SAG president — a job Ronald Reagan once held — at a time of great turmoil for the movie industry.

As any good politician or actor would, she casts her efforts in the context of a broader narrative, that of the prospect of being elected to Congress at the same time that the country could elect its first female president, Hillary Clinton.



Gilbert is married to Michigan native Timothy Busfield, the Emmy-winning actor best known for "Thirtysomething," who grew up not far from where they live now.

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