

“Call Me Josh”: Congressman Riley in Conversation

By Bill Simons, Secretary, UUP Oneonta



Cooperstown-Oneonta Indivisible Group Leader Virginia Kennedy and Congressman Josh Riley

UUP collaboration with the Indivisible movement continues in the campaign to defend an embattled American democracy. Cooperstown-Oneonta Indivisible invited UUP Oneonta representatives to participate in a small group discussion with Congressman Josh Riley (19th NYS Congressional District) on Friday, February 19, 2026, at 5:30 PM. Christ Church (Episcopal), 46 Fair Street, Cooperstown, graciously provided meeting space for this non-sectarian event. CooperstownOneonta Indivisible group leader Virginia Kennedy, a UUP member, introduced the Congressman and moderated the event. I wore a UUP red shirt and cap reinforcing that the union was in the house.

Setting the tone for the discussion, the Congressman said “call me Josh.” An Endicott native and the son of a maintenance worker, Riley graduated from Harvard Law School despite growing up in a neighborhood without professionals. His parents and boyhood neighbors are Republican, a demographic that contributes to Riley’s respect for freedom of expression. In build and demeanor, Josh Riley resembles the tall, lean, idealistic, fearless, humble Jefferson Smith as portrayed by Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Informal in dress and styling, as evidenced in the accompanying photo, Josh wears boots that have trodden many barns.

Dialogue rather than oration provided the template for interface with the Congressman. During the two hours that followed, Riley listened intently and responded candidly to a range of specific questions on diverse domestic and international issues. I shared ideas about augmenting activism on campuses. Unlike the cultish insistence on absolute conformity to the MAGA leader, enforced by threats to dissenters, the alternative, emphasized Riley, is to recognize that spirited debate and differences are ok, even healthy. Indeed, fostering civil, respectful political discourse is a Riley priority as is the defense of democracy from autocracy.

Upbringing and constituency have educated Riley to the importance of representing diverse people. The New York State 19th Congressional district comprises a large, sprawling, primarily rural/small town area, encompassing 7,848.2 square miles. It includes the entirety or parts of 11 counties, extending from Ithaca in the West past the Hudson River to the Massachusetts border. Delaware County alone is larger than Rhode Island. No party affiliation is dominant in the district, and independents are a large component of its electorate. A key swing district, the 2026 electoral outcome in the 19th will have importance to organization of the U.S House of Representatives.

From the grassroots, Riley finds that many people struggle to pay housing, grocery, medical, and education bills. As he seeks to restore a culture of respect, empathy, and dialogue, Riley believes that affordability and safeguarding democracy are common denominator issues that provide shared ground in our America.