

'I love this town': JD Vance shares Middletown pride at his first VP rally

By Victoria Moorwood
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MIDDLETOWN, Ohio – JD Vance's Middletown rally felt more like a homecoming than his first political rally as a vice presidential candidate.

The U.S. senator from Ohio touched on his and running mate Donald Trump's platforms – like domestic energy production, immigration and "indoctrination" in schools – in the second half of his 40-minute speech. But he started, and ended, by talking about Middletown.

"I love every one of you and I love this town," he said during the Monday event.

Vance, who has been Trump's VP pick for one week, drew hundreds of supporters to Middletown High School, where he graduated in 2003.

Beverly Aikins, his mother, was one of the first people inside the school's auditorium. She called the experience "surreal," and was joined by Vance's sister, step-mother, aunt and other family members, many of whom live in the Butler County city.

Supporters lined up around the school and down Breiel Boulevard, and many of them didn't make it inside. The rally was held in an intimate, roughly-600-person auditorium rather than a large gymnasium, allowing Vance to work the room.

People in the audience called out to and joked with Vance throughout his speech.

"You were born for this!" one woman yelled.

When Vance said Middletown had been forgotten by politicians, one man said, "Amen."

Vance responded to supporters with "God bless you," and, "I love you, too."

'This town was so good to me'

Vance, without help from a teleprompter, easily recalled childhood stories about his gun-toting, Kentucky-born grandmother, Bonnie Blanton Vance, whom he called Mamaw.

"Many of you probably knew her," he said to the audience.

Vance recalled a time his grandmother helped a young girl who was experiencing abuse at home.

"When that little girl ran away from home and tried to find a safe space, she asked, 'Where can I go?' And everybody said, 'You can go to Bonnie Vance's house.' And that is the Mamaw – that is the Middletown that I knew," he said.

Vance named the Middletown streets where he used to ride his bike. He shouted out Central Pastry Shop, a favorite Middletown donut shop, leading to competing calls of "Milton's!" – another local favorite – from the crowd.

"This town was so good to me," he said.

Vance told a story about his high school math teacher, Ron Selby, who was in the audience, and how he thwarted a student who called in a bomb threat to get out of an exam. When Vance called him out, Selby lifted his hat to the crowd.

"JD's a great pick," Selby told The Enquirer after the rally. "He was mature beyond his years when he was in high school – still is now. He's 39 going on 60."

Vance wrote about how Selby motivated him in school in his 2016 memoir, "Hillbilly Elegy." Selby said he had been surprised to be mentioned in Vance's memoir.

"He was very generous in that," Selby said. "I did my small part, and hopefully it works out for him."

Teachers, politicians who knew Vance attend rally

Another former Middletown educator was also in the audience. Judy Thacker, 72, was part of Middletown High School's first graduating class and worked at the school for 31 years, including when Vance was a student.

"I remember him when he was in school. He was quiet back then," she said. "It's great to see somebody from Middletown (running for vice president)."

"He's got good values," she added. "That's what we wanted."

Ohio Rep. Thomas Hall, a Republican whose district includes Middletown, said he remembered meeting Vance at a book signing for "Hillbilly Elegy" at Miami University before he became a senator.

"There's a lot of good things happening in Middletown, and JD's one of them," Hall, who's from Madison Township, said. "He's the same guy I met eight years ago."

Vance echoes promise made at RNC

Vance's stories about his Ohio childhood probably won over his Republican-majority hometown (58% of Middletown voters chose Trump in 2020). But will it work across the country?

The VP candidate quickly hopped back on the campaign trail Monday night for a rally in Radford, Virginia. He left his Middletown audience with an echo of a promise he made when formally accepting Trump's nomination during the Republican National Convention.

"Middletown, I love you. I wouldn't be here without you," he said. "I will never forget where I came from."