

Gingrich's Newt U a hit

By: Daniel Malloy

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TAMPA — The onetime West Georgia College history professor whose presidential campaign speeches veered from the Wright Brothers to supply-side economics to colonizing the moon has come full circle at the Republican National Convention.

Newt University is in session this week, as Newt Gingrich hosts a series of seminars around the Tampa Bay area focused on the big ideas animating the presidential race such as health care and energy. Along with a speech Thursday night, Gingrich is navigating a path back from quixotic presidential candidate to party elder statesman.

“I’ve always been a teacher,” Gingrich told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution on Wednesday just outside his classroom — a mostly empty hotel ballroom with about 50 attendees and a gaggle of reporters. “For me, this is an extension of what I’ve done my whole life. If I had won the presidency, I would have been a teaching president.”

Gingrich’s spot on the RNC podium is all the more surprising considering the vicious and personal charges he traded with nominee Mitt Romney during the campaign. He bashed Romney’s work at Bain Capital and his Swiss bank accounts — which now are Democratic fodder — and even during the Florida primary accused Romney of denying kosher meals to Holocaust survivors in Massachusetts nursing homes.

On Thursday night, Gingrich is slated to speak with his wife, Callista, about former President Ronald Reagan, who was in office when Gingrich was a rising young congressman from Georgia.

It was then when Gingrich made tapes for the political action committee GOPAC intended to inspire young activists. Republican delegates and officeholders still speak about them with reverence.

“A guy like [vice presidential nominee] Paul Ryan, a guy like me, we were created, ideologically we came together through your tapes,” said MSNBC host and former Florida Republican congressman Joe Scarborough, when he pulled the former House speaker aside for an interview Wednesday.

The flowing praise and official role at the RNC suggest that Gingrich is making his way back into Republican good graces after his primary campaign dragged on long after his chances had faded, and included attacks his fellow Republicans often found distasteful.

Gingrich still carries nearly \$5 million in campaign debt and his consulting business collapsed after he left it to pursue the presidency, but he has continued to write books and work to reclaim his status as an idea-generating force in the party. Since dropping out of the race in May, Gingrich has done some campaign surrogate and fundraising work for Romney and other GOP candidates around the country.

The Newt U sessions, which are streamed and archived online and Gingrich has vowed to continue, have been heavy on politicians, and the policy experts were just as eager to snipe at President Barack Obama's administration.

On Monday, **John C. Goodman** of the free-market-advocating **National Center for Policy Analysis** approached touchy territory when he attacked the health care system in Massachusetts — where near-universal insurance coverage was an innovation Romney signed as governor — but he also gave a point-by-point takedown of Obama's health care law.

“Personalized medicine is where science is going,” Goodman said. “Cookbook medicine is where Obama is going.”

Gingrich used the seminars to reinforce and flesh out some of his favorite campaign trail topics. On Monday, he attacked the “elite media” and emphasized the need for Republicans to be “cheerful and positive” when talking about Medicare. On Wednesday, he invited U.S. Sen. John Hoeven and oil tycoon Harold Hamm to talk about North Dakota's oil-based boom.

“What he said on the stump is what he's been saying for 30 years, so you can kind of expect that it's going to keep repeating itself,” said Bob Walker, a 10-term Pennsylvania congressman who served under Gingrich's leadership and became a close adviser to his presidential bid. “But he's clearly an enthusiastic supporter of Gov. Romney now, and we're taking a lot of ideas we've developed over a long, long time and putting them to work in the Romney campaign.”

Key Romney advisers spoke at Newt U, and elected leaders who had shied away from supporting Gingrich during the primary were more than willing to praise the non-candidate's smarts and leadership.

“Newt's been the guy for my lifetime, and for him to continue to be the policy heavyweight for our party is very, very important for our election and also for future elections,” said U.S. Rep. Aaron Schock of Illinois, who endorsed Romney during the primary.

The same was true of some members of the crowd. Mary Ann Waldenmeyer of Leawood, Kansas, was a Romney supporter during the primary but still a longtime Gingrich fan who saw him do a seminar on education at the 2008 GOP convention.

“He's a very intelligent man,” Waldenmeyer said.

Some of his primary backers showed up as well, including Dave Sargent of Chittenden, Vt.

“He’s very forward-thinking,” Sargent said. “He’s also able to look and see what happened in the past, too, and put them together.”

In January in another hotel ballroom up the road in Orlando, Gingrich took the most decisive defeat of his primary campaign, buried in an avalanche of negative advertising from a Romney-aligned super PAC. Gingrich accused Romney and his allies of lying about his record and at times seemed embittered by the experience.

But at Newt U, the Democrats are the liars. Gingrich described the twin goals of the sessions as “creating a fact-based campaign” and “developing a new generation of solutions.”

Asked by Scarborough how he could put the personal attacks behind him, Gingrich professed his love and respect for the American political system itself, and offered a joke.

“I threw a kitchen sink at him; I was fairly tough on Romney,” Gingrich said. “He had a bigger kitchen.”

Gingrich added: “If I had become the nominee, I don’t think he would have done Romney U, but I would have asked him to become finance chairman. We all have certain strengths.”