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Edwards announces presidential bid

By Nedra Pickler
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ROBBINS, N.C. — Democrat John Edwards, the Southern moderate looking to reinvigorate his lagging presidential campaign, formally launched his candidacy Tuesday and promised to be an advocate for working-class Americans.

The North Carolina senator spoke before a now empty textile mill where his father worked for 36 years and he earned money for college mopping beneath the looms, trimming the shrubs and serving as weekend night watchman. The site was chosen to draw a distinction with President George W. Bush, whose father served as congressman, vice president and president.

"America deserves a president who understands that the people of this country work, and the people of this country work hard," he said. "A president who will stand up for those people, someone who will stop at nothing to create opportunity for all the great people of this country."

Before he gets the chance to take on Bush, Edwards must come from behind Democratic rivals who are beating him in primary polls. His announcement lost some thunder to retired Gen. Wesley Clark. Just before Edwards took the stage, word circulated of Clark's plan to announce Wednesday that he would become the 10th candidate in the race.

Edwards called Clark "a good man" and said he's welcome in the race. "The people of America will hear my message. A lot of them will hear it today, a lot of them will hear it over the months to come."

Edwards, who made millions as a trial attorney before entering politics five years ago, first announced his presidential intentions in front of his Raleigh, N.C., home Jan. 2. He had a strong start, raising more than any of his Democratic rivals early this year, but has since lost the money edge to insurgent candidate Howard Dean, a former Vermont governor.

His campaign has yet to draw a winning following. In most polls, Edwards draws single-digit support. Nationally, he ranks among rivals with less funding and organization, such as Al



Sen. John Edwards (D-NC) officially announces his candidacy for president at a rally in his hometown of Robbins, N.C., on Tuesday, Sept. 16, 2003.

Sharpton and Carol Moseley Braun, despite working for the nomination for more than a year.

After his kickoff in Robbins, N.C., Edwards headed to Columbia, S.C., a must-win state in his strategy to reach the White House. Rather than try to capture Iowa and New Hampshire against more seasoned foes, Edwards is banking that voters in the neighboring state would be attracted to a fresh-faced moderate with Carolina roots.

In the latest South Carolina poll, Edwards has moved into the lead with John Kerry, Joe Lieberman and Howard Dean, though none were above 10 percent. Nearly half of the state's voters were undecided, and Edwards plans to focus on wooing them in the next few months.

"Those of us from the South, we have a special responsibility when it comes to civil rights,"

he told the crowd at the University of South Carolina. "We have a responsibility to follow, not to lead."

In some ways, Edwards is a presidential candidate in the mold of former President Bill Clinton — a youthful centrist with Southern charm. But having run for office just once before and served only a single term in the Senate, he doesn't have the resume or the experience of his leading rivals in the race.

His campaign made light of the "Breck girl" label given to him by Republican foes who say his qualifications don't go beyond good looks. Staffers passed out mini-bottles of the shampoo with stickers attached commemorating his announcement.

"I haven't spent most of my life in politics, which most of you know, but I've spent enough time in Washington to know how much we need to change Washington," he said in his speech.

Edwards' career as a trial attorney is seen by some as a liability to his candidacy. But Edwards says it is evidence of his fight for average Americans, and he is completing work on an autobiography called "Four Trials" that highlights some of his legal work.

Edwards says if elected, he would push to make the first year of college free for a student willing to work. He wants a law that would require health insurance for every child, in contrast to rivals who are pushing for nearly universal health care with a higher price tag.

Edwards says he would repeal all of Bush's tax cuts, as some Democratic candidates have proposed. He would keep the child tax credit, relief for married couples and allow other tax cuts targeted at middle-income families while repealing those for the more affluent.

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