NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2001

A Pair of Political Firsts

In Flushing, win will go to Asian-American

By Bryan Virasami
STAFF WRITER

With two Chinese-American candidates for City Council running neck and neck in the Democratic race in Flushing, it became clear yesterday that Queens is about to produce the city's first Asian-American elected official.

In unofficial returns, with 93 percent of the votes counted in the 20th Council District, John Liu was leading Ethel Chen by only 201 votes, according to The Associated Press. Liu had 31 percent of the vote to Chen's 29 percent.

Nonetheless, Liu, a consultant at PricewaterhouseCoopers and a civic activist, said his campaign's own count showed him to be the clear winner yesterday.

"I'm fully confident the election is over and we've prevailed," Liu said yesterday.

Chen's son and campaign manager, James Wu, said last night they thought Liu's claim to victory was premature.

"I think we have the closest race in the city right now," Wu said. "I'd like to see somebody other than John Liu project the winner."

Two other Democrats in the primary, Richard Jannaccio and Terence Park, each received 20 percent of the votes. Both Liu's and Chen's campaigns pointed out that Asian-American candidates won more than 6,000 of the 8,000 votes cast in the primary. Park is Korean-American.

In the days leading up to the original primary date, the contest intensified between Liu, who was backed by the Queens County Democratic Organization, and Chen, a retired librarian who accused Liu of accepting financial donations from developers with close ties to his banker father.

Liu's father, Joseph Liu, was convicted of misusing bank funds when he ran the Great Eastern Bank. He and three others were convicted earlier this year.

While their experiences differ, the candidates have similar roots.

Liu, 34, was born in Taiwan and immigrated with his family to Flushing when he was 5 years old. Chen, 61, was born in China but lived in Taiwan before immigrating to New York more than 30 years ago.

Both campaigned on such issues as education, sanitation, crime, quality of life and senior issues.

Liu was endorsed by several unions and city officials. He raised more than $130,000, one of the highest totals among City Council candidates.

Chen won last-minute support from Councilwoman Julia Harrison (D-Flushing), who is being forced out by term limits.

Whoever wins is likely to sail to victory in the heavily Democratic district and become the first Asian-American to represent the city in an elected office.

While acknowledging the significance of that achievement, Liu downplayed his enthusiasm.

"I'm very proud to be the Democratic nominee for the City Council from [my] hometown of Flushing, very proud," he said. "I'm also very proud to be Asian-American."



Newsday Photos / Ken Spencer

FIRST LATINO: City Council District 21 Democratic primary victor Hiram Monserrate is expected to be elected into legislative office.



A FIRST IN FLUSHING. The winner of Tuesday's Democratic primary for City Council District 20 in Flushing — whether it be John Liu, above, or Ethel Chen, shown below in May — could go on to become the city's first Asian-American elected official.



Monserrate: Victory a sign of 'inclusion'

By Ron Howell
STAFF WRITER

Hiram Monserrate basked yesterday in the glory of Tuesday's victory.

As winner of the Democratic primary in the 21st Council district, he is virtually sure to become the first Latino from Queens elected to legislative office, facing no opposition in the November general elections.

"It shows the inclusion of new Americans and Latinos into the political landscape here in Queens," Monserrate said.

But Monserrate, an ex-city police officer, said he never knew the road to victory would be so difficult.

From the start of the campaign months ago, his opponents homed in on him, calling him a Puerto Rican interloper who should not represent the immigrant Dominicans, Colombians and Ecuadorians who make up most of the Latinos in the district.

"It was a rough, rough road; but I believe that at the end of the day goodness triumphed," he said.

To help goodness along, he said, he filed a suit last week in Queens Supreme Court alleging two of his opponents had slandered him by spreading a false rumor that he shot a black youngster while he was a New York City police officer.

The development was only the latest in one of the most bitter and controversial races in the city.

On Sept. 11, in the predawn hours before voting began, Monserrate was arrested for allegedly trying to run over a tow truck operator who was trying to repossess Monserrate's car.

Monserrate acknowledges the arrest but denies the charges and maintains the tow truck driver instigated a confrontation. He also said he believes the whole incident was a dirty trick of one of his opponents.

Monserrate has encountered conflict before.

When he was a police officer in Bayside, he says he was called a coward, a traitor and a rat by some other officers. They didn't like him, he said, because he openly complained about discrimination against Latino officers like himself.

His vindication came in January 1999, when the city paid $108,000 to settle his claims of harassment by superiors at the 111th Precinct.

With that money in hand, and 12 years on the job behind him, Monserrate left the Police Department to start a new life in politics.

Tuesday he won a big victory in that new world.

In the closely watched race, four candidates, all Latinos, were competing to fill the East Elmhurst-Corona-Jackson Heights seat being vacated by term-limited incumbent Helen Marshall. In unofficial returns, Monserrate got 42 percent of the vote. His nearest rival, Luis Rosero, got 28 percent.

Although they make up about a quarter of the population in Queens, Latinos had, until now, been unable to elect a Latino to office.

Born in Manhattan 34 years ago to Puerto Rican parents, Monserrate moved to Queens with his family when he was 5 years old. He attended Jamaica High School and Queensborough Community College before going to Queens College, where he earned his bachelor's degree in political science.

Along the way Monserrate joined the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves.

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