

Agent of Change

By: *Chip Scutari*, Phoenix Magazine
Issue: May, 2009, Page 35



PARADISE VALLEY MAYOR VERNON PARKER IS BREAKING MOLDS IN THE VALLEY'S WEALTHIEST AREA. WILL HIS ASCENT RE-SHAPE THE REPUBLICAN PARTY?

You meet Paradise Valley Mayor Vernon Parker, and a few thoughts immediately pop into your head:

A.) He must come from a hoity-toity family because he carries an aristocratic charm and a Brooks Brothers fashion sense. B.) He could be the next rock star in Arizona politics. C.) He must be a phony because he's just too damn nice.

Let's skip B and C for now. And scratch A off the list. Turns out Parker grew up in a cramped house in Long Beach, California, where his heroin-addicted uncle would steal anything possible to fuel his drug addiction. Outside the home, Parker's neighborhood was more about Bloods and Crips than blue bloods. One of his cousins is on death row in California; another cousin died of AIDS because of a drug habit. Most of the kids from his childhood are either dead, in jail or on drugs.

Parker was not debonair as a youngster. He was cross-eyed and had a speech impediment. He took a bus across town so he could attend a top-notch public high school (now immortalized in the movie *Freedom Writers*). Some of his teachers immediately put him in a "limited potential" box, labeling him as one of "those kids" from one of "those neighborhoods."

"I grew up in a home that sociologists love to dwell on," Parker says. "I would come home from school and the TV was gone. All the furniture was gone. It was very common to find [drug]

needles and spoons under the bed. If I had to guess, I would say I'm less than one-tenth of 1 percent [of those] who got out of that situation."

This is not the typical résumé for a future Republican leader. As you can tell by his photo, Vernon Bernard Parker is not – hold your breath, Rush Limbaugh – white. Paradise Valley, on the other hand, is probably the richest, whitest town in the Valley, if not Arizona. The latest Census figures show that 40 percent of the households there make more than \$200,000 per year, and less than 1 percent of the residents are black (compared with 4.4 percent for the greater Phoenix-metro area). Since taking office last June, Parker has patiently and prudently extracted many concessions from the developer of a high-profile Ritz Carlton project and been praised by most residents for his moderate stance on growth.

Still, Parker usually stands out at Republican gatherings because he's the only African-American man in the room.

"Race is always an issue," says the 48-year-old. "We have to ask the leaders of the Arizona Republican Party what they are doing to reach out to minorities. I'd be lying to you if I said there weren't times when I thought about switching parties. But I'm not a quitter, and I want to be an agent of change for Republicans."

Political rock star? Sure. Parker has an Everyman appeal, an Obama-like swagger and an easy laugh. But if you're questioning Parker's political chops, consider this: He was on the short list for Arizona Secretary of State before Governor Jan Brewer chose former State Senator Ken Bennett, R-Prescott. Parker's name also has popped up in GOP circles as a possible Attorney General and congressional candidate.



Republican strategist Nathan Sproul says Parker should play a leading role in the "national Republican Party."

"There's no doubt Vernon Parker will become governor or a United States senator someday, if he wants to," says Sproul, who owns a political consulting firm and has strong ties to the

Republican National Committee. “Vernon Parker will be embraced by national leaders as a spokesman for what it means to have Republican values. He’ll show why it works, not just for the country clubbers, but why it can work for everybody.”

Amazed by his life story, some Democrats are quick to praise his persona in hopes of converting Parker to their cause.

“He’s confident without being cocky... sort of like President Obama,” says Barry Dill, a top Democratic strategist who met Parker during the 2002 gubernatorial race. “He leaves me scratching my head about how in the world he became and remains a Republican. He’s a very skilled operator.”

Before coming to Paradise Valley, Parker was picked to be assistant secretary for civil rights for the United States Department of Agriculture under President George W. Bush. The U.S. Senate confirmed him unanimously.

In March 2008, Parker received the most votes for Town Council in the history of Paradise Valley with 67 percent of the vote. He became the first African-American council member in town history. Then his council peers picked him to be mayor. He seemed to be living a politically charmed life.

Then a phone call came last summer. The resulting headline in The Arizona Republic was blunt and brutal: “Mayor filed false report, SBA says.”

The U.S. Small Business Administration accused Parker, whose consulting firm coached small businesses on how to apply for government contracts, of forging documents and altering bank accounts to enhance his company’s chances of winning a \$1.2 million federal contract.

The allegations, however, are starting to disintegrate since Parker hired Paul Charlton, a former U.S. attorney who himself lived through a politically charged ordeal when the Bush White House tried to fire federal prosecutors based on flimsy evidence.

“I was a prosecutor for 17 years, and I’ve never read a report that was this poorly written. In the end, they tried to hide material that would have proven Vernon’s innocence,” says Charlton, who is working Parker’s case pro bono. “When the truth comes out, it will not hurt his political career. He is a bright individual, a good man and an honest man.”

Earlier this year, the Arizona SBA office dismissed charges against Parker. Now Charlton is appealing to a federal administrative law judge in Washington, D.C., to persuade the federal SBA to do the same.

“Life is about going through tough times, because those who make it through the hard times can do anything,” Parker says. “Sure these SBA stories have been tough. But I’ve survived a lot worse. I’ll be fine.”

If Parker is a phony, he belongs in the con man Hall of Fame. He still gets his hair cut at the Esquire Barber Shop in south Phoenix, a spot that's more Ice Cube than iced cappuccino. Joyce Reynolds, who has been Parker's barber for a decade, doesn't care about his political affiliation.

"Sure I'd vote for him," Reynolds says. "I don't care if he's a Republican.... He is just a good, all-around guy."

Arizona Republicans might have an agent of change they can believe in. Sound familiar?