

Governor hopeful faces GOP establishment

by **Laurie Roberts** - Jan. 6, 2010 12:00 AM
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Vernon Parker says he is realistic - some say optimistic - about what to expect this year. "The bazookas, the cannons are going to come after me," he says. "That's fine. I'm ready for it."

At this, the dawn of a big election year in Arizona, Parker is the most intriguing candidate running for governor. This great-great-grandson of a slave is the mayor of the wealthiest, whitest town in Arizona. He's a Black man running for the top job in a state that was one of the last to establish a holiday honoring the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. And he's a Republican.

If Parker somehow defies the political odds, he would become the nation's first African-American Republican ever elected governor. But first, he has to get past this state's political establishment, most of which is rolling its collective eyeballs at the notion that this relative unknown could have a shot.

Other than one successful run last year for the Paradise Valley Town Council, Parker has never run for public office. That, however, may be his most valuable campaign asset. That, and a compelling story.

Parker grew up in a gang-infested neighborhood in Long Beach, Calif., raised by a grandmother who cleaned houses by day and by night had her grandson read to her from the Bible. Summers brought a trip to camp, but to get there, he had to sell butter-toffee peanuts.

It was in those peanuts that Parker found the underpinnings of his Republican philosophy. "It taught that if you are going to get something out of life, you're going to have to work for it because if you didn't sell them, you weren't going."

There was never any question in Parker's mind. He was going. To camp. The first in his family to college. To law school.

He was accepted at Georgetown and had only enough for a semester's tuition when he bought a one-way ticket to Washington. "My thought," he said, "was if I got out there and succeeded, they'd have to keep me."

He did, and they did.

At Georgetown, he met not only his future wife, Lisa, but his political future, which came via an introduction to then-Vice President George H.W. Bush. After graduation, Parker served in the Bush administration and by age 31, the kid who sold peanuts to get to camp was working in the White House.

After Bush's defeat, the Parkers moved to Arizona, but Vernon commuted to Washington for three years during the George W. Bush administration, serving as assistant secretary for civil rights in the Agriculture Department.

Since returning to Arizona in 2006, Parker has run a consulting firm, and in 2008 was elected to PV's Town Council, which made him mayor.

It's easy to see why. The guy has a natural charm and an impressive resume of public and civic service. Parker, who once got food boxes from the Salvation Army, just finished a term on the charity's National Advisory Board, proving that anything's possible. Or most anything.

Pundits and pollsters tell me that Parker offers "a novelty factor" but faces tough challenges.

First, he's running as a Clean Elections candidate, which means there won't be much money upon which to build name ID. And he's running against a sitting governor and probably state Treasurer Dean Martin. That's before he gets to the likely Democratic nominee: Attorney General Terry Goddard.

Second, when Parker is mentioned, so is his past legal trouble. He was the focus of a 2008 inquiry into whether his consulting firm improperly qualified for a federal contracting program intended for minority- and women-owned firms. His lawyer, former U.S. Attorney Paul Charlton, says the serious allegations were dropped, though Parker is no longer in the program because of a technicality. Parker has filed a lawsuit, claiming the investigation was politically motivated.

If he can overcome the challenges, he could do well in a GOP primary. He's pro-life and adamantly opposed to Gov. Jan Brewer's call for a temporary tax hike. But he hasn't explained how he would pull us out of the financial abyss, preferring to talk about leadership.

"You can't discuss the budget crisis, you can't discuss education, you can't discuss bringing jobs to the state if you have poor leadership at the top," he said.

If the big issue of 2010 is leadership, the intriguing question is whether a Black man can convince the state that he's the guy to supply it.

Parker just smiles when told what the pundits are saying, perhaps remembering a recent visit to the White retirement community of Sun Lakes, where people lined up after his speech to shake his hand and give him \$5 donations.

"My entire life, Laurie, I've gone against the world, you know? We're going to prove everybody wrong again," he says. "That's my entire life, proving everybody wrong."

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