

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Who's Drinking The Kool-Aid?

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Freelance writer and Yale senior Ayesha K. Faines (pictured) interviewed the candidates competing and the neighbors working in two of Tuesday's Democratic Party aldermanic primaries in order to cut through the rhetoric and draw her own conclusions.

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By Ayesha K. Faines

For the residents of Ward 2 and Ward 22 the prospect of electing an alderman who is insensitive to the dire needs and issues facing their community could have costly repercussions. However, amidst mud-slinging campaigns and political side-shows, the best candidate for the job may not be the obvious choice.

At face value, the [Ward 2](#) race between Gina Calder and Frank Douglass appears to be a struggle between opposites. Gina is a student at the Yale University School of Public Health and a graduate of Yale College. She is the Democratic-endorsed candidate who lost to 3-term incumbent Joyce Chen in 2005 by a mere 24 votes. She is

also, according to her political foes, against workers organizing and workers rights, a historically divisive issue in New Haven.

Her opponent Frank Douglass, father of four, was born and raised in New Haven. An employee of Yale, he is the 2nd chef in Trumbull College. Douglass is a long-time member of the Local 35 labor union and he currently sits on the E-Board.

"My advantage over Gina is my roots," Douglass states proudly. "If I take the lead it will be because I have a lot of followers and a lot of back-up." He says that he can count on the baby boomers, the workers and even the Yale Students to show up at the polls.

To the contrary, if Douglass has any advantage, it probably will not be his New Haven roots. After all, Joyce Chen was a Yale student and certainly not a New Haven native.

"The people spoke when they chose Joyce Chen because they want someone that is not a puppet and at the end of the day she kept her independence," says Jacqueline James, the Alderman for Ward 3 since 2002. "There has to be a level of conscious autonomy.

"Joyce Chen was alderman for three terms and was never supportive of the [city] administration. They have always run someone against her. Gina was that candidate. What's hurting Gina is what people are assuming about her."

In a neighborhood where the needs of the residents are frequently left unmet, a mayoral endorsement could be the kiss of death. Many residents perceive it as the candidate's willingness to sell out.

Calder's internship with Yale-New Haven Hospital during the summer of 2007 only added salt to the wound. Her deliberate affiliation with an institution that has been a barrier to workers organizing characterized her political bearings as anti-union.

So in a ward where a good portion of the adult residents are affiliated with Yale University, Yale-New Haven Hospital, and local unions, Frank Douglass should be the obvious choice. But is he?

"What has he done?" Calder questions rhetorically while seated in her Dwight Street apartment, cluttered with campaign paraphernalia. Despite the fact that her car was towed while she hosted an event on Yale's campus, she is calm, collective, and focused on explaining her intentions. "It's about action. It's about work—Yes I'm a Yale Student and proud of it, but I'm not twiddling my thumbs trying to build a resume. I'm equipping myself with the tools I'll need to work."

Calder explains that allegations of her being anti-union are far from the truth. She took the internship at Yale-New Haven Hospital despite warnings from union leadership in the early 2007 because she knew that within her career, she was fighting a greater crusade.

"Anything worth having is worth fighting for. At the end of the day, the leadership in the top hospitals across the countries — They don't look like me. I'm trying to eliminate health disparities. I know what my purpose is."

And it may be this very conviction that makes Calder a viable candidate for Ward 2 alderman. Not only is she determined to "be a part of the solution," as she puts it, but her track record in the community is outstanding and trumps that of her opponent. Calder founded and currently chairs the Youth Concerns Committee. She established an annual basketball tournament for youth and community cook out. She is also an active member of the Black History Coalition and helps run the annual Gateway celebration. And that is only spot lighting a few of her initiatives.

Union and mayoral issues assumptions aside, at close glance these two candidates are really not so different. Both put the New Haven youth and crime control at to the top of their priorities. They both find frustration in the fact that felons face grave obstacles when trying to re-enter the workforce.

"A half of young males have 'felon' hanging over their heads and once their in the system it's like they're kept in the system," says Douglass.

Another striking similarity in their platforms is their concern for women forced to be the primary bread-winner of the family.

"If [a woman] can't find a job for her husband or boyfriend, that family falls apart" Calder says.

"A lot of women are working two jobs and you can't take care of your family if you work 60 hours per week." Douglass says in a comment that eerily echoes Gina's.

Tables Turned In 22

Some might argue that Calder's party endorsement, certainly not her qualifications, have made her the underdog in this race. Circumstances however are quite the opposite in **Ward 22**, one of the most heated local elections that Elm City has witnessed in years. To many, endorsed candidate Alderman Greg Morehead is the obvious shoe-in.

"He really has the ability to focus on what's important," says Eric Kafka, president of the Yale College Democrats. Kafka and Morehead met at a heated forum in 2007, shortly before former Dixwell Alderman Drew King stepped down. "There was a candidate that was already endorsed by the town committee and like by the students at Yale. At that point it seemed like the right thing to do," Kafka says of his organization's official nod of approval. In a special election, overwhelming support from Yale College students and the Democratic Party secured Morehead's victory over his competitors

Cordelia Thorpe, Lisa Hopkins, and Reggie Lytle.

The September primary elections should be regarded as Round II in this toe-to-toe political match with all of his opponents vowing to take him down. But that will not be an easy feat. Greg has five months experience over them. That is to say he has had five months in which to prove himself capable as a political leader.

"I've been working since I've been in office," he says. "I haven't let any grass grow under my feet."

Amongst his most successful accomplishments is the work he has done for seniors. Morehead credits himself with revitalizing the activities for senior citizens at 114 Bristol and 69 Webster, two establishments in Monterrey Place. They'd been temporarily closed due to lack of funding and a pesky trespassing issue. "I approved a proposal for the Monterrey Advisory Board," he explains, "because the seniors felt like they were in a jail. That's crazy because it was."

Morehead has also charmed voters with his ambitious plans for the Q House, a long time sanctuary within the community that has been closed for the past eight years due to issues of funding. Inspired by a technology and arts center that he visited in Ohio, Morehead is now "looking to build a youth center in our ward". He cites the Q House as a potential location.

Nevertheless, amidst a confident persona, powerful endorsements, barbecues, open-mics and lofty promises, many residents are wondering if the rise of Alderman Greg Morehead is something like the childhood fable, "The Emperor's New Clothes." Has he duped his constituency with illusions grandeur when in fact little is really there?

To begin, although the Q-House holds a mighty place in the hearts of Elm City residents, it is \$1.5 million in debt and will require \$3 million more for renovation. Therefore creating an art a technology center is a lofty dream indeed.

Barbara Whittaker is a long-time resident of Monterrey Place, the same complex where Morehead resided with his wife and three children until he bought his house two years ago. "I've never head of him or seen him interact with residents," Whittaker confesses. She also says that his claims of initiating the programs for seniors at 114 Bristol and 69 Webster Place are "total untruth".

"Revitalization of the senior programs was already in place before Greg became an alderman." She explains that this project was funded by an endowment from BCJ, the developers of Monterrey Place.

She also contests his assertion that the senior citizens felt like they were in prison. "I think that was something he came up with himself. A lot of seniors don't understand the political process and how it works. They more or less take in account what he says at face value."

Whittaker explains that Morehead doesn't have the authority to do a lot of the things he promises, such as change the strict regulations that govern the properties of Monterrey Place. "We are public housing residents, and we have to abide by the rules." Whittaker believes that Morehead "has the seniors bamboozled."

Other concerned parties question Morehead's qualifications as a political leader. "I don't think that Greg Morehead is a good representative of open government or fiscal responsibility," states Jeffrey Kerekes of New Haven CAN, an organization founded in the aftermath of a 2007 tax increase that Morehead voted to instate. He also voted in favor of this year's controversial budget. In fact his voting record has raised some eyebrows. Morehead has voted in line with the administration.

Michael Jefferson, a prominent New Haven civil-rights attorney, understands the heart of the matter. "There is a history in communities like Ward 2 and Ward 22 of community leaders using the electorate to gain political power and then using that power to serve other interests. As far as local politics go, people use the votes to get where they want to go, but they serve the interests of City Hall and not their constituency."

Should one rightfully assume that Morehead is a puppet just because of his voting record? No, according to the candidate, who stands by his every move. "Having [the mayor's] support doesn't mean that I'm in total agreement with everything he says. I do have a backbone and I can think for myself." Furthermore, Morehead insists that his affiliation with the DeStefano administration ends at his endorsement.

Morehead and his wife moved to New Haven in 2000 from Mt. Vernon, N.Y.. "We didn't know anything about New Haven except Yale," he confesses. Since then he has become a jack-of-all trades. He and his wife do computer repair work, financial counseling and credit restoration, and Morehead, a drummer, also finds time to manage a band. A jack of all trades, yes, but none of those trades involve City Hall. "I don't want a job with City Hall," he states flatly. "It would be a conflict of interest."

As a matter of fact it would be a huge conflict of interest, particular to the interests of Ward 22 residents. This is why simmering unproved allegations that he has been hired to be a "street outreach worker" for the New Haven Family Alliance are alarming. News of his recent employment with the mayor's new youth initiative has begun to circulate amidst his colleagues within that program and other political insiders.

"Greg can't depend on votes in the community," says opponent Lisa Hopkins. "Already I'm coined the 'people's choice.'" Lisa Hopkins finished third last spring, but after launching a grassroots campaign now stands as his principal competition. Her platform of "empowering the community to be real stake holders in the political process" is fitting of the self-professed community activist considering her substantial professional background in building mixed-income communities and implementing Hope 6 Projects.

"It's not enough to read someone's literature or listen to a friend. Your job is to dissect that individual that is coming to you and asking for your vote. What is this person's track record? What does this person stand for? Who is he or she?" cautions Jefferson.

In high-stakes communities such as Ward 2 and Ward 22 the decision process is crucial because the ramifications of being politically misrepresented will be felt by the residents for years to come. This reality is complicated by the significant presence of the Yale community in both of these wards. Can Yale students who for the most part are isolated from many of the vices that plague Ward 2 and Ward 22 residents effectively make political decisions for them?

"We are the ones that are going to have to live with the repercussions?" states Barbara Whittaker.

At the end of the day, the alderman must be both a political leader and a community organizer. The aldermanic board is the greatest opportunity for the residents of New Haven to have their voices heard. These local politics cannot center on alliances and affiliations, but rather character. Who is willing to go to bat for the needs of the community? It is a lofty job. And on the eve of the elections residents still wonder....

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