Reed Between the Lines

A tale of two campaigns: Phil Reed saves his life and his city

March 1, 1998 By David Kirby

Election night, 1997. A cold November wind blows off the East River and through the struggling blocks of East Harlem. But inside Emily's rib place on upper Fifth Avenue, a celebration is heating up to inferno levels. Phil Reed, local hero, has just been declared the winner in the election to represent the 8th District on the New York City Council.

"You did it, my man!" says assemblyman Keith Wright, smothering Reed in a bear hug. "After all these years!" Wright seems on the verge of tears, as are many of the revelers, whooping and cheering for their candidate. These are Reed's people -- men and women of every age, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. They elected him; they're sending a gay African American with HIV into the beating heart of New York's rough-and-tumble political world to make trouble.

Trouble is Reed's specialty. He is ready to fight for more housing and better health care for his uptown, downscale district, battling what he perceives as the bottom-line values of the city's boomtown economy. "The New York City renaissance has not yet crossed north of 96th Street," he tells friends, supporters and -- now that he's elected -- constituents.

Reed won with 75 percent of the vote, a landslide in the largely minority district. True, Democrats tend to dominate New York's political arena (the current mayor is an exception), but given that a big bloc of Latino voters in Reed's district organized against him, Reed's returns are impressive. To pull in such numbers, he had to stitch together a coalition of African Americans, white liberals and enough Latino backers to tip the scale in his favor. Not easy when prominent members of the Latino community -- like State Senator Olga Mendez, whose aide, Jorge Vidro, ran against Reed in the primary -- urged Latinos to support Latino candidates. According to Mendez, the seat Reed won "was designed for a member of the East Side community." Is that another way of saying Hispanic? "No," she says. "We used to be represented by Carolyn Maloney [currently representing Manhattan in the U.S. Congress]. A politician from the West Side is not the same as a politician from the East Side." It's not like East Siders didn't have the opportunity to vote for their own: Reed's three opponents (including the one Republican) were Latino.

Reed knows that he'll have to stir the complacent, self-satisfied pot of late '90s New York to help his district, which hopscotches from Manhattan Valley to Spanish (East) Harlem to the South Bronx, one of the city's roughest neighborhoods. The rest of New York might be booming, but Reed's turf suffers 20 percent unemployment and has high rates of crime, poverty, drug abuse,

teen pregnancy and AIDS. “In the good times, most people don’t give a shit about social problems, but we’ve got life-and-death issues here,” Reed says to a group of supporters at the victory party. “New infections of HIV are extremely high, and there isn’t enough access to services, especially health care. We also have environmental problems that range from heavily polluting bus terminals to toxic waste sites to the highest rate of asthma in the city because of roach droppings.”

This is serious business, and Reed is serious about tackling the problems. But tonight is a time for laughs, ribs and those remarkable returns that continue to come in via New York 1, an all-local-news cable channel giving continuous coverage to this otherwise ho-hum election.

“The night Phil Reed won, I was so happy that, well, wherever you can get, that’s where I was!” says Rosetta Williams, a member of the Three Parks Democratic Club, a racially mixed, old-style, community-based group bonded as much by place as by politics. It is the club’s first meeting since Reed’s victory one week before, and the 40 or so who have gathered in a hall at the International Youth Hostel on the Upper West Side clap and cheer to congratulate him as he enters. This is Reed’s political home, and Three Parks (named for Central, Riverside and Morningside parks) represents a part of the Upper West Side and Manhattan Valley -- Reed’s neighborhood. “I’ve been working to get Phil into office all these years because I love him,” Williams says. Wendy Pastor, a state legislative aide, friend and political ally, agrees. “I’ve watched Phil work and struggle for ten years to get here,” she says, watching Reed, a polished pro, work the room with handshakes and hugs. “I can’t believe he almost didn’t make it to this point.”

Pastor is talking about the malignancy that invaded Reed’s body in 1995: Third-stage multiple myeloma, a deadly bone-marrow cancer that makes the plasma go berserk. Reed was diagnosed with HIV in 1984, and though there’s no proven connection between HIV and myeloma, Reed believes they’re related. Indeed, a recent article in *The New York Times* cited a possible link with the virus that causes Kaposi’s sarcoma.

“They gave me four months. I’d thought I might die of AIDS, but not this other thing. It eats at your bones, causing holes in the skeleton until it falls down and you die,” Reed says. The meeting is over, and he’s back home, gulping Diet Pepsi and puffing on one of the few cigarettes he allows himself each day. Reed has always lived comfortably, and his one-bedroom apartment overlooking Central Park at 103rd Street is surely one of the finest addresses in his district. As he gazes out across the amber leaves of the park to the glittering towers of Fifth Avenue, it becomes apparent that Reed is ill-at-ease when speaking about his disease -- the myeloma, that is. “It’s difficult to talk about my cancer,” he says, tears welling in his eyes. Eighteen months of sickening chemotherapy followed his April 1995 diagnosis, tempered only by “all the wonderful people who ran my life for me during that time. My doctor told me to prepare for bad news, because you never have to prepare for good news,” he says. Especially considering myeloma’s three-year average life expectancy after diagnosis. Yet somehow, by September 1996, Reed was feeling better, and by January of last year he was back to work.

“Phil’s a survivor,” says Elinor Hackney -- Reed’s twin sister -- speaking by phone from her Silver Spring, Maryland, home. “His own struggles with life-and-death issues, with himself and his

friends, have given him an understanding of what people go through. It's left him with a real humility, a thankfulness for having what he has and accomplishing what he's been able to accomplish."

"What *else* did she say?" Reed asks after learning that his sister was interviewed for this article; it's almost as if he knew it wouldn't be entirely positive. And it wasn't. "Phil is quick to make judgments about a person's intellect," Hackney says candidly about Reed's less-impressive attributes. "He sometimes cuts people off before they're able to express themselves clearly. He used to do that with me, but I put a stop to it."

Hearing this, Reed smiles. He clearly knows the downside of his reputation: Difficult, arrogant, judgmental, maybe a bit quick-tempered on bad days. He's too smart not to recognize a certain attitude problem, but artful enough to use it to his advantage, even when reaching out to Latinos in East Harlem and the Bronx who didn't vote for him. "There's a great deal of tension from both sides. I've heard African Americans speaking very disparagingly of Latinos and vice-versa. Still, I am going to be the councilman, and East Harlem has to accept that," he says, his tone now shifting into that "cutoff" mode his sister described. "We all gotta work together, honey. Besides, I won East Harlem in the primary, too." True, though his narrow margin of victory in that section of the 8th District -- 220 votes -- hardly indicates a groundswell of support.

To Reed, none of this is the least bit daunting. "Philip has the arrogance to think he can make a difference," says longtime friend Jill Nelson, a New York-based writer, "and I commend him, because so many have lost that belief in themselves. No one, and nothing, will stand in Philip's way 'til he gets what he wants. Thank God he wants good things, like peace and justice." Another old friend, Tom Rhue, a college professor in Los Angeles, agrees. "Phil's got ire all right, but it's good ire. I've seen him turn it on some pretty evil people," he says.

Reed's dismantled campaign headquarters has ended up in cardboard boxes in his living room. "Now that the election's over, I'm trying to remember I live here. I want my life back for a while," he says, stacking boxes in the corner as he listens to soft jazz on the radio.

Besides politics, a big part of Reed's life is his love of jazz and R&B. "I've got millions of records. I could teach a course," he says. He makes an annual trip to the Montreal Jazz Festival. "French-Canadian boys are so adorable," says Reed, but it really is the music that he goes for. Ask him who his favorite musicians are, and he rattles off a list as if they're household names: Kenny Burrell, Cannonball Adderley. "Now, you're *not* going to tell me," he says, raising an eyebrow, "that you've never heard of Cannonball Adderley, are you?"

When it comes to past relationships, Reed is less forthcoming with names. "I haven't been lucky in that department. I've had my heart broken -- I'm sure we all have," he says, though he seems ready to launch a new campaign. "I'm ready and waiting for a husband, and you can print that, baby."

Kicking back in his leather recliner, Reed is a fit 48-year-old with light brown skin, wire-framed glasses and short-cropped hair that's graying and thinning. His face has an intensity that suggests

struggles, both recent -- cancer, campaign -- and lifelong, though his upbringing included an apartment on Manhattan's West End Avenue, prep school in Massachusetts and a home on Martha's Vineyard that his family still maintains.

Not that there wasn't turmoil. Reed's white mother met his black father in San Francisco in 1948, "when racial issues were beginning to percolate." Since interracial marriage was against the law, they eloped to Mexico. "When my grandfather found out, he disowned my mother," Reed says.

The newlyweds continued their romantic romp through Latin America, and the Reed twins were conceived "somewhere in Central America." But their parents' relationship was short-lived: Their mother returned to New York to give birth. Reed's father died in 1966, and though Reed never met him, he had his father once pointed out to him at a party. No introductions were made. "I didn't want to talk to him," is all Reed says.

Eventually, his mother remarried. "He was a white man who was very involved with the work of Martin Luther King," Reed says. "The whole family got involved. That's how I got my taste for politics." Reed recalls the tales of civil-rights struggles in the South that he heard first-hand from the Freedom Riders who stayed at his parents' apartment. "There was a lot of energy in the late '50s and early '60s. That's when I met Dr. King," he says, opening an autographed copy of King's book, *Stride Toward Freedom*. "I remember being in awe when I met him. I thought, 'Here's this man doing such great stuff, and he's so personable, so pleasant.'"

Reed came of age just as the Vietnam War was intensifying. After dropping out of Ohio Wesleyan College, he received his draft notice, but Reed had no intention of going. Citing his years of work for peace and justice -- his family's favorite pastime -- he was granted "conscientious objector" status, one of the few to qualify on nonreligious grounds. "In hindsight, all I had to do was say I was gay, but I wasn't quite ready for that," he says. That's what the next phase of his life was about: Ten years in the San Francisco Bay area, where Reed rubbed shoulders with Angela Davis, Harvey Milk, Eldridge Cleaver and Jim Jones. Eventually, he went to work as a service-contract salesman for Otis Elevators, but Reed's political life also fell into place when he, Tom Rhue and other friends formed Third World Gay People Against Racism and Political Oppression. "It was a black, gay rap group -- *rap* as in talking," says Reed, who had the task of opening the group's checking account. "I went to the bank, trembling. It was the first time I'd done anything openly gay. But the teller was really helpful. She suggested we use our initials on the check, because the whole name wouldn't fit!" Sadly, most of the group has died of AIDS. "I used to have countless friends in San Francisco. Now I have just one friend left alive there. San Francisco is a ghost town for me," Reed says.

If Reed came to terms with his homosexuality, his mother struggled with it, despite her staunch support for civil rights. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, she moved to California. "I spent much time helping her die," says Reed, who also used the time to clear the air between them. "I just said, 'Mom, you had to leave town to marry your husband, and your father disowned you for it. Of all people, you should understand me.'"

Soon after his mother's death in 1977, Reed left San Francisco and returned to New York: "I'd stayed in the candy store a little too long," he says. Though his New York political life was less radical than the days of Third World Gay People Against Racism and Political Oppression, it was no less active. In 1984, he joined his local community board, waging his first battle in support of middle-income -- in addition to low-income -- housing in his mostly black and Latino neighborhood. "They called me a pro-development, anti-progressive 'Not In My Backyard,' but you can't stabilize a neighborhood with just poor people."

Reed left Otis Elevators, taking a pay cut, to jump-start an HIV program in Brooklyn geared to helping the community integrate mental, legal and primary-care services. "It was a prototype, the very first in the nation," he says. "It was also the most rewarding job I ever had." His first bid for city council ended in defeat in 1991, but Reed continued working on the issues that affected his district: Crime, housing, health. He helped clean up West 107th Street, a notorious drug-dealing strip. He fought to save needle-exchange programs through his work on the city's HIV Planning Council. And he won his battle over middle-income housing when construction began on Towers on the Park.

Then came the cancer disaster, followed by the chemo miracle. "My biopsy was free of cancer -- I was one of the rare people to be cured," he says. But there was a sad side to the good news, too. "On the day I found out, I went to the hospital to tell my best friend, Jesse Crawford." Tears brim in Reed's eyes. "I had to tell him I was going to live, while he lay there dying of AIDS."

Days after the election, Reed gets a chance to show what he can do. A proposed 45-unit facility for homeless people with AIDS in his area is met with the kind of opposition that seems to be the trend in Manhattan (even in liberal areas heavily hit by HIV, like Reed's district), and Reed is asked -- as councilman-elect -- to bring the divided community together to talk it out. "I went to the neighborhood's emergency meeting," he says, "and I realized that this is a meeting of the block association that I was once head of, dealing with an issue that must go before the planning commission that I once sat on, being held in a church that I worship in, in a council district that I'm about to represent, dealing with the issue of HIV, which I have."

In the flush of victory, Reed has apparently closed all his circles. But State Senator Olga Mendez accuses Reed of hiding his HIV status during his campaign. "If you have HIV, it's your obligation to tell the voters, who have a right to know that you're in good health," she says. "Phil Reed kept it quiet, and it was a devious thing to do."

Reed rejects Mendez's accusation as absurd. "My serostatus is a matter of public record. I have been publicly identified as a person with HIV in both the political and AIDS activists communities," he says. "I was put on the HIV Planning Council by Mayor Giuliani as a person with HIV."

HIV was far from the focus of his campaign, Reed is the first to admit. "I talked about my HIV infection when it was appropriate, but I wanted to draw attention to my district, not my health," he says. "People thought I was crazy when I announced I was running for office. A lot of them thought I had already died of AIDS, so we called my campaign 'Dead Man Running.'" Reed is not the city

council’s only member who has HIV: Tom Duane was elected more than six years ago. “Phil’s going to be a great addition,” Duane says. “He’s very outspoken, and that’s good because he has a voice that people will have to listen to.”

“Phil may become the first black, gay mayor of New York,” says Jill Nelson. “He has great compassion and commitment. It’s from coming of age in the ’60s. He’s hard to beat, he perseveres, he’s tenacious and won’t let go if he thinks he can make a difference.” Tom Rhue also sees bigger things in store for Reed. “He was always the one with talent and intellect. I keep a file on Phil because I know he’s going to be a significant person,” Rhue says, as if Reed has not yet achieved significance.

“I’ll have to stay alive to do that,” Reed says, noting that the recurrence rate for myeloma is high, not to mention the uncertainty of life with HIV. Thanks to his current saquinavir, d4T and 3TC cocktail, Reed’s CD4 count is hovering around 350, and he describes his viral load as “under control. I have no idea what the future will bring, no aspirations beyond this point, except to do a good job,” he says. “And, of course, to settle down and find a mate.”

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