

# SNEAKERS AND POLITICS:

## A SATURDAY MORNING ON 116<sup>TH</sup> STREET



**FEBRUARY 10, 2017**

At 10:30 AM, a crowd of men in their teens and twenties lined 116<sup>th</sup> Street between Malcom X and Adam C Powell Jr Boulevards. A few sipped coffee and chomped on paper-wrapped breakfast sandwiches. Many dressed in variants of the same outfit: a hooded puffer jacket, leg-hugging black pants, and colorful sneakers. Almost all sported a Nike Swoosh.

In honor of New York Fashion Week, Nike opened a pop-up shop that morning to sell a capsule collection with VLONG, the cult streetwear brand helmed by musician A\$AP Rocky. The collection centered the debut of a new sneaker, the VLONG Air Force 1 Low. But Nike waited until 8:00 Saturday evening to release

that key product: fans lined up that morning came solely for the satellite goods. “Apparel now, sneakers tonight,” security guards grunted repeatedly to newcomers joining the line, which then wrapped more than twice around their third-of-a-block territory.

On the opposite side of the street, another crowd formed, their numbers in tens. Dressed in jeans and logo-free black winter coats, they stood huddled, surveying the sneaker-clad youth. Back postured against a brick-walled storefront, one man yelled, “These people, they come into our neighborhood, and they rob us!”

Five feet away from him, a campaign poster for city council candidate Cordell Cleare flapped in a gust of wind. On Tuesday, February 14, Harlem will hold a special election to fill a Ninth District city council seat vacated by venerated councilwoman Inez Dickens.

Dickens, who represented the Ninth District since 2009, began her political career as a State Party Committeewoman, a position she retained for over three decades. After term limits precluded her from seeking another term on city council, she successfully ran for the 70<sup>th</sup> District seat in the state Assembly, triumphing over opponent Heather Tarrant with an 86% margin of victory. But the election to replace Dickens on city council promises to be far more contentious: nine candidates vie for her seat.

Whereas a luminescent orange outline of the Nike Swoosh adorned the pop-up shop’s storefront, the neighboring businesses bore posters abound for city council candidates. Shoe Repair, Your Modern Barber Salon, and 99 Cent Plus sported Cordell Cleare signs while 121 Convenience Deli and Gourmet Deli publicized Athena Moore. Charles Cooper signs proved most abundant, occupying eight storefront windows on the block, including Tropical Grill Restaurant and Kilimanjaro Fashions. Some establishments touted multiple posters, such as iconic eatery Amy Ruth’s, which happens to offer a multigrain waffle named after Dickens.

The election has galvanized the denizens of Harlem, many of whom seek this opportunity to channel their outrage over the fledgling Trump administration. “This man that’s in office, our president...he’s only concerned with a certain sector of the population,” said Patience Gerald, a Harlem local lingering outside a pharmacy as she watched athleisure-bound teenagers stream from the 116<sup>th</sup> Street subway stop.

Gerald, a self-described advocate for charter schools, believes that New York City wants to hinder the expansion of charter schools across Harlem “now that they see the little brown and black counterparts doing well,” referring to the racial disparities between the Upper West Side and Harlem public school systems. She plans to vote for Larry Blackmon, currently a vice-president at FreshDirect, for his pro-charter school position as well as his stature in the community. “He’s been a Harlem resident for forever, and he’s a personal friend of my family,” she explained. Dickens herself championed Blackmon for the position, though this endorsement didn’t impact Gerald’s position.

Around 11:00 that morning, every five minutes or so, a couple of Nike x VLONE patrons emerged from the store clutching black tote bags emblazoned with the two designers’ logos in orange. Some walked away with a practiced nonchalance, but most smiled and waved at their brethren still in line.

Looking out on the masses of Nike aficionados entering and exiting the pop-up, Gerald shook her head in bewilderment, red corkscrew curls flying. “I mean, it’s just sneakers,” she said.