

Village Primary Race Far From the Textbook

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Body

It might be hard to find another primary campaign like the one in this suburb, where two Haitians, a Jamaican and an Orthodox Jew are running for mayor.

And it might be hard to find another candidate like Jacques Michel, a poet, part-time deputy sheriff, Pentecostal minister and self-professed prophet who spent a month and a half in prison for immigration fraud.

But this Rockland County community of 22,000 is unlike most suburban villages, with a steady stream of immigrants, most of them from Haiti, Jamaica, Guatemala and El Salvador, adding to the mostly black or Jewish population.

And Mr. Michel's confidence in his success is not the ordinary stuff of politics. God, he says, showed him in a vision that he would become mayor. "If God is for me, who can be against me?" he said the other day in his office at the United Saints and Holiness Church of God, where he is pastor.

Mr. Michel wants to become the first Haitian-American mayor of a United States municipality, and he says that he doesn't believe that his conviction in 1978 will stand in his way.

While working for an anti-poverty program called the Rockland Community Action Council, he helped Haitian immigrants file false documents to obtain resident alien status, according to court documents. In this community, where a third of the population is Haitian, the 57-year-old Mr. Michel wears his arrest like a badge of honor.

He says the Government prosecuted him after he refused to turn over a list of people he had helped. "In the 70's, the Government was like a bounty hunter," he said, Port-au-Prince still in his voice after 34 years in this country. "I could not reveal the names to Immigration so they could go after these people. I would never give up my people."

More recently, Mr. Michel caused controversy in another arena. At a mayoral debate, he identified the victim of an attempted sexual assault and said the Spring Valley Police Department had covered up the crime.

"There was sloppy police work that could be interpreted as a cover-up," he said. He said he identified the victim with her permission, and would not have done so if she had been raped. Nonetheless, his opponents and the police attacked him for his statements about a case of sexual assault.

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"I was really shocked because he is allegedly a deputy sheriff in Rockland County," said Detective Reginald Anderson, president of Spring Valley's Police Benevolent Association. "This case is still under investigation. So it's impossible to be a cover-up. It has to be a political ploy on his part. Besides, he mentioned the victim's first name and last name. He had no right to do so. You question his judgment."

Shortly after the debate, Mr. Michel took a leave of absence from his deputy sheriff's job. "Jacques and I talked and we thought that because part of the campaign involved police issues that it might be a conflict of interest," said Rockland County Sheriff James Kralik. "Jacques agreed. He wanted to be free to say whatever he wanted."

Mr. Michel reserves most of his criticism for the incumbent, Allan Thompson, a Democrat who is seeking re-election. Mr. Thompson is a native of Jamaica and a former bakery owner. Mr. Michel says he has failed to deal with the community's crime problem or the lack of diversity in the police force, which has no Haitian-American officers.

The other Haitian seeking the Democratic nomination in the race is Demeza Delhomme, who has been in this country 23 years. He works with the community's youth in the People's Choice, an organization he founded. He also teaches plumbing, electrical wiring and carpentry at a free technical school he started. He calls for a crackdown on drug dealing and an effort to bring businesses to the village.

The fourth Democratic candidate is Philip Rosenthal, a computer consultant who has been a village trustee for four years. He says he wants to reduce property taxes, which he says have climbed more than 80 percent in the last four years.

"The Mayor," he said, "doesn't understand there are other ways to balance the budget besides on the back of homeowners."

Mr. Rosenthal said the budget could be balanced by cutting spending and attracting new businesses to the village.

Mayor Thompson, who says he brought the village back from the brink of bankruptcy, makes no effort to conceal his hostility toward Mr. Michel. "He is someone that I do not trust," he said.

Much of Mr. Michel's campaign deals with law enforcement. He proposes creating a "police council to oversee what the police are doing" and a trustee board to deal with minor infractions committed by young people. He also wants more diversity on the police force, which is 80 percent white.

"I want police officers to be seen as peace officers," he said, "not to be seen as an army of occupation."

Recently, he marched in a protest rally against the New York police officers accused of brutalizing Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant. "It was not a Haitian cause," Mr. Michel said. "It was an inhuman thing that happened to him."

Mr. Michel's slate includes a Russian-American environmentalist and a Haitian-American auto-repair shop owner seeking positions as village trustees and an Orthodox Jew who is running for village justice. They campaign door to door.

One of seven children born to a construction worker and a housewife in Port-au-Prince, Mr. Michel earned a master's degree in criminology at the University of Mexico and a doctorate in theology and divinity this year at Logos University in Jacksonville, Fla.

He came to the United States in 1963 on a tourist visa and stayed after the visa expired. In 1990 he became a citizen. He has seven children and has published his poems, many with religious themes, himself. He has also published a book, "United Aliens of America: A Guide to Foreign-Borns," in which he addresses his 1978 conviction.

He teaches boxing to children in a community organization that he founded in 1991 called Haven (Haitian-American Voters and Entrepreneurs). He speaks French, Creole, and Spanish as well as English and he was an interpreter for area courts.

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He expects to add the position of mayor to his resume shortly, but he says he will not take the credit. "All of the glory goes to Him," he said, looking skyward.

Graphic

Photo: Jacques Michel is a Pentecostal minister and a poet. He also served time for immigration fraud. He says his conviction won't stand in his way as he campaigns for mayor in a village with a large immigrant population. (Chris Maynard for The New York Times)

Map of Rockland County showing the location of Haverstraw: Four Democrats are running for mayor in Spring Valley, N.Y.

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