



Nick Najjar



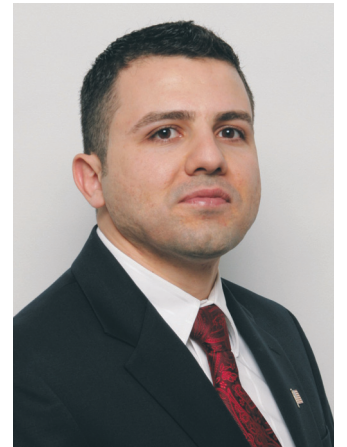
Sahera Housey



Al Zara



Diane D'Agostini



Michael Shallal

the good, the bad – and the ugly?

Elections yield mixed results for Chaldeans

BY JOYCE WISWELL

The August Primary Election brought triumph to some Chaldean candidates, disappointment to others and, to a few, the belief that anti-Middle East bias cost them votes.

NICK NAJJAR

Nick Najjar, who lost 60 to 40 percent in the 30th District state rep race (Sterling Heights) to Joseph Bogdan, said the theory that racism is behind his loss is “100 percent true.”

“My opponent never lifted a finger after paying the \$100 filing fee. He did nothing, and he beat me by 20 percent. Give me one good reason besides discrimination,” said Najjar, who vows to continue his political aspirations, perhaps running for Sterling Heights City Council next year.

“I will go to every community – Polish, Albanian – and knock on their doors and show them that my name is Middle Eastern and I am proud of it, and that I am working for everybody, not just Chaldeans or other Middle Easterners,” said Najjar, who was endorsed by the Detroit Free Press and seven unions.

See related article for more reaction to Nick Najjar's loss.

SAHERA HOUSEY

Sahera Housey, who lost in her bid to become a Circuit Court Judge, is less blunt but does believe her unique name cost her votes. She came in fourth behind Karen McDonald, Dan Christ and Jason Pernick, but did beat Layne Sakwa by 1 percentage point.

“I don’t think anyone worked as hard as I did, did as much as I did or was as qualified. I have no idea what happened – God only knows,” said Housey, noting she was endorsed by more judges and attorneys than her competitors. “But I think it came down to the names – voters were looking for

very common names, names that are non-ethnic.”

Housey said she hasn’t decided if she’ll try again.

“I am not a bitter person – it was an amazing experience and I met fantastic and fabulous people who were supportive. I was deeply humbled and touched by those people,” she said. “I am not willing to change my name. But I could have been ‘Sarah O’Brien’ and I would have won.”

AL ZARA

Al Zara, who with 7 percent came in last in a field of eight for the West Bloomfield Board of Trustees, thinks the fact that he is not Jewish may have cost him a seat.

“The Jewish community does not just talk – they act. They go to the polls when it really matters,” he said. “Nearly 30 percent of the township is Chaldean and Chaldean people can give me their checks but if they don’t vote, it doesn’t matter.”

Zara said he regrets not teaming up with Klint Kesto, who won the Republican nod for state rep in District 39 (which includes parts of West Bloomfield) “for a more powerful impact” in the Chaldean community. (See related story.)

“We Chaldeans need to unite and all be on the same page and really work together,” Zara said. “We have educated our community a lot but we need to get people to know the importance of voting as much as we can, by any method possible.”

Zara said he’s not sure he’ll run for office again. “I am not a politician. I don’t have the heart for it; I am way too straightforward. If I don’t like you, you will know it. I can’t be politically correct and kiss people’s behinds.”

Still, he said, the race motivated him. “I’ve learned a lot. Coming from Iraq living under a dictator and then seeing democracy at its best was really wonderful,” he said. “It inspired me to do big-

ger and better things, but it may not be in politics.”

DIANE D’AGOSTINI

Garnering more votes than her three challengers combined, Diane (Dickow) D’Agostini sailed into victory for her third term as judge in the 48th District Court. She’ll face second-place Josh Arnkoff, who received 18 percent of the vote to D’Agostini’s 66 percent, in November.

“I always go back to the grassroots. My philosophy was very simple – I made promises and I was able to tell the residents that I delivered. I went door to door and made thousands of calls,” said D’Agostini, who has been appointed chief justice three times.

D’Agostini said she has saved taxpayers more than \$1 million in budgetary and consolidation moves.

“When people retired – including my own secretary – I didn’t always fill the position. I don’t have a secretary now and thought it was wise to lead by example,” she said.

She’s also proud of the partnerships she’s built with local school districts, holding court at some local schools so students can see the consequences of drug and alcohol offenses.

Though she got 64 percent of the vote her first time around and was not even challenged in her second election, D’Agostini said she’s taking nothing for granted.

“The community has been so supportive. I saw them at the polls and was so gratified by their words of support and their prayers,” she said. “I am so grateful.”

MICHAEL SHALLAL

In the District 30 Republican race for state rep, Michael Shallal got just 13 percent of the vote against incumbent Jeff Farrington. Shallal did not return calls seeking comment. 🐾

poised to make history

Outlook good for Klint Kesto's state rep bid

BY KEN MARTEN

Klint Kesto is close to becoming the first Chaldean elected to the State Legislature.

Kesto is the Republican nominee for state representative in the 39th District, which includes Commerce Township, Wixom, Wolverine Lake and the western section of West Bloomfield. He emerged from a crowded field of six candidates in the August 7 Michigan Primary, garnering 2,626 votes. The next highest vote-getter snagged 2,012. Kesto now faces Democrat Pam Jackson, who bested one opponent.

"I wasn't that surprised, considering the hard work we put in," said Kesto, a Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor and Commerce Township resident. "The hard work of a campaign is walking neighborhoods and knocking on doors, and we did that. I had mostly family and close friends volunteer and walk. It was a collaboration of ideas and effort. I think the proof is in the pudding, where you see the numbers."

Speaking of numbers, Kesto estimates that his campaign will need to raise \$100,000 to \$150,000 to propel him into office. That's about double what his campaign raised for the primary.

"I still need the financial support and for people who don't necessarily have the time (to volunteer), I'm counting on the Chaldean community on the financial end," Kesto said. "This is an opportunity for them to be included in history and have the first Chaldean elected to the House."

He hopes to raise enough money to buy television ads. The Michigan Republican Party has provided Kesto with a staffer to help with fundraising. Beyond that, everyone on his campaign is a volunteer.

"I have someone in charge of fundraising, someone in charge of mailing, someone in charge of signs," Kesto said. "I have a lot of staff members and they're all friends and family who do it out of the goodness of their heart."

District 39 is traditionally Republican, so observers expect a Kesto win. However, that's what people said about Mark Abbo's bid for State Rep in District 20 in 2006. Considered a virtual shoo-in after handily winning the Republican primary, Abbo was narrowly bested by his opponent in the "Democratic tsunami" that swept the national elections that year.

More volunteers are welcome to the Kesto campaign.

"Even if it's just a few hours a week, I can give them a walking list for their community, or a list to make phone calls," he said. "I didn't do this alone. It was a collaborative effort in terms of planning, in terms of going door-to-door."



Does Kesto think ethnicity will be an issue in his race? Some unsuccessful Chaldean candidates believe it contributed to losing the primary.

"My hopes are no," he said, "because I'm the most qualified candidate. You can see my commitment to civil service. It's first rate. Whatever ethnicity someone is, it shouldn't play a role in their qualifications."

A 2006 graduate of Wayne State University's Law School, Kesto has been an assistant prosecuting attorney for Wayne County for the past six years. Prior to that he worked for the federal departments of Energy and Justice, and the city of Southfield. He said it's possible he'll take a leave of absence from his job.

Kesto is a member of the Mother of God Parish Council, the Chaldean American Bar Association, and is a director of the Chaldean American Chamber of Commerce. His family owns a Buscemi's restaurant in Sterling Heights and previously owned a pair of dollar stores.

"We ran an effective grassroots campaign and it worked," Kesto said. "We're in the same universe, the same district as before. The boundaries of the district haven't changed. We have to run the same campaign again."

Kesto, who will be 31 in October, is a widower. His wife, Amal Kashat Kesto, died of cancer two years ago. 🐾

Kesto plans to hold several fundraisers in September, as well as a voter registration event. Visit www.klintkesto.com.

Did Racism Sink Najjar?

So how did a 25-year-old, whose campaign for the state House was to not campaign, win the Democratic primary against a candidate who knocked on thousands of doors, raised \$20,000 and put up some 800 yard signs?

Nick Najjar, a real estate agent and small business owner who lost to Joseph Bogdan, 60 to 40 percent (2,202 to 1,475) in the Sterling Heights-based 30th District has an idea.

Could it have been his Chaldean last name, "Najjar?"

"What else could it be?" Najjar asked. "He did nothing. He didn't campaign. He didn't move a finger. He did nothing. Zero ... If my last name was Smith, Taylor, Switalski, I guarantee I would have won."

"I was endorsed by the Detroit Free Press, the unions, the food union. I have a background of volunteering in this community. I did radio and television. I was all over the media."

Bogdan was fairly open with his non-campaign in the 30th District for the right to face Rep. Jeff Farrington (R-Utica) in the November General Election. He pledged on his website that he was not going to purchase TV, radio or newspaper ads. He was not going to use robo-calls or knock door-to-door.

But even Bogdan said he was surprised when he pulled up the precinct reports at 8:30 p.m. and saw him beating Najjar in some precincts two to one.

Bogdan, a quality inspector for a local automotive facility, was working on a college project as he watched the returns trickle in for him.

"Honestly, it came to a giant surprise to me, too," he said. "I thought he seriously was going to win. He had a strong volunteer base, active supporters. He was doing a good job getting the word out."

Asked if he thought voters were hesitant to support a candidate with an Arab-sounding name, Bogdan said he thinks maybe voters like the idea of candidate deciding not to bother them with junk mail and telephone calls at inconvenient times.

Joe DiSano of Main Street Strategies said the not-so-subtle racism in this district is pretty obvious. This part of Sterling Heights, in particular, has become a melting pot of new ethnicities in which none of the groups completely trust each other, yet.

"You also have those old school white folks who aren't going to vote for someone named Najjar," DiSano said. "It's unfortunate and it will change over time, but you need to recognize that it's a reality."

The Najjar loss essentially takes the 30th District off the table for Democrats looking to make gains on the Republicans' 64 to 46 majority in the state House. Bogdan said he isn't going to change his campaign tactics for the General Election.

Not only does it give the Republicans a free ride in November, it hurts the Democrats' ability to raise money from the affluent Chaldean community, which saw one of their candidates, Klint Kesto score a primary victory in the 39th House District in the more affluent area of West Bloomfield. 🐾

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