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November 1

A new candidate for 3rd ward alderman challenges politics-as-usual in Bronzeville

BY ELIZABETH RYAN
 FILED UNDER BRONZEVILLE, NEWS, POLITICS | 1 COMMENT

Stepping into Mell Monroe's Victorian graystone on a recent Sunday afternoon felt less like a political fundraiser than a family Thanksgiving. Cooking smells filled the air, children scampered on the staircase, friends and neighbors greeted each other with warm embraces.

At the center of the happy bustle, wearing a blue shirt and a sport coat, Mell Monroe stood in the entryway, shaking hands, talking on the phone and coordinating volunteers. Monroe is a candidate for 3rd ward alderman in a bid to unseat incumbent Dorothy Tillman, who has held the office for over 20 years.

"I'm going to fight for people who might not always be able to fight for themselves," Monroe said in an interview Wednesday. "That's why I'm in it."

Although he seems like a natural at politics, Monroe didn't start out with political ambitions when he first moved to Bronzeville from the South Loop five years ago.

As founder of the Bronzeville Area Residents and Commerce Council (BARCC), a group that advocates for property owners and businesses, Monroe said he grew frustrated when Tillman continually declined invitations to their meetings.

The issue that really pushed him over the edge, however, was when the alderman turned down the Kroc center, a \$135 million gift from McDonald's heiress, Joan Kroc that would have built a "family life center" on 47th Street. Plans for the center included an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a gymnasium, a Senior center and a theater.

Like many Bronzeville residents, Monroe was baffled by Tillman's refusal of the facility, which would have generated hundreds of jobs and provided a much-needed recreational outlet for youths. Even worse, Monroe said, was that the community was not allowed to participate in the decision-making process.

"I take her decision to reject the center for our kids, families and future, personally," Monroe wrote in an editorial in the Chicago Journal in April. "The fact is, someone needs to speak out about the lack of power held by near South Side residents."

"But the center can serve a purpose," he continued. "For me, the Kroc Center is the beginning of the end of machine-style politics in the 3rd Ward."

Last Spring, Monroe stepped away from his career as head of a successful executive recruiting firm to campaign full time. He started by knocking on doors to introduce himself and learn more about the needs of the community.

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The three key areas that emerged from his work form the backbone of his campaign: education, innovative businesses and families. These platforms, Monroe says, are aimed to address the needs of a diverse ward comprising the South Loop, the Gap, Bronzeville, Englewood, Fuller Park and Back of the Yards.

At his home on Sunday, where fashionably dressed professionals mingled with business owners, Chicago Housing Authority residents and community leaders, his strategy seemed to be paying off.

"What you're seeing today is just an example of the renaissance that Bronzeville was known for," Monroe said. "When you build it, they will come."

Malcolm Hannnah, who bought his condominium in the 3300 block of Michigan Avenue more than a year ago, said he supported Monroe because he wants an alderman who will listen to the community.

"The biggest problem with Dorothy Tillman," Hannah said, "is that she's unattached to her constituents. People are investing money and they want to see things happen."

Others, like Chris Curtis, community leader at the Harold ICKES Home, put it more bluntly when he said, "Dorothy Tillman never did anything for us."

Curtis, who helps run Monroe's petition gathering campaign, said Monroe understands the needs of the low-income residents because he was once one himself.

Raised by a single mother in East Orange, N.J., Monroe grew up on public assistance and the little money that his mother could earn by cleaning houses. He went to Rider University on scholarships and grants to study business and worked as a teacher in Jersey City after graduation.

After making the switch to corporate America, Monroe worked his way up as a salesman for companies like Johnson & Johnson, Coca Cola and GE. In 1990, he became a partner in Execusearch, where he specialized in recruiting under-represented people like women and minorities.

"I can relate to all sides because I've been there," Monroe said.

As alderman, Monroe promises to bring what he describes as his unique balance of passion and business to stimulate commercial development in the 3rd ward and negotiate for a living wage for workers.

He is a supporter of the Big Box living wage proposal that would have guaranteed workers at Wal-Mart and other big retailers \$10 an hour, plus benefits.

"The CEO of Wal-Mart makes \$8 million and they pay their workers \$6.50 an hour. There's something about our society says that's OK. But I'm saying it's not."

Looking out for the entire community, he believes is the duty of an alderman.

"If I have the opportunity to do it, I'm going to fight for my people, for all people," he said. "I will get results. I will get results."

From days as a student leader in High School to his work as a member of the South Loop School Education Alliance and his work as a neighborhood organizer Monroe has always given back to the communities he belongs to.

He mentors "seven or eight" boys from the area, who he says are always coming and going from his house, playing on the computers he has set up for them, or cooking with him in the extra kitchen he uses to keep them busy.

This connection to his community, he says, won't change if he's elected.

As his wife, Angie told those gathered Sunday, "I always tell everybody that the office will probably be just like the house." Monroe agreed, adding, "We'll always be regular folks."

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