

TV's View of Local Political Campaigns

By: Claudia Cruz

"We are hoping this documentary can be used by people interested in campaigning not only in New York but across the country. We hope this has a timeless value and serves as a resource about how elections are run at the local level."

The 2001 New York City council elections were the most competitive in the city's history. In Washington Heights, Inwood and Marble Hill there were a total of 8 candidates running for Guillermo Linares' District 10. And with 37 of the 51 seats up for grabs throughout the entire city, every district was slated for a very unique year in city politics.

New York's local PBS broadcaster, Channel 13 has made a documentary that takes a look back at last year's local city council campaigns called "Running: The Campaign for City Council." This hour-long special documentary premieres this Sunday, February 24 at 10 p.m. and takes a look at the new political landscape and opportunities facing the city's residents.

This special documentary features District 10's campaign race and uniquely highlights the enthusiasm and participation of the residents and candidates of Washington Heights, Inwood and Marble Hill.

According to executive producer, Stanley Nelson, his team "was looking for different districts in the city where there was no incumbent returning. District 10 was ideal because it was also largely Spanish-speaking and it's a growing community," Nelson shared with Manhattan Times.

Unlike previous elections, the 2001 race for city council took place under different circumstances, the most obvious changes being the large number of candidates running for office and the amount of money raised by each for campaigning.

The 2001 race marked the first time that term limits and campaign finance reform made it accessible for anyone to run for office. Unprecedented in the city's history, incumbents were forced out of office paving the way for other local leaders to vie for the coveted honor to represent their district in the City Council.

The other significant change was the city's matching of private citizen contributions at a rate of \$4 to \$1. This meant that if you gave \$100 dollars to a candidate, the city in turn donated \$400 to that campaign. This amendment leveled the playing field for candidates and created a great opportunity for everyone to raise money and compete equally in the electoral process. The maximum amount of money allotted by the city for each candidate was \$75,000.

For most residents of District 10,

the intricacies of the campaign reforms were not common knowledge but out on the streets, the effects were hard to miss. With the thousands of posters plastered on lampposts throughout the community and the multitude of leaflets handed out to commuters at subway stations, last year candidates definitely had more money on hand to reach out to the potential voter.

For the producers of Running: The Campaign, District 10 became a model community for the electoral process. Nelson shared that one of the reasons District 10 was chosen for the documentary was because his team saw that the campaigns were run very differently in this neighborhood and this was demonstrated through the high levels of participation by the community.

"I found the use of caravans fascinating and this was a very different approach than other districts. The candidates in District 10 were like celebrities accompanied by large entourages of people. During the caravans, kids would cheer for the candidates they supported or give a thumbs down to the candidates that they didn't. The fact that kids understood and were indirectly participating in the campaign was fascinating to me."

Similar to other campaigns throughout New York City, District 10's eight candidates posed an interesting dilemma to Nelson and his team. "Unfortunately only a few of the candidates made it into the documentary. We had one cameraperson for each district we covered and each had about 7 candidates, that's a total of around 21 people. We filmed over 200 hours of footage. We wanted to use the footage of the candidates who won the elections and those that seemed interesting."

One of the candidates highlighted in this documentary was Miguel Martinez, the now elected city council representative for District 10. Councilmember Martinez believes in hindsight that the campaign reforms did have a positive effect on the community. "The reforms allowed many different people to run. And most importantly, it forced the candidates to put out a platform that would meet the needs of the community," Councilmember Martinez stated, "Everyone contributed different ideas that generated an increase in political awareness."

Both Councilmember Martinez and Stanley Nelson hoped that a result of the campaign reforms was higher voter turnout. With more money available for the campaigns, candidates were able to pay more attention to the issues and promote their platforms rather than concentrating so much on fundraising.

Nelson did point out one other major difference between the City Council race in District 10 and that of other districts covered in Running: The Campaign. "One of the things that didn't make it into the film and we struggled with it in the editing room was the use of television in placing campaign ads. Spanish language television made it more affordable to buy time."

District 10's innovative response to the campaign reforms will hopefully serve as a starting point for political activism in other communities across the country. And within our own city, Nelson hopes that "campaign reform and term limits can continue to bring more participation and enthusiasm into [local] elections."



Above: Ruben Dario Vargas, candidate for District 10, campaigning at El Carnaval del Boulevard last summer.

Below: Victor Moriseto-Romero's sound truck toured District 10 throughout his campaign for City Council.

Photos By: Landa Towns

