

Kavanaugh aims to transcend the 'L' label

Lesbian candidate for lieutenant governor stresses education, not identity politics
By Christine Dinsmore

Buffalo's local media have Barbra Kavanaugh listed in their Rolodex under "L" for "lesbian mom," or "lesbian on the left." She hopes to soon be in the Rolodexes across the state under the same letter as lieutenant governor.

Kavanaugh, the first open lesbian on the Buffalo City Council, thinks running for public service is like jury duty, in which every citizen "steps up" when needed. She's stepping up for a statewide office, not because she wants to be a career politician, but because she thinks she can improve the lives of New Yorkers.

Although she's running as an open lesbian, Kavanaugh is not looking for the title of lesbian lieutenant governor. In fact, she bristles when she thinks of selecting candidates because of sexual orientation.

"People used to say that I should run for an office because it would be great to have a lesbian fill-in-the-blank," said Kavanaugh. "I was insulted by that. That wasn't telling about the issues."

Kavanaugh is definitely running on the issues. She's a self-described progressive candidate who supports gay rights, reproductive rights, environmental protections, and affordable housing, and she opposes the death penalty. She has a long history of working with the poor, including 12 years at the Neighborhood Legal Services, a not-for-profit law office providing legal representation to low-income people.

While some people are uncertain how an open lesbian will do in a statewide primary, several Democrats say Kavanaugh has a good chance. Emily Giske, the openly lesbian vice-chairperson of the state Democratic Party who has personally endorsed Kavanaugh, goes so far as to say that she has an excellent chance. And Tom Schuler, of Manhattan's Gay and Lesbian Democrats, adds that Kavanaugh can count on support from Erie County, which has a large Democratic base, and should be able to grab the votes of women and gays.

Karen Burstein, the openly lesbian candidate who ran for state attorney general in 1994, is less sure about Kavanaugh's chances for a primary victory. Calling Kavanaugh an "intelligent" person who would make a "first-class lieutenant governor," Burstein said that a strong Buffalo turnout would help her, but it doesn't make her a shoo-in.

"New York is not a great state for women," said Burstein. "But she could surprise all of us with a grassroots campaign that excites people."

Grassroots activism helped elect Kavanaugh to the Buffalo City Council in 1996, and she hopes it will help her galvanize support around the state. One of her messages is about public education. She supports increased aid to education, as well as collaboration among community organizations and schools to build upon the "exciting and terrific" things that are happening in some school systems. In Buffalo, for instance, schools have developed visual arts programs; a

culinary program that gives students hands-on training; and telecommunications learning, which allows students to tap into programs from around the country.

“Schools today take care of the failures of social policies,” said Kavanaugh. “The failure of schools is more about racism and poverty.”

It’s not surprising to Kavanaugh’s mother that education is so dear to her. Frances Kavanaugh said that her daughter has been addicted to learning since she was a young child. The younger Kavanaugh began reading at age four and spent much of her childhood curled up reading a book.

“The worst punishment I could give her was to say, ‘No more reading,’” reminisced the elder Kavanaugh, “and ‘You can’t have your books.’ But she couldn’t jump rope to save her life.”

A commitment to causes

The elder Kavanaugh is proud of her daughter’s commitment to social causes, even though it has sometimes confused her. When her daughter graduated from the University of Buffalo law school, she announced to her family that she would not be wearing a cap and gown because the money would be better spent feeding a hungry family. Barbra Kavanaugh, who had her first child during her last year of law school, brought her son to the graduation ceremony.

“Barb was the only one without a cap and gown,” said her mother, “and carrying a baby in bunting.”

Kavanaugh now has two children, 15-year-old Brian and 8-year-old Jack, whom she is raising with her partner of 13 years, Lynn Edelman. Kavanaugh and Edelman, both 43-year-old attorneys, were the first same-sex couple in Erie County to be granted a joint adoption.

Edelman is strongly protective of Kavanaugh. Any political attack on Kavanaugh irritates her partner. When the *Buffalo Alternative Press*, a progressive newspaper, accused Kavanaugh of selling out by becoming part of the political system, Kavanaugh took it in stride. But not Edelman.

“I take more offense. I take it very personally,” said Edelman. “If someone is critical, she lets it roll off. I take it to heart.”

Edelman also grounds her partner when Kavanaugh’s enthusiasm to a cause clouds reality. For instance, when Kavanaugh took a month’s leave of absence from Legal Services to do prison reform work in Mississippi, she “fell in love” with the small town of Oxford. Kavanaugh came home and announced that she wanted the family to move to Mississippi to continue working for the rights of prisoners.

Edelman put her foot down.

“I said ‘Our children are being raised Jewish,’” said Edelman. “‘What will life be for them in Oxford, Mississippi?’”

Family is the trump card in any argument. Kavanaugh has spent years fighting for the recognition of gay families throughout the state. Perhaps her own background drives her devotion to family issues. Her younger brother Jack was killed in a motorcycle accident when he was 19, and when she was in college her parents separated.

“I came home from college one day and found out my mother wasn’t living there anymore,” said Kavanaugh. “They didn’t want to upset me.”

While she jokes about her parents’ divorce, she is dead serious about children’s issues. She is a board member of the Gay and Lesbian Youth Services of Western New York, a not-for-profit resource center for gay teenagers. Even though she is traveling the state for her bid for a primary victory, she has not missed the center’s monthly board meetings, according to its associate director Jan Treinin.

“Barbra is very supportive of our program,” said Treinin. “She is on our educational committee and is really dedicated to our youth.”

While Kavanaugh is the favorite among Buffalo’s Democrats, she faces challenges from two announced candidates, Manhattan attorney Charlie King and Plattsburgh mayor Clyde Rabideau. Observers said that the pro-gay King will compete with Kavanaugh for the progressive voters. Rabideau, who worked to pass Plattsburgh’s gay civil rights law, is virtually unknown in New York City.

While naysayers insist that the economy is too good and the state is too conservative to elect a self-described “lesbian on the left,” Kavanaugh is banking on her theory about human nature.

“People might say they are socially liberal and fiscally conservative,” said Kavanaugh, “but people want to believe in the best of us – we will take care of our own.”