

The man who beat Senator Montalbano

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Edward J. O'Neill takes a walk through Lincoln Woods with his dog, Tommy, as he talks with a reporter from a local radio station yesterday. O'Neill, a retired business executive, upset Senate President Joseph Montalbano in Tuesday's election.

LINCOLN — Time was that Edward J. O'Neill and Tommy, his Labrador mix, could count on getting to Lincoln Woods three or four times a week, walking among the trees and nodding to (or, in Tommy' case, sniffing) passersby during their contemplative strolls.

But yesterday afternoon, the day after O'Neill pulled off the biggest upset of the 2008 state election by defeating Senate President Joseph A. Montalbano, those times were clearly over.

Instead of the swish of windblown leaves or the thrum of traffic on Route 146, the solitude of O'Neill's walk was broken by the steady chiming of his cell phone, as yet another person wanted to talk to the giant-slayer who knocked off the third-highest elected official in the state.

Sometimes he knew the caller, sometimes he didn't, but he took all calls politely. Barely out of the car, he began the walk talking about the race, his life and hopes for his first term in the District 17 seat with a reporter from Woonsocket radio station WNRI 1380-AM.

"Are they public radio?" he asked after he hung up.

Total strangers knew him. Paul Pare, of North Smithfield, was jogging, saw O'Neill and stopped with a look of shock and recognition.

"I'm not even from where you are," Pare said, exulting as if he'd just met an old friend. "You're doing a great job."

"Maybe you can get something done," he shouted over his shoulder as he jogged off.

O'Neill, who ran as a political independent, said he's thinking about how to get that "something" done. Rather than caucus with either party, he said, he has talked to some senators, whom he declined to identify, about organizing around good-government issues rather than along party lines.

"I want to see how things shake out," he said. "... They say with Montalbano gone, this opens up the whole organization in terms of restructuring."

Even with the phone calls and a reporter and photographer tagging along, yesterday's walk was a break. The day started at around 6:30 a.m., he said, with a round of calls to local talk radio shows.

"It was John DePetro, Helen Glover, Buddy Cianci," he said. He planned to be on Dan Yorke's show in the studio today. Yorke gave him early and generous exposure on his show, O'Neill said, and he wanted to thank him in person.

The WNRI call was over for a few minutes when the sing-song ringtone chimed again. He dug into his pocket and flipped the phone open, saying with a slightly tired voice, "This is Ed, who is this?"

"Oh!," he brightened. "Hey Governor, how are you?"

Governor Carcieri was a supporter and O'Neill talked of how daunting it had been. Montalbano had what seemed to be hundreds of foot soldiers at the polling places, O'Neill said, and a network of allies from decades in office.

But O'Neill was no slouch. He had a core group of about 40 workers and a willingness to spend \$30,000 of his own money on leaflets, mass mailings and billboard space.

He focused his campaign on good government, hitting Montalbano on his Ethics Commission fines. In Lincoln, he said, the abortive effort to build a courthouse on Louisquisset Pike was a particularly good issue for him. The town hadn't been consulted on the proposal, he said, and even though Montalbano tried to take credit for the project's being moved to Smithfield, Lincoln voters didn't forgive him for letting it be proposed in the first place.

Still, O'Neill said he wasn't sure how election night would end until he saw the numbers from the Birchwood School, in North Providence, the incumbent's hometown. O'Neill won it, 332 to 282.

"That was kind of a key, that I won in North Providence," he said. "To win any polling place in North Providence, against Joe Montalbano, is pretty good."

O'Neill, a retired Texas Instruments executive, was no rookie. He ran unsuccessfully for town administrator in 2006 and helped found the Lincoln Taxpayers Association. His plan was to run up large enough margins in Lincoln to offset Montalbano's strength in the Democratic strongholds of North Providence and Pawtucket.

It worked. He beat Montalbano by a 1,768-vote — virtually 2-to-1 — margin in Lincoln, and that offset Montalbano's 530-vote edge in North Providence and 461-vote lead in Pawtucket.

O'Neill said he had been campaigning steadily since May, no golf outings, no walks in Lincoln Woods. He's had Tommy for 15 years, he said and it was the walks around Lincoln Woods that he missed the most.

And he said he owed Tommy. The mutt had been featured on his campaign literature, O'Neill said, and the picture never failed to make a connection throughout the district

"Everybody, in North Providence, Pawtucket, Lincoln, they love dogs," he said. "They'd ask what kind of dog is he, how old is he."

"This is his joy in his life," he said, as Tommy happily rutted around in some leaves, "a walk in the woods. He sees other dogs. He is very sociable.

"He laid some guilt on me pretty regularly," he said. "I'm trying to earn his forgiveness."

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