

O'Neill reflects on how he defied the Democratic tide

By JON BAKER

LINCOLN -- On Wednesday afternoon, Edward O'Neill sat at his kitchen table, chomped on a leftover grinder and attempted to describe his feelings after unseating State Senate President Joseph A. Montalbano in the District 17 Senate race just 18 hours before.

He admitted he didn't have much time to savor the triumph, one in which he outdueled Montalbano, a Democrat who had served sections of Lincoln, Pawtucket and North Providence for 20 consecutive years, by 777 votes (6,767 to 5,977, according to the latest results from the Rhode Island Board of Elections).

The 62-year-old retired business executive and political independent claimed he had collected less than five hours sleep before his home and cell phones began ringing at about 7 a.m. Those calls came not only from thrilled family members and friends offering congratulations, but also media types requesting responses.

"I was asked to go on John DiPietro's show (WPRO-AM) at 8:30 a.m., and then Helen Glover from WHJJ-AM called and asked for an interview at about 9:15," O'Neill said at mid-afternoon Wednesday, shortly after taking his 16-year-old dog, a Labrador mix named Tommy, on a promised walk/run through Lincoln Woods State Park.

"Then (former Providence Mayor) Buddy Cianci called; he wanted me to go back on WPRO at 10:10," he added. "I'll tell you, I'm tired, very tired."

O'Neill still found time for his usual 90-minute workout — consisting of resistance machine training and sit-ups — at Pawtucket YMCA later Wednesday.

When asked if he could believe the events of the previous evening, the tall, enigmatic senator-elect offered this: "Sure I can. Trust me, this wasn't easy. It was very hard, but myself and my team worked really hard. I had a campaign team of ... well, the inner-circle numbered about a dozen, and the outer circle about 30. We walked every street in the district starting at the end of June, when I filed, and kept doing so every day until the night before the election.

"In fact, we spent so much time campaigning, I only played golf once dating back to May, and, honestly, that's unusual for me," he added with a grin. "Seriously, during all those months, from the time I got up in the morning until the time I went to bed, seven days a week, I was working on the campaign ... I just never stopped believing. It wasn't difficult to keep my focus. Once you commit to something, and when you're serious about accomplishing a goal, you keep moving toward it. There were just challenges along the way we had to face."

The greatest challenge?

"My opponent has about 50 employees, and he had the ability to harness their free time and campaign for him," O'Neill claimed. "He also has a lot of devoted family, so he had a lot of boots on the ground, and tremendous financial resources via campaign contributions."

O'Neill said he provided \$30,000 to his campaign, while he guessed Montalbano had mustered three times that amount. Still, he said, he made the most of what he had.

The natural query: How'd he pull it off?

"Simple dedication to our game plan," O'Neill responded. "We'd spend hours dealing with correspondence. I'd answer e-mails I had received every day. We'd always be updating my Web site, and we'd put out press releases. We'd immediately answer constituents asking for lawn signs to place in front of their houses. We bought advertisements from newspapers, and put signs on

billboards.”

O’Neill’s basic thrust: “Ethics and integrity, or “business as usual,” referencing Montalbano’s two former brushes with the State Ethics Commission.

“A big thing was I’d go on talk radio,” he stated. “I was a regular (guest) on the Dan Yorke Show on WPRO-AM. During the course of the campaign, I was on 12 times. People got to know me, and understood what I was thinking. Also, when we hit the streets, I’d go to neighbors with one of my teammates, and I would notice who was home and who wasn’t. I’d have the teammate leave a leaflet at the empty homes, but I would go to the houses where I knew someone was there. After all, I was the candidate, and I wanted to make my feelings known.

“I think the difference was this: People wanted change, and I think they believed that I would be responsive to them,” he added. “They knew I’d listen to them, and work hard to be the kind of public servant in which they could be proud. You’ve got to understand, I’ve talked with thousands of people during this race, and there have been a lot of discussions about ethical behaviors for more than a few years now.

“We just offered voters a chance to have someone with a focus on positive change. My first goal is to focus on the budget. First and foremost, that’s the direction I want to take. We need to reduce the cost of government in Rhode Island, and make it a more business-friendly state.”

O’Neill also stated he would stick to his promises, which included ethics training for state legislators; fair compensation for Lincolnites from Twin River gaming revenues; improved cooperation between the General Assembly and town governments; ending discretionary legislative grants; “e-Verify;” a 10 percent health insurance co-pay for all legislators; and tighter term limits.

On Tuesday night, at the O’Neill household located at 2 Lladnar Drive, O’Neill’s wife, Carole, monitored incoming results from the 15 polling sites in Lincoln, North Providence and Pawtucket.

“We had received reports from every polling place in District 17 but one, and that was Central Elementary School in Lincoln,” Carole O’Neill said. “At about 9:45 p.m., we started adding up all those numbers, and we found Ed was up by about 700 votes. When Central came in, we discovered the unofficial numbers to be 511-252, in favor of Ed.

“We were all thrilled,” she said, with a smile. “I’m so proud of Ed and his team.”

Stated O’Neill: “Joe called me at about 12:30 (Wednesday afternoon) and told me it was a great race, and he wished me well. He also told me there are a lot of good people at the State House, and that I should keep an open mind.

“At that point, he concluded the call, and wished me luck,” he continued. “I’m not thinking about anything right now, except for getting some sleep.”