

Essay from "Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology",
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"Ward 6"

By Jim Rokakis

June 1977. My first official campaign stop was at Merryman's Hall: a tired, two-story red brick building located at the corner of West 14th and Denison Ave. The club was nothing more than a small bar and ten tables. No food. Just cheap booze. Once a club for the Polish immigrants, it had now become a hangout for the sons and grandsons of the founders, but also for Appalachians who had worked their way north for the jobs at the mills and plants. The most recent wave of immigrants to the neighborhood, the Puerto Ricans, were not welcome here—not yet, anyway. When the membership rolls dropped to levels so low that the club could not pay the light bills, the membership criteria were loosened so anybody could join, as long as you had cash.

I had my one and only campaign staffer with me that night: Dave Krischer of Skokie, Illinois. Dave was a junior at Oberlin College. I can't think of anyone who had less in common with the average Ward Six resident. He was Jewish. In fact next to blacks, Jews were probably the least favorite ethnic group in that neighborhood. Dave knew this. In fact he had some fun with it when the topic came up. "You a Greek like Rokakis?" I once heard him being asked. "Oh no," he'd reply. "I'm Russian. My ancestors were from Pogrom, Russia." I don't think anybody ever caught on.

The steps leading up to the hall on the second floor were long and narrow. Like every other public space in the neighborhood the most overwhelming feature of the room was smoke. There were about fifty people in the room. At twenty-two years of age I was the youngest by about twenty years. When I entered, it got quiet, heads turned. I got anxious. My throat dried.

I stopped at the sign-in table and let them know that I wanted to speak that night. The club secretary asked if I wanted to join their organization.

"Yes," I said, and gave her three bucks.

She asked if I had a door prize.

"Of course," I replied and handed her a bottle of wine I brought, complete with a tag that read "Compliments of Jim Rokakis." I forgot who told me to do that. I would like to thank them anyway. The sentiment was a lesson that would guide me through Cleveland politics for the next thirty years.

The meeting began like all meetings did in the neighborhood: with the Pledge of Allegiance. After the reading of minutes, the club president suddenly turned to me, saying: “We have a special guest here tonight, a young man named Jim Rokakis. It says here on the sign-in sheet that he is running for City Council here in Ward Six. He wants to say a few words to us.”

Oh shit, I thought to myself. I felt I was going to get sick. I got up. “Thank you for the chance to speak with you this evening,” I stumbled. “My name is Jim Rokakis. I’m one of your neighbors—I live on Garden Ave. I am here to announce to you that I am running for Cleveland City Council here in Ward Six. I have lived in this neighborhood all of my life, but I am unhappy with the direction that it is taking.”

I continued, my tone as about as deliberate as the sound of tiptoeing: “I am really unhappy with the crime problem in this neighborhood—“

Just then I was cut off. There was a voice in the hallway, shouting: “I’m coming up. I’m coming up. Coming up babies, don’t nobody come down the stairs— Sophie’s coming up!”

Peals of laughter rippled throughout the room. Heads turned toward the doorway to see an enormous woman named Sophie enter. She wore a billowing white dress that was sleeveless and exposed big white arms. Her legs were trunks right down to the feet.

“Hi’ya Sophie!” somebody shouted. “Come over here, we saved a seat for you!”

She slowly worked her way over to a wooden folding chair. She sat. I stared at the chair, worried about its integrity. Sophie glared in my direction. My concentration was shot. I tried to pick up where I left off.

“People just don’t feel safe anymore in this neighborhood. As I go door to door I hear stories of break-ins, cars being stolen—“

I was cut off again by a man in the front row. “I caught a nigger in my driveway last week,” he began. I was floored. The man went on, “I asked him what he was doing, said he was looking for somebody named Maurice, you know that was bullshit. He was looking for a house to break in to.”

I turned to the club president, hoping that he would rule the man out of order for his racist remarks. Wrong. Instead he picked up the conversation where the bigot in the front row left off.

“What day did you see him? Was it Monday or Tuesday?”

“I’m sure it was Monday because I was off that day.”

“Was he with anybody? Because I saw two of ‘em in a station wagon, cruising and looking up and down driveways.”

The conversation went on for another couple of minutes with people in the room joining in. Then someone raised their hand, pointed to me, and the club president apologized and asked me to continue. I didn’t get far.

Rita LaQuatra raised her hand and asked: “Mr. Rokakis, what’s better—governor or senator?”

I didn’t get the question, so I asked to her to repeat it.

“I said, what’s better, governor or senator?”

I stammered. “Well, they are very different jobs—both important but very different.” I then ventured into the differences between the legislative and executive branches of government. After about three minutes, folks weren’t paying attention. I then struggled to get back to my prepared speech.

At this point Howard Lorman of Library Avenue got up and turned to face the audience. Mr. Lorman was in his early eighties, rail thin, neatly dressed. He didn’t live in that neighborhood but somewhere along the way he found this group, or they found him—or they found each other more likely.

“I would like to say something about voting,” he said. “It was 1932. We use to vote in those metal sheds. Do you remember those metal sheds?”

People nodded in the smoke.

“Well, it was the primary. I asked for my ballot and looked for the name of Herbert Hoover, but couldn’t find it. They told me I had asked for the wrong ballot and wouldn’t give me another one. You know what I did? I wrote in the name of Adolf Hitler.”

The room burst into laughter. Not long after the crowd quieted, I thanked them for the opportunity and sat down. I was drenched in sweat. I had been speaking for forty-five minutes, and it seemed I had gotten nothing across. I was disappointed. I lost control of the group early and never regained their attention.

But the evening was not a total loss. I learned a valuable lesson about neighborhood politics: Expect the unexpected. This lesson was reinforced by the fact that Ted Sliwa, the incumbent Ward 6 Councilman and a legend in Cleveland politics, would be a no-show that night, as he was all summer. I thought it was because he was confident and secure in his position. Only later did we learn that he had had it with local politics.

I consider that evening at Merryman's--my first public appearance--the night in which I was thrown to the wolves. But as difficult as the evening seemed, it paled in comparison to the experiences awaiting me less than a year away as a member of Cleveland City Council. They were the beginning of the most tumultuous two years in the city's history—Dennis Kucinich's short-lived tenure as mayor. The time would also present me with one of the toughest days I ever had in public life.

When Sliwa dropped out of the race I became the front runner. That much was clear. Our youth and enthusiasm had created "buzz" in the neighborhood. One problem: money wasn't coming in. Campaigns cost money, and I was broke, as were my folks. A fundraiser was needed.

My first fundraiser was a "Greek" affair at the UAW Hall on Chevrolet Boulevard in Parma. We had a Greek band, the Pyros Brothers, and Greek food. The event raised a few grand, but it only lasted us until July, and we thought maybe we'd go bigger with a neighborhood event. So we hosted a beer and sausage event at the VFW hall at West 49th and Memphis. I was worried it would be a bust, but also hopeful that my relentless door-to-door campaigning would somehow pay off.

Rick Morgan, my right hand man at the time, printed up some cheap fliers and delivered them door-to-door. We had hoped for 100-125 people. A day before the event a man named Chuck Sayre, whom I had met on the campaign trail, asked if he could provide the evening's entertainment. Chuck was a blue-collar guy: a former boxer, then a fight promoter, then an organizer of third-rate musical acts. Talk about Rust Belt Chic, well, Chuck was it.

The night of the fundraiser came. I was petrified I would arrive to an almost empty hall. I had spent the entire day campaigning and had gone home to shower. Around 7:30 the phone rang. It was Rick, and I could barely hear him. "You better get up here," he shouted. "The crowd is huge and they are asking about you." I was stunned. I headed over to the hall immediately.

When I got the parking lot I was shocked to see cars overflowing. Adrenaline rushed. I parked a block over and ran into the hall. As I worked my way to the door people began to shout out my name, "Jim," "Jim, how ya doing," and "Jim, good luck!" I was shaking hands. Hugging and kissing old ladies. Smoke filled the room. Drinks flowed. In the back Chuck had a microphone and was introducing one of his acts—an Elvis impersonator in a sequined suit—to the crowd. "Hound Dog" played and ended. Chuck then took the mic from Elvis' hand and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, the man we all been waitin' for. The guest of honor: JIMMY ROKAKIS!"

The crowd erupted. It felt like a dream. I worked my way to the head of the room and took the mic. I don't remember what I said. But I do remember closing with a question: "Are you with me?" The crowd roared yes.

To say that I expected to be a politician growing up wouldn't be the truth. The streets of my neighborhood weren't particularly nice. They weren't as tough on the Near West Side or East Side of the city, but as the years passed it was safe to say most of my neighbors were not there by choice. In fact growing up I didn't so much focus on how to lead as much as I did on where I didn't want to follow. So much youth around me was doing time, and dying young. Like Jerry Wallace: the best athlete in the neighborhood died of cirrhosis of the liver at 30. Luckily, my family and my drive kept me away from being on the terribly wrong side of life. And so the neighborhood that grew me eventually became the neighborhood that voted me to the forefront when it was their time to be represented.

But politics is not just about public recognition, it is also about public pain, and I learned this early with the murder of an eleven-year-old girl named Maxine Penner not a half year into my first term. I was sick when I got the news. I remember meeting her and her mother, Ruth Penner. They lived in a small frame house directly across from Riverside Cemetery. The media was all over this tragedy. The headlines blared: "Young girl murdered on the west side."

I remember going to a meeting with a group of neighbors the night after the murder. They were angry. They were scared. The meeting was about ten doors away from the murder scene. I could barely look at the house where it happened when I drove by. The lights were on. The shades were drawn.

Nobody greeted me when I entered the home where the meeting was taking place. No handshakes. No smiles. The anger was thick. I remember a large heavysset man standing in the corner who charged at me, coming within inches of my face and screaming, "You ain't done shit in this neighborhood. This neighborhood has gone to hell since you became councilman!" There were shouts of approval from others in the crowd. I remember thinking this was a verbal assault I would have to take. I had no choice. I represented authority and order. And what occurred was the opposite of that: horror, disorder. When I finally responded I was brief. I told them that I would work day and night to make sure the killer(s) were caught. I reminded them that I lived in the neighborhood and shared their risk. I promised a greater police presence. I asked them to share any information—to work with me even if they didn't care for me. I asked them to say a prayer for Maxine. I stayed until almost midnight. It was and still is my hardest day in public life.

The next morning I compiled a list of potential suspects based on what I knew of neighborhood problems and what the neighbors shared with me. The neighborhood didn't have a gang problem in the classic sense. Just a bunch of mean, hard-scrabble kids from the lower west side: Hispanic, Appalachian, and first-generation ethnics. Most abused drugs and had done time in some JV facility for relatively minor offenses. This murder was something else. And if they were the perpetrators, they had grown up: they were killers now.

I submitted the list to homicide detectives that morning and they politely accepted it. But they didn't have much to say. It was too early in their investigation. They became annoyed over the course of the next few weeks as I pressed them for answers. These weren't the days of crime labs and DNA analysis. The investigations were methodical, slow. I was afraid that they would never make an arrest.

The evening of the visitation I became sick and vomited just before I left. I knew the job of councilman wouldn't be easy but dealing with the murder of a young girl was something else. When I went to the funeral home I was scared I'd become emotional when I'd meet Mrs. Penner: not exactly the image of a strong leader I was meant to project. I knew I had to keep my emotions in check.

The funeral home was crowded. The people parted for me as I walked to the mother of the victim. I remember holding her and the two of us walking to the casket, where Maxine lay. The casket was open and I remember her saying something about how they had done a good covering the cuts on her neck. That's all I remember. I didn't cry. I went directly to my car and headed south on Pearl Road into Parma, Parma Heights, and then all the way into Medina County. I turned around and it was dark when I got back. I stopped at my parent's house on Garden Avenue before I returned to my empty apartment. I took an aluminum folding chair from the porch out to the backyard where I had grown up. I sat alone listening to the sounds of the neighborhood: the barking dogs, the television sets, the country music, and I cried.

A couple of months later one of the boys on our list admitted to a juvenile detention counselor that he had some information on the murder. They arrested Curtis Richmond and charged him with rape and aggravated murder, though he served less than eight years after being allowed to plead down to manslaughter. Other juveniles admitted to being accomplices but didn't serve much time. They all said it was a botched break-in and panicked and killed her. Shortly after the funeral, Mrs. Penner left Cleveland and I never saw her again.

Maxine would be forty-six years old if she were alive today. I have not forgotten her. I never will.

JIM ROKAKIS was born and raised on Cleveland's Near West Side. He ran for Cleveland City Council in 1977 at the age of 22. He expected to lose and begin law school that Fall. He won and spent 33 years in public office - nineteen years in Cleveland City Council and fourteen as the Cuyahoga County Treasurer. He spends his time now as the director of the Thriving Communities Institute, organizing land banks and raising money to knock down 100,000 houses in distressed urban Ohio.