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Woodrow Parker: The Makings of a Firebrand



By Gary C. Harrell

Woodrow Parker was in his element of that cloudy Friday morning. At house after house in a quiet neighborhood, he left his flashy, two-sided push card, which read: I am seeking your support, as we work to make our party stronger in Louisiana. That party was the Louisiana Democratic Party, and Parker was quite aware that he might have been campaigning in enemy territory. Morgan City, Louisiana, was home to just over 11,000 people, including Parker, and the population of St Mary Parish, more broadly, was just under 50,000 – much of it, leaning conservative. Here, in the most recent elections, while a Democrat won the Parish President's seat, beating a fellow Democrat, the political party had dismal showings; Republicans swept the Parish Council district seats, and sixty percent of the residents here helped elect Jeff Landry to the governorship. Even still, Parker was undented. "This just speaks to the fact that it is time for a change," he remarked, continuing to leave his push card on front doors.

With elections set for late March, Woodrow Parker is running to change the mechanics of the state's Democratic Party. He is no newcomer to this fight. Parker currently serves as the incumbent on the Democratic State Central Committee, 50th District-B, a seat he is hoping to retain, and he is also seeking an at-large seat on the Democratic Parish Executive Committee serving the entire parish. A victory in both races, which is permissible under the bylaws of the party, would give him a greater role in the direction of a party that is underperforming independent and non-affiliated candidates across the state. "Louisiana's residents are confronting real, kitchen-table issues. Rising insurance costs, the drug problem, crime, the lack of affordable housing – and the list goes on and on," Parker explained. "We have to bridge the divide here.

"These are not Republican problems. They are not Democratic problems. They are everyone's problems, and until we're able to address them in that way – and with forward thinking – we won't solve them." That is a message Parker is taking to voters across Saint Mary Parish, including conservative ones.. The result of doing so has opened the door to some very necessary conversations with people across the parish. On this day, following one of those conversations with a receptive homeowner, Parker was making his way back to the street, when he noticed

that their boy had come out to shoot a basketball in the driveway. Almost instinctively, Parker broke out of his canvassing mode. "Hey, young man, give me that ball," Parker told him, and the boy complied. That was the start of an unexpected, but very spirited, one-on-one, and it seemed to typify the same energy Parker was bringing to political life in Louisiana.

Woodrow Parker's path to politics was a circuitous one. Born and raised in Morgan City, he became well-acquainted with the nuisances of life in this small town, but after high school, he felt that he needed to pursue professional aspirations elsewhere. Parker lived in Dayton, Ohio, for a time, where he served as president of a neighborhood association and a board member on the housing and economic development committee, the arts council, and the advisory committee to U.S. Congressman Tony P. Hall. Later, he relocated to Sacramento, where he worked in the California State Assembly, pushing for legislation like AB 132, which, in 1999, was sponsored by Assemblywoman Carole Migden and decriminalized for-profit hair braiding. It would not be too long before Parker found himself back in his hometown, applying what he learned through the years.

In 2009, Parker founded the Aqua Safety First Community Program. As the name suggests, this non-profit organization operated with the mission of promoting water safety in underserved communities across Southeast Louisiana, as well as providing training in occupational settings. "Our goal, from the start, has been to reduce incidents of unintentional drownings, particularly in communities of color, where this occurrence is disproportionately high," Parker explained. He was not wrong. According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, which tracks such deaths, more than 4,000 people drown each year, and African Americans at or below the age of twenty-nine are 1.82 times more likely to die this way than their white peers. Parker went on to say, "There was an urgency to do something – to bring these resources and awareness to our communities. And if our leaders weren't willing to do something, I had to step up." The same determination prompted Parker to pivot into public health during the



pandemic. “Because we were already hosting events, why not conduct health fairs?” Parker explained. “We reached out to partners in our network to offer the Covid vaccine, while also doing health screens, at the same time as our traditional water-safety trainings.” For its aquatic safety training and promotion of public health, Aqua Safety First Community Program became a recipient of the Governor’s Certificate of Recognition from Governor John Bel Edward.

The drive to make a difference did not stop there for Parker, of course. After earning a seat on the Louisiana State Democratic Central Committee, Parker has used his role to raise awareness on issues affecting Louisiana residents. He has worked with partners to make home-ownership a reality for working families; he has tackled issues related to senior care, disability, and food insecurity; and he has been unafraid of speaking truth to power even in his own political party. The latter of those things has earned him some detractors, and he is occasionally looked upon as a firebrand or worse. But Parker takes the name-calling in stride. “I am not here to be liked,” Parker often said. “We have a job to do, and things are too serious for us to sit back and be quiet.” Quiet is the last thing Woodrow Parker has been. The 2023 elections were a seminal moment for Parker, as Democrats across the state were defeated in race after race. “We are no longer connecting with everyday people. They don’t think we understand them or that we feel their pain,” Parker said. “What’s worse, though, our party doesn’t seem to get that. It’s still operating with the status quo.”

That is what propelled him to action. By the end of 2023, Parker launched the website going by his own name, and as the new year began, he started his campaign for the two seats inside the machine that is the Democratic Party. He aims to wake up a staid institution, so that it will once again resonate with voters. “The problems that our families are facing are only going to be solved by a serious party with serious candidates offering serious solutions,” Parker told a group of constituents in Franklin, Louisiana. “I am running, because I know that I can be a part of bringing those things to the table. And when we do, a lot of voters, both Democrats and Republicans, will take us seriously again.” If he is successful, Parker might offer a path for reinvigorating his wounded party.

Back on the driveway, Parker’s one-on-one with the young boy went on for approximately ten minutes, before the politician went back to canvassing the street. When

asked about his exchange with the homeowner, Parker commented, “I may not have swayed a voter, but I did make an impression. They’ll recognize that we aren’t so far apart, and that’s how we start to make a difference.” Then, he added this about his interaction with the young boy: “You have to stop for a moment and remember that we are doing all of this for them – for our children. We have to make this state better, so that it’s a place he’ll always call home and not just some place he used to live.”

Gary Harrell is the founder of G. Harrell Literary Properties and a guest columnist for this piece. Additional information about Woodrow Parker can be found at woodrowparker.com.

