

'In Ray's honor'

THE DEATH OF A FRIEND COMPELLED BILLY OCASIO INTO ACTIVISM AND POLITICS

In February 1988, even though he was 140 miles away attending classes at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Billy Ocasio's life was changed forever by events that took place at the corner of Rush Street and Grand Avenue. There was a traffic accident involving Ocasio's former high school pal and college roommate, Ray Rivera, who had worked for the late Mayor Harold Washington, and some off-duty Chicago police officers. There was a fight. "And my friend was killed," Ocasio says. "That changed my life. I dropped out of school and came back. I wanted to get back to my community, to work making it better in Ray's honor."

That community is Humboldt Park, which makes up a large part of the 26th Ward, where Ocasio has been alderman since 1993 and where his roots are deep. He was born to his Puerto Rican parents in 1961, served as an altar boy, attended Alexander Von Humboldt Elementary School and then Roberto Clemente High School. He had two brothers and three sisters.

"My father worked and we were not poor, but the housing in the area was terrible. It is vivid in my mind how we kids would entertain ourselves," he says. "We sat on the sofa with our shoes in our laps and would throw them at the rats scurrying across the floor. We would each get points for hitting the rats with our shoes."

He was the first freshman and first minority student accepted into the U. of I.'s then-new sports medicine program, but after Rivera's death he turned his attention to community activism, eventually becoming the director of the Latin United Community Housing Association.

When Luis Gutierrez won election to Congress in 1992, he chose Ocasio to replace him as the ward's alderman.

"We always argued about issues, and I didn't like politics," says Ocasio. "But he convinced me that I could have a greater impact as alderman." He won his first election in 1995 and in 2003 won re-election with 77 percent of the vote.

"Every election I say I am not going to run again, but in this job I really have a chance to shape this community," he says. "I have accomplished a lot of what I set out to do, but it's a never-ending task. No day is like any other. Every day there is a crisis. But I challenge any ward to say they have created more affordable housing than we have."

He talks, in his pleasantly animated style, about the thriving commercial section of Division Street, of the increasingly family-oriented activity in a "much safer and more beautiful Humboldt Park," and of the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, which is seen in Osgood's photo.



This \$7-million renovation project is transforming the landmark Humboldt Park Stables into a 25,000-square-foot museum that will be, Ocasio says, "the premiere museum outside of Puerto Rico and a national museum in every sense."

He has been married for nearly four years to Veronica, whom he has known since high school and who works as an executive assistant for Gutierrez. They have two children, 9-year-old Ismael Antonio Sanchez and 2-year-old Gabriel Albizu Ocasio. Another baby is on the way (or might have already arrived by this printing), Antonio Betances Ocasio.

He plans to run again next year but that might be it. "I think then I might be done and will have left enough behind for the young people to have a model," he says.

And then? "Then I want to meet Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett," he says. "I want to tell them to open an office here and I would run that office. There are a lot of people who need help, poor and working families here and across the United States. My work helping others will not stop when I stop being alderman. I think that is what Ray would have wanted. That's what he would have done if he had the chance to live." □

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