

Democrats call Texas 11 Party heroes

By Kevin J. Shay
Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA)—The stand by 11 Texas Democratic senators against a Republican redistricting attempt is inspiring Democrats across the country, said state Sen. Royce West of Dallas, one of the politicians who fled the state July 28 to effectively block the redistricting plan.

"The Democratic Party is starting to get some backbone," West said during a conference call Friday with reporters from the African-American press. "We have some real differences between our parties, and we will draw that distinction [in the 2004 elections]."

Some Democrats in New Mexico, where the party controls the state Legislature, are discussing redrawing Congressional seats there to partly combat the Republican efforts.

In Colorado, Democrats didn't flee from the state last May, when Republicans there pushed through a redistricting plan. But they are opposing the new plan in court. And they recently hosted a reception for the Texas Democrats.

MoveOn.org, a California-based national progressive organization founded during the Clinton impeachment battle, has showed its appreciation of Texas Democrats by raising more than \$1 million from some 32,000 members—averaging about \$30 each—in just one week for a national media campaign to raise awareness about the situation. Zack Exley, MoveOn.org's organizing director, said he was overwhelmed by the response and praised the 11 Texas Democrats for inspiring such support.

"They have put their reputations and careers on the line for all of us," Exley said.

For their part, Republicans continue to wage a public relations battle blaming the situation on Democrats. Referring to the Texas-New Mexico State football game overwhelming won by Texas, 66-7, on Sunday, Texas GOP Chairman Susan Weddington said that at least New Mexico players showed up.

"Fans of both teams can rest assured that there were far fewer delay of game and unsportsmanlike conduct penalties on Sunday

than the Democrats have incurred over the past few months," Weddington said.

Meanwhile, U.S. District Judge George Kazen admonished both sides during a recent hearing in Laredo to consider a lawsuit Democrats filed to allow them to return to Texas without being arrested. "We're almost like the Middle East," Kazen said. "We've got these two camps over here, and it's either total victory or total surrender."

Among the issues discussed was a 72-hour warning before Republican Gov. Rick Perry, who has vowed to call a third special session, can do so. Kazen referred the case to a three-judge federal panel.

One Democratic senator, John Whitmire of Houston, did return to Texas over the weekend without being arrested. He called for an end to the standoff.

Republicans have made many attempts to get West and other Democrats to comply with their plan. They have tried to arrest them using state and federal resources. They have fined them as much as \$5,000 a day.

Republican Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst changed the procedures by doing away with a long-standing rule that two-thirds of senators must agree for a bill to be debated.

Perry has also hinted that he may move the date of the Texas primary election next March to allow more time for a new districting map to be approved.

Redistricting in Texas is normally done in years ending with one—for example, 1991 and 2001—every 10 years right after new U.S. Census numbers are released. In 2001, the Texas Legislature could not reach a consensus, and new districts were redrawn in court.

After Republicans took control of the Legislature in 2002, U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, and others wanted to solidify their power in Congress. They decided a redistricting plan was the best way to ensure Republicans would win the seats.

This is the first time in Texas history that a party has made such a "re-redistricting" attempt in a mid-year without being under a court order, West said. Among the reasons
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FRIENDLY FOES

Democratic presidential hopefuls, Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., (left) and the Rev. Al Sharpton, leader of the New York-based National Action Network, talk prior to the candidates debate Tuesday at Morgan State University in Baltimore.

Refuge for N.Y. children face challenges

By Herb Boyd

Special to Sentinel-Voice

NEW YORK (NNPA)—It was during a visit to see her incarcerated son in 1992 that Sharonne Salaam began conceptualizing People United for Children. "I saw so many young men in the prison who had never received a visitor," she said in a recent interview at her Harlem office. "It was then that I began thinking about what could be done to rescue our children, to put them on a better path."

Salaam could have been self-absorbed in her own plight since her son, Yusef, was one of the youths convicted—and later exonerated—in the Central Park jogger case. But she saw the bigger picture and a community ravaged with the lack of parental care, a failing foster care system and a child welfare agency gone bonkers.

For more than 20 years Salaam, a graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology, was a fashion designer and a teacher at Parsons. "I still do a little designing now and then," she said, revealing just a bit of her luminous smile. "I designed my daughter's wedding gown."

Most of her designs nowadays are devoted to salvaging young lives, and since the founding of her organization in 1992, she has impacted thousands of lives in the community.

"We are struggling to keep our doors open," she sighed, her attention half divided as she watched the movements of a toddler nearby. "We are a service-starved community, and we are a nonprofit organization that depends on funds from private corpora-

tions."

Keeping the doors open for needy children is just one concern for Salaam and her staff of four. She is also in the midst of a federal class action lawsuit against the city to stop the removal of children from their parents without an investigation.

"We are also seeking to change the unconstitutional way in which the ACS [Administration for Children's Services] takes children away from parents without a court order. After four years, we recently received a certification of our suit.

"There is an epidemic going on," Salaam continued, "and our children are the victims. And foster care and the juvenile justice system are just Band-Aids. Our children come out of these situations worse than when they went in."

In the organization's newsletter, seven steps are listed for parents who have had their children removed, including going straight to family court, finding out what charges have been filed and getting legal counsel.

Of particular concern to Salaam is the plight of fathers, who often face daunting circumstances in the court system trying to retrieve their children.

"There is no sympathy for the fathers, nor is there much sympathy for any of us in this system," she added. "People don't know where to turn when they face a crisis like this. That's why we are here...to help people in distress."

And the distress calls come in waves, almost hourly. Recently there was a call from a woman whose child was "acting out on her." Another was calling seeking ways to sue the Board of Education because it had failed to educate her child.

"We get all kinds of calls, and we do the best we can to assist them, to give them good advice on where to go," Salaam said.

On Wednesday, Sept. 10, the community will have an opportunity to get advice from the organization during a forum the People United for Children is hosting at the
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Imam

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W. Deen Mohammed is the son of Elijah Muhammad, who led the Nation of Islam until his death in 1975.

The Nation had taught that its founder, Wallace D. Fard, had divine status and that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet—which is heretical in mainstream Islam and alienated the movement from Muslims worldwide.

When W. Deen Mohammed took over the Nation of Islam at the time of his father's death, he gradually moved his thousands of followers toward orthodox Islam, winning the respect of Muslim leaders around the globe. He founded the group that became the American Society of Muslims, and Louis Farrakhan took leadership of the old Nation of Islam in 1978.

The two publicly mended fences in recent years, although their movements remain separate.

About one-third of American Muslims are U.S.-born Blacks, but not all are affiliated with W. Deen Mohammed.

He is known as a mentor to Malcolm X and for reaching out to leaders of other

faiths.

"His greatness came from the fact that he brought African-American Muslims into a deeper understanding of mainstream Islam," said Salam Al-Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a Los Angeles-based advocacy group founded by immigrant Muslims.

"His wealth of Islamic knowledge, as well as his experience as an American, has really cemented our understanding of what an American Muslim identity should be."

Imam David Shaheed said no successor has been named and no timetable set for an appointment. He said the imams of the movement would meet to decide whether to name one successor or to restructure the society.

But Abdulmalik Mohammed insisted that although W. Deen Mohammed was cutting back on his role with the society, he would remain the movement's spiritual leader.

"No force of nature, no spirit, no influence, no person, no group can ever separate me from Imam W. Deen Mohammed," Abdulmalik Mohammed said.

Rachel Zoll writes for The Atlanta Daily World.

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