

Poorest D.C. constituents confident in Marion Barry

By Vanessa St. Leger

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The Safeway grocery store on Alabama Avenue, near Good Hope Road in southeast D.C. is in the heart of Marion Barry country. On this bright, sunny day, there are a myriad of striking scenes, some more desolate than others. In one corner, a group of men all dressed in the uniform white t-shirt and jeans, watch aimlessly as cars drive by. Directly across, is a young couple, a Black man with his pregnant mate, trudging their cart full of groceries to their almost defunct car.

In the middle of the intersection stands an older barren man. He is wearing a jacket and pants so dirty of sweat and soil that they are beginning to fall off his limbs. With a cardboard note in hand, he searches for the few souls with an ounce of pity that will grant him a few bits of change.

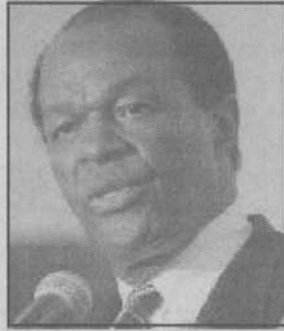
Of the District of Columbia's four quadrants, Southeast is the poorest. With a crime rate up 7 percent in 2003 over the previous year, it isn't the safest neighborhood by any measurement. Still, there remains a deep sense of community. Despite a reputation for being the most dangerous ward in Washington, the men and women of Southeast are citizens with rights. They, too have needs and a list of grievances for their political officials.

"These streets don't always look good for walking," says Yvonne Bates, a 36-year-old resident of the area. "Lately we've had to pick and choose our battles or nothing around here will ever get fixed."

Few people have been in more battles than Marion S. Barry, the embattled former three-term mayor. In 1990, he served a 6-month prison sentence for drug possession after being videotaped in a local hotel smoking crack. He emerged from jail, pulled a short stint on the City Council and then in November 1994 handily won his third term as mayor.

Just weeks ago, the local polls suggested that Barry didn't have the backing to win a seat on City Council, where he launched his first bid for mayor in 1978. While the so-called experts were counting him out, Barry was counting on people in Ward 8

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to return him to prominence. And they did, with 8243 ballots cast, he received 57 percent of the vote in a field of seven candidates. The victory in the Democratic primary virtually assures Barry a victory in the Nov. 2 general election. Already, there is speculation that Barry, who is jokingly called "Mayor for Life," will seek an unprecedented fourth term as mayor.

On these blocks, paralyzed by time, the mere mention of Marion Barry's name draws a vocal and opinionated crowd. Those who were hustling to attend to errands pause for a minute to speak of the man. Families congregate to tell their personal tale of his kindness. Those too young to know the man, listen in awe of stories of the street's legend.

His stretch in jail, his sullied reputation and losing the support of his Afro-centric pastor, Rev. Willie Wilson, didn't keep loyalists from voting for him. Now, at 68, prostate cancer and other nagging health problems have taken a heavy toll. But Ward 8 residents have pinned all their hope on going back to the future.

"Barry has experience. He's been here before and we've seen what he can do. Southeast owes a lot to him because of what he's already done for us," says Tony Clarke, a part-time electrician from Atlanta.

There's another factor that is rarely discussed in polite company - some Black voters vote for Barry as a way to thumb their nose at the power establishment. And they do it at every opportunity.

These residents have long memories. They remember Barry leading transit boycotts in the 1960s, they know about his civil rights background and are grateful for his leading the Free D.C. movement.

During his three terms as mayor and his terms as D.C. councilman in 1992 and 1994, Barry backed initiatives that helped create jobs, build

homes, spur downtown development, expand summer jobs for teens and help those with the most need.

With Barry in City Hall, things were looking up for Southeast. Crime wasn't down and people were still living below the poverty line but there was hope.

"I have hope when Marion's around. That's my brother. He cares for me and mine, so I return the favor and I help keep him in office. I trust him," says Tajir Bonner of Southeast.

So does Nicole Jenkins, a cosmetologist and lifelong D.C. resident. She explains, "Marion knows us and he knows the political system. He looks out for our best interest."

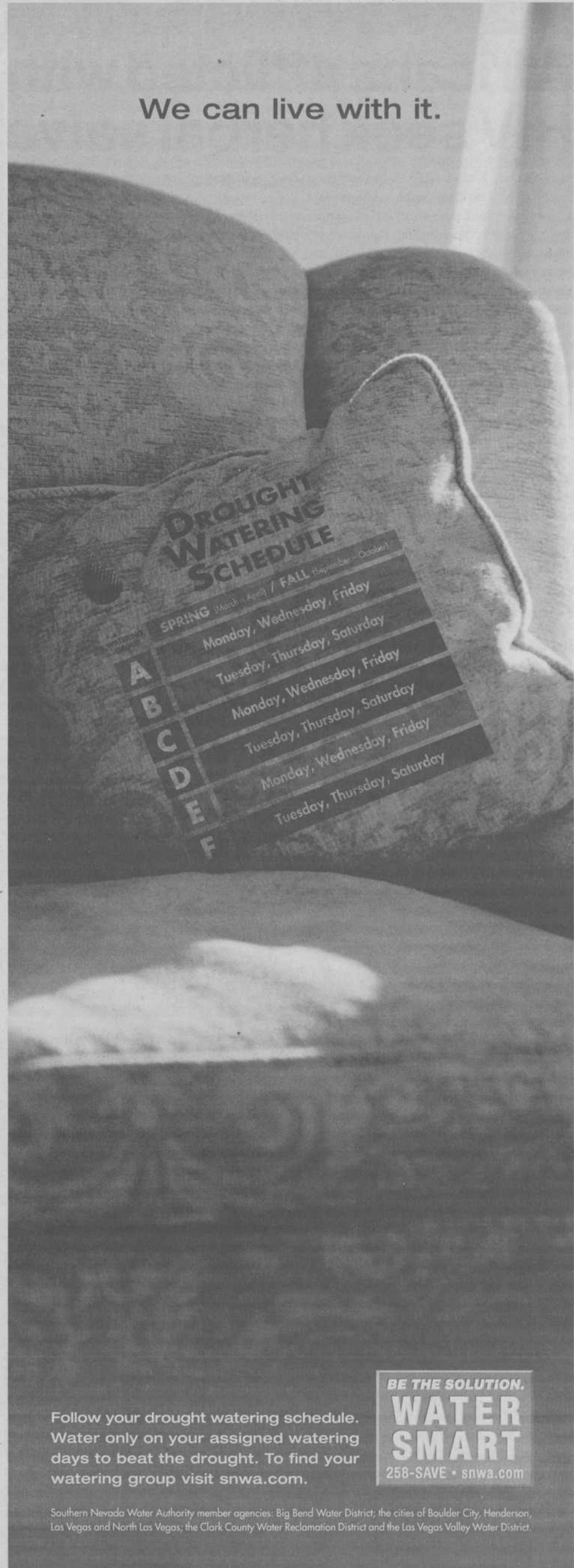
Residents trust and believe in Barry because they feel he knows and trusts them.

A true sign of stardom is when one is recognized by a single name. Jesse. Michael. Janet. Shaq. Usher. On these streets, the former mayor is known by one name — Mar'nbarry.

Wherever Mar'nbarry goes, he is never treated as a stranger. The old, the young and the in between greet him as he moves comfortably among the handshakes, hugs and kisses. They know his record — both political and criminal — and he's still their choice.

"He's not hiding anything. He's real," comments Bonner.

This isn't a politician who is out of touch with his constituents. Countless stories exist of Barry's appearances around the neighborhood. He's been spotted in the grocery stores, at street corners, and even at local parties. In the eyes of these voters, he's a regular member of the community, only he has the ability to make more changes than they can. "If anyone can make Southeast better, Marion can. If he can't do it, no one can," says Jenkins, the cosmetologist. "It's not what we think, it's what we know."



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	SPRING (March - April) / FALL (September - October)
A	Monday, Wednesday, Friday
B	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday
C	Monday, Wednesday, Friday
D	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday
E	Monday, Wednesday, Friday
F	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday

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