

Running Her Own Race
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She used to run away from her problems — now she’s picking herself back up after her first election loss and diving right back into her community.

Summer smells of tropical vegetation, lazy sunshine and steamy rain in this city of 10,000, just a short drive from the heart of downtown Miami. Until recently, building codes prevented developers from raising anything higher than four stories and successful elections were run door-to-door. It’s a small town going through big-time changes.

A divisiveness that begins with elections and continues long after the polls are closed now pits ethnic groups against one another. Big money from special interests and developers is rolling into city elections, driving up campaign costs, while at the same time the number of voters is declining.

Whether residents are suffering from apathy, extremely busy lives or disillusionment is up for debate. But the facts are that only about half of them were registered to vote this year, and of those only about 800 bothered to cast their ballots May 27 when special elections were called to fill a city commission seat.

For SGI-USA member Karen Zeller, it’s more than a soap opera played out on the evening news. She ran in the three-way race for city commission and lost by 24 votes. The news is that she’s not following her instinct — the instinct to disappear into the Florida sunset and let someone else clean up the mess.

“In the past I would have just been gone, I would have run away,” said Ms. Zeller, who has been practicing Buddhism for 10 years. “But I’ll never be a quitter again. I never felt part of a community. I always was searching for a home. Now I feel like I can’t let them down — those who supported me — and just fade away.”

Her involvement began as a simple desire to support the SGI’s peace movement. Inspired by SGI President Ikeda’s guidance and a desire to support his 1993 visit to Miami, she settled in South Miami and took over management of a small apartment complex. She set about the job of improving the atmosphere in the complex, which had attracted drug dealers and people whose lifestyles included little consideration for others.

Within one difficult year, during which she faced threats from evicted tenants, the situation gradually improved as quieter families moved in. But one problem continued to disturb people’s sleep: garbage trucks running in the early morning hours, in obvious violation of city ordinances. On behalf of her tenants, Ms. Zeller made her first appearance at a city commission meeting.

One thing led to another: Ms. Zeller ended up first as an officer in the local homeowners association, then as a member of the City Planning Board. The mayor also appointed her to direct a program for disadvantaged youth, which Ms. Zeller saw as the perfect opportunity to help bridge cultural and economic gaps in the community.

“Every time I heard President Ikeda when he was here in Miami or when I read his guidance, he was saying to focus on your environment — to focus on yourself and do what you can do,” Ms. Zeller said. “When I started practicing Buddhism, I was running from failure. All I had ever wanted to do was manage my own business.”

She was introduced to the practice just as her dream was falling apart. In May 1985, she and a friend bought a black-and-white photo processing business in Louisville, Ky., not realizing that the business was in decline. By August 1986, when she received the Gohonzon, she and her partner were on their way to bankruptcy court. When it was over,

both her finances and her friendship were broken. In February 1987, she headed out of Louisville, intent on leaving behind the pain, to build a new life in Boston. But her determination was so weak that she took a snowstorm along the way as a sign to head south to Florida instead.

For seven years, she wandered, uprooted, in three different Florida towns until she took a stand in South Miami. “I had been divorced in 1980,” Ms. Zeller said. “I’d always had trouble with relationships both inside and outside the organization, but I was determined to stop running. It’s amazing that for the first time in my life I stuck with something — I stuck with my practice to the Gohonzon.”

She still confronts the tendency to give up. Right after the election, the narrow loss and the public humiliation she faced made her question why she cared to keep going. But as the days passed and she began to receive calls from people in the community urging her to stay involved, she realized that giving up would be cowardly.

“I kept thinking of the Goshō passages ‘winter never fails to turn to spring’ and that ‘the Lotus Sutra is a sword that’s useless in the hands of a coward,’” said Ms. Zeller.

Running for political office has given her a deeper understanding of what it means to practice Buddhism for the sake of a peaceful world, and, because of that, to face persecution. At the only scheduled debate before the election, a rival and former judge threw all the issues out the door by first accusing her of being a drug abuser.

“It was an absolute absurdity — it was a set-up,” said her campaign manager, Dick Ward, a former teacher and principal for 30 years at South Miami Middle School. “I told Karen before the debate to have an answer for that question, because that’s the type of dirty campaign tactics that have become popular in the last few years.”

The accusation became news in the local newspaper and rumor in the community. On election day, people campaigning for her opponent actually heckled members of the Police Benevolent Association who were supporting Ms. Zeller, Mr. Ward said. They demanded to know why a police association would support a drug abuser.

Mr. Ward has managed eight door-to-door, small-town campaigns for city commission and won seven since he first got involved in 1962. He managed the campaign for the first African American elected to the city commission in 1968 and the first Hispanic in 1996. While he believes one-on-one dialogue is still the ideal, he sees that style threatened by public relations campaigns run by high-paid professionals. He always has run campaigns as a volunteer.

“I supported Karen because she asked me to run her campaign and because, while working with her in the homeowners association, I found that we supported some of the same things — a stable tax base and trying to maintain a harmonious political atmosphere,” he said.

Joyce Schecter, owner of Sunset Preparatory School in South Miami for 30 years, has known Mr. Ward all those years. And for the last 20 years they’ve supported different candidates in city elections. This time they were in the same camp.

“She is like a breath of fresh air,” said Ms. Schecter. “It’s the city’s loss that she didn’t win.”

Ms. Zeller has worked part-time at Ms. Schecter’s school, helping students with reading for the past several years. “Her heart and her thinking are in the right place,” Ms. Schecter said. “She is one of the most patient people I know. Karen is an exceptional human being — that is what is so important about her.”

During the debate in which Zeller was accused of being a drug abuser, Ms. Schecter stood up to defend her.

Vice Mayor Julio Robaino, the first Hispanic elected to the city commission, also

campaigned for Ms. Zeller. “I supported Karen because I believe she was the kind of person people can trust to be their eyes and ears,” Mr. Robaino said. “She’s very up and up, very honest. She had no political agenda. I believe people are looking to elect someone like Karen, somebody who comes from the heart, over someone who’s doing it for the clout or the prestige.”

When the campaign turned nasty, Ms. Zeller also found support among her friends in the SGI. For example, while some of Zeller’s opponents were heckling her supporters, Thomas Krutchfield was making friends. “We were standing side by side [with opponents] in the hot sun passing out pamphlets and we started talking to one another,” he said. “I told them about the practice [of Buddhism]. Whether Karen won or lost, I believe we raised the consciousness of people.”

Stephen Bonnell, another member, also came out to support Ms. Zeller: “I was amazed at how much strength and courage it takes to put yourself on the line as Karen did. She had a real desire to help the community and do her part. That totally came out of her practice. It showed me how much there is a need for people of integrity and purpose and a sense of mission in the political world, and how we have to look for those things when we vote.”

Ms. Zeller hasn’t decided if she’ll run for office again, but she is more resolved than ever to make a difference in her community. When she told the owner of the apartment complex she manages that she was going to join the local Toastmasters Club to improve her public speaking skills, he offered to pay for her to take a college course. After the elections, she was also appointed president of the South Miami Homeowners Association, which has begun a non-partisan, community-wide campaign to inspire voter participation.

“My determination is to get the community involvement up,” she said. “We’re going to make an all-out effort through the homeowners association to get absentee ballots to people and more information to city residents. People are supporting me — they want me to stay involved. We have to find a way out of this apathy and the feeling that all politics is corrupt and dirty. The only way is for more people to be involved.”

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