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The Baltimore Sun

October 26, 1994, Wednesday, FINAL EDITION

SECTION: LOCAL (NEWS), Pg. 3B

LENGTH: 997 words

HEADLINE: 'Senator for Life' faces hard-charging Republican

BYLINE: Joe Nawrozki, Sun Staff Writer

BODY:

Russell Mirabile is waging the war of the underdog.

On this morning, he jumps into his powder-blue Oldsmobile with campaign signs spilling from a yawning trunk, the back seat piled high with literature hailing his vision for the salvation of Baltimore County's 7th Legislative District.

In normal times, Mr. Mirabile might be brushed off as a bright, eccentric Republican long shot with little chance to defeat the man known as Dundalk's "Senator for Life," Democrat Norman R. Stone Jr.

But in this political season, Mr. Mirabile hopes logic won't reign, and he's running at breakneck speed, zooming along the Baltimore Beltway with his mobile telephone on his lap. He scribbles reminders to himself. His pager doesn't stop chirping. He converses with his front-seat passenger -- while looking at him -- as he drives toward North Point Boulevard at a frantic clip.

"I'm a jack rabbit, a renegade," he says, suddenly jerking the car off the highway shoulder. "We have to get Stone out of office because he forgets where he came from."

But the soft-spoken Mr. Stone doesn't think he's lost touch with his constituency. Indeed, many voters speak fondly of Mr. Stone and tell stories of how he helped them battle the state bureaucracy or gave free legal representation.

"Listen" said Clara Graff, co-owner of Clara's Ice Cream Parlor on German Hill Road, "my husband went to school with Norman. He's always done good for people . . . he helps people no matter what."

Mr. Stone has a large campaign chest, the support of organized labor and endorsements from most of the political action committees in Annapolis -- enough to convince Eastside political oddsmakers that he's again an overwhelming favorite.

In contrast, Mr. Mirabile's organization is small. He's financing his campaign with some small contributions and his personal bank account, which some say is considerable.

But he believes that if he can hitch a ride on the coattails of Republican gubernatorial candidate Ellen R. Sauerbrey

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and capitalize on anti-incumbency sentiment, he can make things difficult for Mr. Stone.

On Sunday, Mr. Mirabile won the endorsement of Rep. Helen Delich Bentley, R-Md.-2nd, who was the favorite to win the GOP gubernatorial nomination until her campaign was derailed by Mrs. Sauerbrey in the September primary.

"Russell has a good chance because he is very honest, he's not a phony, and the voters are ready for a change," said his campaign chairwoman Anne Wolf, owner of Wolf's Finest Chocolates in Rosedale. "We have growing crime, economic deterioration and very little help in Annapolis," she said.

But Mr. Stone has history. He grew up in Highlandtown, shined shoes in Eastern Avenue saloons as a child and attended law school at night while working during the day as a bricklayer. His four children grew up to be white-collar professionals, one a lawyer like himself. He says his long service in the state capital converts to power, and that enables him to better serve his constituents.

"You have to know the major issues as a public official but you have to know the bread-and-butter ones too," Mr. Stone said. "I have extensive knowledge of the budget and I'm ready to help people. My home number has been in the telephone book for the 30-some years I've been in Annapolis."

Tom Toporovich, retired secretary to the Baltimore County Council and a man known as the unofficial mayor of Dundalk, said he senses nervousness on Mr. Stone's part. But on election night, Mr. Toporovich said, Mr. Stone will emerge victorious.

"I think if a more substantial candidate were facing Stone, he'd have cause to worry," Mr. Toporovich said. "But Mirabile has not built a substantial record in the community and is generally unknown, although he has campaigned very actively."

The son of a steel worker and member of a family that owns a trailer park and a one-time bingo hall that's now a popular country-western bar, Mr. Mirabile graduated from Calvert Hall high school and after college earned a law degree from the Northern Virginia School of Law. He also holds a master's degree in litigation, although he does not practice law.

He has done his best to make himself visible in a frenetic campaign.

For example, Fourth of July parade-goers in Dundalk got a very clear message about his feelings on crime when Mr. Mirabile sponsored a float featuring a jail cell and a mock-up electric chair that pulsed with strings of Christmas lights.

"I had a guy with his head shaved who was going to sit in the chair for the parade," Mr. Mirabile said. "But I nixed that because I thought kids along the parade route might have gotten frightened."

The hurdle for any Republican in the 7th District is an overwhelming Democratic registration. It's a major factor in the House race, where the Democratic lineup of Del. John S. Arnick, Joseph "Sonny" Minnick and Jacob J. Mohorovic Jr. faces Republicans Jacqueline W. Madison, a longtime resident of Edgemere, and Robert J. Parsons, a Dundalk real estate agent.

"It's usually a tough situation being a Republican in the 7th, where we are outnumbered nearly 4 to 1," said Mrs. Madison. "People are very loyal to the Democratic Party unless something drastic changes their minds."

"There has been too much government intrusion with over-regulation, with the environmental and gun issues, and over-taxation," she said. "The government has become unaccountable."

Some 7th District voters seem to agree.

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Lee Cronin, owner of the Big Bear's Den, a restaurant in Gray Manor, was a longtime Stone supporter but has thrown his support to Mirabile.

"Look around eastern Baltimore County and you see businesses closed up, no jobs at Bethlehem Steel or Martin Marietta," he said. "Norman hasn't helped the people that need it and he hasn't used the power he's built up over 30 years to bring jobs into the area. And because of that, young people aren't staying here, they're moving out. We're dying down here."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO 1, Russell Mirabile; PHOTO 2, BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR/SUN STAFF PHOTO, Sen. Norman R. Stone Jr.

LOAD-DATE: October 27, 1994