

Not Backing Away From a Fight

Del. Baker Takes On Pr. George's Schools -- and His Next Campaign

By Paul Schwartzman
Washington Post Staff Writer
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The finger-wagging crowd outside his Annapolis office waves protest signs, spews promises of revenge come election time and accuses him of betraying African Americans.

Into this cauldron steps state Del. Rushern L. Baker III, the lawmaker at the center of the power struggle over the Prince George's County public schools.

Flashing a boyish, gap-toothed grin, he ventures a joke: Next time, perhaps, the protesters could spell B-A-K-E-R in larger letters.

Then the mood turns. A demonstrator, his face twisted with anger, curses Baker, and the delegate inches forward, fists coiled. Baker is restrained by two state troopers sent to protect him.

"Take your hands off me," Baker tells the officers. He's still ready to rumble two weeks later, recalling the moment. "If they hadn't stopped me, I would've gone after him. Your headline would've been: 'Delegate Gets Into Fight With Protester.' You don't talk to me that way."

In the high-voltage theater that is the Prince George's school meltdown, no actor has commandeered the spotlight more forcefully than Baker, the two-term Democrat who is leading the call for reform.

He's not new to the cause. For three years, Baker has lobbied to abolish the elected school board, pitting himself against a majority black panel and some civic leaders, who argue that he's seeking to strip voters of their civil rights.

The timing of the current uproar could not be better for Baker, 43, a lawyer who hopes that the attention will boost what is widely regarded as his long-shot campaign to succeed Wayne K. Curry (D) as county executive.

With a relatively small amount of money raised so far, even his most ardent admirers -- the ones who describe him as an emerging star in state politics -- believe he can't win. They would prefer that he remain in Annapolis, where they say his horizons are unlimited.

"Maybe he has a death wish," said Del. Howard P. Rawlings (D-Baltimore), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. "He ought to stay in the House, where he has an excellent future and will probably be speaker one day."

For months, top state Democrats, including Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (Prince George's), have implored Baker to run for a new Senate seat created this year as part of redistricting. But Baker has ignored the entreaties.

"We cut that seat for him. I'd like to see him come over to the Senate -- he's the next

generation of leadership in our county," said state Sen. Gloria Lawlah, a veteran of Prince George's political wars.

Lawlah, who is supporting another county executive candidate, snorted at the prospect of Baker succeeding Curry. "It's a mistake. He won't win, and he'll be out of politics for good," she said.

Baker has heard all the naysayers before and brushes them aside during an interview in his Annapolis office, the walls lined with photographs of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X.

He said he has raised significant cash since he reported in November that he had \$28,000 in his campaign account, an amount that at the time seemed to define his candidacy as doomed. By contrast, another Democratic contender, State's Attorney Jack B. Johnson, had about \$300,000, while two others, County Council member M.H. Jim Estep (Croom) and Major F. Riddick, a former adviser to Gov. Parris N. Glendening, had more than \$200,000.

"They miss the whole point," Baker said of his doubters. "I didn't run for office so I could hold it. I ran for office because I wanted to make a difference. I don't want to spend the next 40 years here."

Around Annapolis, Baker is known as Mr. Congeniality, a man so prone to hearty hellos and lingering chatter that his itchy, clock-watching aides often serve more as chaperones ushering him off to appointments.

As chairman of the Prince George's House delegation, he touts himself as a consensus builder who has lobbied to bring state funding to the county. He earned kudos for his passionate speech before the recent House of Delegates vote to strip power from the local school board.

"Three years ago, people wondered why he subjected himself to abuse from the public by taking a leading role on the school board issue, virtually alone," said Joel Rozner, a longtime Annapolis lobbyist. "Anyone who's willing to exhibit that kind of leadership way ahead of the curve deserves a lot of credit."

But Baker also is known in Annapolis for embracing a somewhat obscure cause. Until recently, perhaps, his biggest prime-time moment was sponsoring legislation to ban circuses from using elephants.

"Why are we talking about this?" his aide, Ramon Korianoff, groaned when the subject came up during the interview.

Some colleagues question Baker's independence, complaining that he aligns himself too closely with Curry. For the past three years, Baker has been a \$60,000-a-year legal consultant to the county's Redevelopment Authority, a quasi-independent agency that's largely controlled by Curry.

"If the county executive says 'This is the way it's going to be,' then I think Rushern says, 'This is the way it's going to be,'" said Del. Carolyn J.B. Howard (D-Prince George's), who has clashed with Baker over the schools. "He really believes Wayne knows what's right."

Baker dismisses any suggestion that he lacks independence, though he has difficulty citing a substantial issue in which he and Curry have differed since he became delegation chairman in 1999.

And he rejected the criticism -- advanced by school board Chairman Kenneth E. Johnson (Mitchellville) -- that his county contract is a patronage plum granted by a dotting administration.

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"Where do these people come from?" Baker asked. Many state lawmakers, he said, supplement their \$31,509 annual salaries by working for the school system or county and state government.

Even Baker's detractors don't doubt his commitment to school reform, a cause he pursued even before Iris T. Metts's tumultuous reign as superintendent. In any public discussion of the issue, he rarely forgets to mention that his three children attend Prince George's public schools.

But his call for including appointees on the school board has incurred a price: anger from black community leaders who argue that it would disenfranchise voters.

"I thought he had a very close understanding of what African Americans have gone through in terms of gaining voting rights," said Edythe Flemings-Hall, head of the Prince George's branch of the NAACP. "I thought he would be more reticent about canceling those rights, given how hard we have fought to get them."

But Baker says the need for change trumps that argument in a system that he says suffers from mismanagement. "This is an emergency," he said. "I have to live with these idiots in charge, and my kids go to the schools."

Until this year, Baker's commitment to school reform has been largely a solo act. He endured a torrent of boos and heckling three years ago at a forum on the issue at Prince George's Community College.

The barrage was easy to take, Baker said, until a man began shouting insults about his family. If not for a colleague, Baker says, he would have gone after the man.

"I would've stomped" him, Baker said. "That was personal."

His penchant for brawling dates to childhood, when he recalls coming home from second grade, crying over a beating by two bullies.

His father, a career Army man, offered no sympathy.

"Go beat them up," he commanded.

His father's advice, Baker said, was "you weren't supposed to start fights, but it was unacceptable to be pushed around."

The family zigzagged the globe, following his father's postings from North Carolina to Massachusetts to Okinawa, Japan. Baker attended five elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools.

The constant dislocation, he said, caused an array of problems in school, an experience that infuses his current passion over education. At one point in elementary school, teachers told Baker's parents that he could not read.

But it was his temper that got him in the most trouble. In sixth grade, he was thrown out of school for fighting. A few years later, his mother forbade him to play basketball after he beat up an opponent who fouled him. "You're going to end up in jail," she warned.

His last fight, he said, was in high school when he attacked a classmate, a constant antagonist who made the mistake of calling him stupid. "I beat the hell out of him," Baker said. "I never saw so much blood on an individual. It was scary."

The experience pushed Baker to focus on controlling his temper, and he grew steadily more serious about his studies. By the end of high school, he was reading rigorous fiction by black writers such as Richard Wright, and he considered himself a "leftist." He resolved

to go into politics at the urging of his father, who said it was a way to make a difference.

Baker, who got his undergraduate and law degrees from Howard University, moved to Prince George's in 1989 with his wife, Christa Beverly, who is also a lawyer. Five years later, after immersing himself in the county's political community, he won election to the House of Delegates.

It was after winning reelection in 1998 that he began talking about running for county executive. If his loyalists and skeptics doubt his chances, it may be a mistake to question his resolve.

"Besides," Baker said, his ever-present smile back in place, "I'm going to win."

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