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## A Rising Star's Biggest Risk

Supporters Hope Baker's Boldness Pays Off in Votes

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Del. Rushern L. Baker III strolled confidently through the crowd of veterans and politicians at the Bladensburg park, exuding easy charm.

For weeks he had been urging strangers to elect him as the next Prince George's county executive. But this morning he was on home turf, attending a ceremony with people he had long represented in Maryland's House of Delegates.

Spotting former town councilman Warren Hoffman leaning against a post, Baker grinned broadly and strode up to shake his hand.

Hoffman greeted him warmly. "If Rushern wins, it would be a really good thing," Hoffman said enthusiastically after Baker moved on. Then he paused and gave a wistful sigh. "I just wish he was running for the state Senate instead."

It is a common refrain among Baker's many admirers. During his two terms, they have watched with growing respect as Baker, 43, blossomed into one of Annapolis's youngest stars. He was largely credited with unifying the county's often fractious lawmakers as chairman of the Prince George's House delegation, leading the fight to replace the county's controversial school board with an appointed panel this year, and helping to win a deal for an unprecedented \$350 million in additional state education funds over the next six years.

Then, just as Democratic Party leaders were poised to reward Baker with a rare new state Senate seat carved out especially for him, he opted instead to run for county executive against a collection of contenders who were far better known and far better funded.

That decision remains a central mystery of both Baker's campaign and his persona. How, his friends wonder, could a man who demonstrated such political savvy in the General Assembly take such a gamble?

"I'm still trying to fathom that," said Del. Howard P. Rawlings (D-Baltimore), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and a close ally. "Maybe he has a death wish."

Baker offered a more cheerful explanation: "I did not get into politics to hold on to office," he said. "I got into politics to make a difference in this county. And the county executive job is where I can best do that."

His resolve is buttressed by the knowledge that he has successfully bucked conventional wisdom before -- running for his first term in the House as an unknown when experts initially warned that he should go for a Bladensburg Town Council seat first, and persisting with his unpopular effort to reform the school board.

Should Baker prevail, he will have pulled off his greatest upset to date. But with a recent Washington Post poll showing only 5 percent of voters supporting him, his admirers fear a different scenario: They worry that the same stubborn, idealistic confidence that has propelled his political career will now prove his undoing.

This dogged, self-proclaimed commitment to principle can give Baker an air that is alternately inspiring, arrogant and a touch naive.

Ask him how he came to politics, and he tells a story straight out of an African American sequel to "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington": He was 17, and watching a televised political debate with his now-deceased father, a retired Green Beret, at home in Springfield, Mass.

"I was going on and on to my father about how these politicians didn't care about the people, that all they cared about was getting reelected," he recounted. "And my father said, 'If you think you can do a better job, you shouldn't just talk, you should run for office.' I decided at that very moment that that's what I wanted to do in life."

Years later, that epiphany compelled him to forsake his General Assembly career for a shot at the county executive seat.

"It was very tempting," Baker said. "But then, I swear to God, I had this dream where my father and I were watching television

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just like when I was 17. Except I was a grown-up and had become a state senator. My father looked at me and said, 'Well, it turns out you were just like everybody else.'

"I woke up with this empty feeling," he continued, "and I knew right then that I would not run for the Senate."

## **Slow Learner, Avid Reader**

The promise Baker showed as a legislator was less evident in his early years. He was born in Valdosta, Ga., in 1958, soon after his father had joined the Army Special Forces, and moved frequently with his parents and three siblings -- living in towns and on bases throughout North Carolina, Massachusetts and Okinawa.

As an Army brat, Baker said, "you got used to making new friends. Adapting to new situations was easy for us." The bases he lived on were very integrated, added Baker, giving him a sense of ease among people of different races that serves him well today.

But the constant moves exacerbated Baker's difficulties at school.

"I was a slow learner," he said, "and I had a bad temper. I was always getting into fights."

When he was in second grade in Massachusetts, Baker's reading skills were so poor he was held back a year.

Baker credits his parents with getting him back on track.

On one occasion, after Baker had been suspended from elementary school for a particularly bloody fight, his father marched him right back to the building. "He spanked me in front of the whole class, then made me sit down and told me, 'You are not going to be disruptive,'" Baker recalled.

To Baker, the episode underscores his parents' refusal to give up on him. A child of the segregated South, Baker's father did not attend college until much later in life. But "there was never any doubt in his mind that we would go to college," Baker recalled.

It wasn't until midway through high school that Baker proved his parents' confidence in him correct. By that time, he had grown out of his childhood feistiness. But he still had few interests beyond the football team, of which he was captain.

Then a teacher assigned him the book "Black Boy" by Richard Wright.

"It changed my life," Baker said. "It was the first time I started to understand all these things my parents had been telling me about my obligation to my family and to other African Americans to do my best in school."

Baker quickly devoured every other book by Wright, then moved on to the rest of the library. The boy who had failed second grade became an avid reader, and an even more avid liberal.

He launched his first campaign as an undergraduate at Howard University, becoming sophomore class president and later student council president.

At Howard, Baker also met his wife, Christa Beverly, now a lawyer who works for an association representing historically black colleges. "She was the most interesting person I had ever met, very popular and smart," he said. They married in 1986, just after each had graduated from law school -- he from Howard, she from William and Mary.

After stints in the Washington law firm of Covington & Burling, the office of Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) and a District housing agency, Baker took a job with an area community development corporation. He also began a private practice as a small business and personal injury lawyer.

## **Paying Dues in the House**

In 1989, Baker moved his growing family to the Prince George's town of Cheverly, a middle-class oasis of modest homes and leafy streets amid the mostly gritty county neighborhoods inside the Capital Beltway.

He began volunteering on local campaigns and soon caught the eye of Democratic Party members such as Rep. Albert R. Wynn and Michael Arrington, who Baker helped elect to the House of Delegates. "He really impressed people. He's so genuine and sincere and likable that it was a cinch for him," said Arrington, now an Annapolis lobbyist who has endorsed one of Baker's

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opponents, Jack B. Johnson.

Baker also caught a lucky break when then-Del. Paul G. Pinsky, whom he had planned to challenge in 1994 against the advice of insiders, decided to run for the state Senate. Baker was appointed to replace Pinsky two months before the primary and won the seat with 50 percent of the vote.

As a rookie legislator, Baker occasionally raised eyebrows. In his second year, Baker took on party elders with an impassioned speech against their plans to build FedEx Field for the Washington Redskins in Landover, which, Baker contended, would subject the area's low-income residents to unbearable traffic and noise. He also sponsored a number of well-intentioned bills that elicited giggles from more-seasoned colleagues -- including, most infamously, a proposal to protect circus elephants from mistreatment.

"I think he came in being very idealistic and thinking he could operate on principles alone in the legislature," Arrington said. "But he quickly learned to be more efficient about prioritizing his goals and not spinning his wheels and antagonizing people."

## Making a Difference

By the time he was elected to his second term, Baker was considered a natural choice to head the county's House delegation.

Determined that they should present a unified front, Baker took his colleagues on a day-long tour of the county to help them better understand the needs of each other's constituents.

Baker also earned raves for his willingness to keep members of the delegation, the County Council and the county executive's office in the loop, and for his ability to build consensus among them. "In another life, he would probably have made a very good group therapist," said County Council Chairman Peter A. Shapiro (D-Brentwood).

The halls of Annapolis soon buzzed with talk of a bright future -- perhaps even an eventual rise to the speaker's job -- for the young delegate from Cheverly.

A member of the House Appropriations Committee, Baker also built a solid liberal record and sponsored a series of bills that he now points to as proof that he is more committed to improving the county than his opponents are.

He has tried, thus far unsuccessfully, to exempt Prince George's from waiting 10 days before questioning police officers accused of misconduct -- a move activists say is crucial to reforming a police force with a reputation for brutality. And Baker also was instrumental in securing state funding for revitalization projects in the county and pushing through laws making state agencies and courts more accessible to Spanish-speaking residents.

But Baker is most proud of his success in passing legislation to install a temporary appointed panel in place of the county's elected school board, which generated headlines for ethical lapses and its constant sparring with schools chief Iris T. Metts.

Many county residents, including some who were disappointed with the board, complained that they were unjustly robbed of their right to vote. In the four years since he first took up the issue, Baker has been booed at public hearings and picketed at his office.

He also was accused of acting at the behest of County Executive Wayne K. Curry (D) in exchange for a \$60,000-a-year contract to provide legal advice to the county's redevelopment authority. Although a 1999 state law bars legislators from holding government jobs, it exempts those who had such positions before the law took effect.

Baker, who has supplemented his \$31,000 legislative salary with the county work since 1998, said it had not influenced his judgment. "I always did what I thought was in the best interests of the county," he said.

He adds that his commitment to revamping the school board stemmed from his experience as a parent with three children in public schools. "When you live with both the best and the worst of the system, it really opens your eyes," he said.

Baker also contends that it would have been impossible to secure the record amount of state school funding awarded to Prince George's this year without replacing the board.

He remains convinced that come primary day, Prince George's voters will agree.

But even if they don't, he said, he has no regrets. "If I never serve in politics again, at least I'll know that I helped pass legislation that will make a fundamental difference in people's lives. That was my dream, and I actually got to live it out."