

Schaefer's Return to Life

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He grunts at steep curbs, feels winded after walking a few blocks, and in the quiet moments, his watery green eyes get a faraway look. But before a crowd, especially a campaign crowd, William Donald Schaefer is revived—shoulders back, hands gesturing, wisecracks flying.

Schaefer, the former two-term Democratic governor and 15-year Baltimore mayor who dominated Maryland politics until term limits forced him from office, wasn't built for retirement.

He is so closely associated with his public roles that people who pass him on the street still call him Governor Schaefer or Mayor Schaefer or Governor-Mayor Schaefer, as if the titles were his first name.

His surprise decision to jump into the race for Maryland comptroller at age 76 is more than a last hurrah. It's his return to life.

"I know a plumber whose wife insisted he retire," Schaefer said when asked why he decided to run for state comptroller days after his friend, Louis L. Goldstein, 85, unexpectedly died in office in July. "The neighborhood was changing, and she didn't want him working anymore. Within a year, he was dead."

Republican challenger Larry M. Epstein says that's a poor reason to seek office. "He's doing it because he's bored and likes being in public life," said Epstein, a certified public accountant from Glyndon. "I'm doing it because I like the job."

When Schaefer left Annapolis in January 1995, he walked away from 40 years in politics. An only child who never married or had children, he was lost. His longtime companion, Hilda Mae Snoops, is ailing in a nursing home, and although he visits her three times a week, her health problems leave him alone. "Just like that, it was over," Schaefer said. "Door slammed. A new governor. A new king."

Life as a private citizen was disorienting. Schaefer had to learn to

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drive a car, shop for groceries and grapple with other details of domestic life that his staffs had handled for decades.

"He went to the market, and there's like 27 different kinds of milk," said Lainy M. Lebow-Sachs, a former adviser who remains close to Schaefer and calls him each morning at 6. "So he throws it all in his cart and has his hat pulled down because he doesn't want anyone to recognize him. And he gets to the checkout line and the woman says, 'Paper or plastic?' He pauses. Then he pulls out his wallet and hands her a credit card and says, 'I'll do plastic.'"

He tried to fill his days with philanthropic fund-raising, teaching and advising. But it wasn't enough. "He felt like all he did was talk," Lebow-Sachs said. "And he's a doer."

He seemed depressed, his friends say. "He said, 'I'm old and washed up,'" said James D'Orta, his personal physician. "His phone stopped ringing. He had a lot of time to reflect on those who are no longer powerful. They're almost discarded by society."

Back on the campaign trail, it's another story.

On a recent Sunday, as Schaefer loped along the sidewalks of Highlandtown, a working-class neighborhood in Baltimore, passengers in a city bus slid open their windows to wave to him. "Governor Schaefer! How ya doing?" one woman shouted out the window.

At lunch in the back room of Ikaros, a Greektown restaurant, Schaefer bathed in the sustained applause of about 50 supporters. A savvy campaigner, he used a reporter as his foil and opportunity to deflect criticism. "The reporter following me around, says that I don't really want this job, that I'm just trying to get back into public life," he told the crowd. "Well, I'm telling you that I do want this job. I want it! I've got the experience and the knowledge, but I need you. I really need your vote!"

In the Waterfront Hotel, a historic bar across the street from Baltimore police headquarters, Schaefer had barely settled into a wooden bench near the front door when passersby started to notice him.

"Governor Schaefer, hello. I just wanted to say good luck," said one young man who bounded in the door and offered his hand to Schaefer. As he stepped back outside, he told his waiting young children, "Guys, that was my friend, Governor Schaefer."

In Baltimore, Schaefer has lots of friends.

"He's among us," said Amilia Ferrari, 76, a homemaker and lifelong resident of the city's Little Italy neighborhood who dragged a lawn chair to the city's Columbus Day parade to watch Schaefer ride past in an Imperial convertible.

"He's an old dishrag, hon," said Rose Tier, 70, a retired Baltimore teacher, bestowing an unusual compliment. "He doesn't live high off the hog. He's an intelligent man, but he's got a lot of common sense."

This is a man who prefers crepe-soled shoes to wingtips, McDonald's to Starbucks, and strains from his car window as he passes a yard sale. "I wish we could get out and go there—that's what I really wish," he said, eyeing the lamps and shirts and frying pans set up on the steps of a row house. "You can get a lot of good stuff at a good price if you go early."

In his campaign, Schaefer offers few specifics about what he would do as comptroller, except to say he would retain the existing staff. He has refused repeated requests from Epstein to debate before the election. "What for?" he said when asked why he won't meet his challenger at least once.

He said he is running because he has the experience for the job. "I don't have to learn, I've done it," he said.

In Maryland, the comptroller has an unusual amount of power because he sits on the Board of Public Works, which awards lucrative state contracts, buys land and settles litigation. The other members of the board are the governor and the treasurer.

Schaefer is likely to create some turbulence on the board, no matter who is sitting in the governor's seat, observers say. He has strained personal relations with the incumbent Democrat, Parris N. Glendening, and his political views often are more liberal than those of the Republican candidate, Ellen R. Sauerbrey.

"Some are saying the best concession in the state will be to sell tickets to the Board of Public Works meetings," said Del. Robert H. Kittleman (R-Howard), the House minority leader.

But those who spent time around Schaefer after he left office say that life as a private citizen smoothed his infamous rough edges.

"He's been relaxed, far calmer throughout this whole process than

I've ever experienced," said Mark L. Wasserman, secretary of economic development when Schaefer was governor and one of a band of Schaefer devotees who reassembled for the comptroller's campaign.

Time seems to have mellowed not only Schaefer but also a few of his adversaries.

For the last two years of his administration, Schaefer feuded so intensely with his lieutenant governor, Melvin A. Steinberg, over Schaefer's failed plan for an \$800 million tax package that Schaefer stripped Steinberg of duties and staff.

Steinberg, now retired from public office, is more interested in playing with his grandchildren than throwing darts at Schaefer. "The fact that he wants to be back in public service is great," Steinberg said.

Schaefer clashed regularly with leaders in the General Assembly, particularly over spending. As mayor and as governor, Schaefer's "do it now" philosophy drove him to pump tax dollars into the Inner Harbor in Baltimore, building the \$125 million Camden Yards and a \$290 million light rail system that remains underutilized. He then committed to a \$220 million Baltimore Ravens stadium that the Glendening administration had to fund.

Some analysts blame the state's fiscal troubles in the early 1990s in part on Schaefer's spending in the late 1980s. As the economy took a nose dive, Schaefer's approval ratings tumbled from 64 percent to a low of 16 percent.

Laurence Levitan, a former Democratic state senator from Montgomery County who chaired the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and fought Schaefer's big spending ways, said Schaefer's reputation as a spender is irrelevant now.

"As comptroller, he doesn't spend it, he collects it," Levitan said.

Even GOP leader Kittleman has nice things to say. "He's healthy, and if he wants to do it, he should do it," he said.

And although Schaefer often was accused of lavishing attention and money on Baltimore at the expense of Montgomery and Prince George's counties, many now say Schaefer's universe has broadened.

"His reputation was more Baltimore-oriented, but in all my discussions with him, he's had a statewide focus," said Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), who sought Schaefer's advice as