

Trusted ally drums up support for Townsend

Cummings, others help
court black vote in city

By SARAH KOENIG
SUN STAFF

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings was driving his car behind a campaign trolley for Kathleen Kennedy Townsend yesterday in Edmondson Village when he saw four people standing outside their house.

"See these people right here?" he said as he rolled down his window. "I don't even know them, but I guarantee you they've got relatives all over the city and they'll tell people."

He waved to them and shouted, "We gotta get in Kennedy Townsend! We gotta get in Kennedy Townsend! Oh yeah — me, too! Don't forget me."

Townsend spent about eight hours yesterday waving and talking to voters in West Baltimore, along with a nine-car caravan of supporters. It was exactly the type of campaigning Cummings believes Townsend should be doing in African-American neighborhoods.

"The respect that she shows by coming into the community is a big deal. And the word travels very quickly," Cummings said. "TV doesn't matter so much here."

Well aware that her campaign is struggling for traction among traditional Democratic voters, including

African-Americans, Townsend is listening to such instruction carefully. Ever since she announced that she wanted to be governor, Cummings has been a close adviser, part of a small group the lieutenant governor routinely consults.

She and Cummings, both 51, talk on the phone almost every day. He has helped sharpen her message and shape her rhetoric. He has told her who needs to

hear what and to whom she ought to listen. And he is one of her most passionate cheerleaders, quick to enumerate her virtues, often loudly, to anyone willing to listen.

A starring role

Although Cummings has helped other campaigns, including that of Gov. Parris N. Glendening in 1998, never has he had such a starring role in a statewide campaign. And, perhaps, never has he been more needed.

His help comes at a crucial time, when Townsend — who began the race blessed with the considerable advantages of the Kennedy name and a huge pot of money — needs to make her case more effectively to Maryland voters. Polls show her and Republican Rep. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. neck and neck in a state where registered Democratic voters outnumber Republicans by almost 2 to 1.

Among her most vocal Democratic critics are prominent African-Americans, many of whom have stopped short of embracing her candidacy. One of their chief complaints is that she chose a white former Republican, retired Adm. Charles R. Larson, as her running mate. And there has been grumbling about Townsend taking black voters for granted.

By appearing at her side in black areas, Cummings is trying to plant a syllogism in his constituents' minds: "You like me, and I like Townsend. Therefore, you like Townsend." He is not shy about linking his life story —

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Arthur W. Murphy, consultant

the son of sharecroppers who pulled himself out of poverty all the way to Congress — to her candidacy.

"It was her family, John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and many others, who for many

years made it clear that all men and women were created equal," he told residents of a Baltimore senior center last month.

Traditional strategy

This kind of proxy campaigning is not unusual. "That's certainly the traditional way to campaign for a white politician among African-Americans, to walk shoulder to shoulder with black politicians," said George R. LaNoue, a University of Maryland, Baltimore County political science professor who specializes in civil rights.

It's also typical of a candidate who needs a boost. "If she was having trouble among Jewish voters, you can bet Ben Cardin would be out there talking to Jewish voters," said political consultant Arthur W. Murphy, referring to the 3rd District congressman.

(Townsend, too, is likely helping Cummings with white voters when she appears with him as he campaigns in Howard County, parts of which now make up his congressional district.)

Stirring excitement about Townsend is especially important in the black community, Murphy said, because voter turnout has been low in some past elections. "You have to go to people they trust and care about," he said. "And Elijah is someone they trust and care about."

'Became very close'

Townsend said Cummings is also someone she trusts and cares about, and he provides more than just entree into African-American neighborhoods. She describes him as a good friend, and points out that he endorsed her gubernatorial candidacy more than three years ago.

They got to know each other in 1994, when she and Glendening squeaked into office by fewer than 6,000 votes.

"Because I worked on anti-drug issues, on crime issues, and worked in the community with him, we just became very close. We realized that we share a real passion for helping people," Townsend said. "He has just always been a source of enormous advice and counsel."

Cummings tells a similar story about how he came to believe in her sincerity, to feel it in a way that he is not sure how to articulate — a rarity for a man from whom words pour with obvious ease.

"Those things that move

Cont.

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend are the same things that move me," he said. "It's in her blood, and I don't mean Kennedy blood. I mean in her person."

Although he has his own reelection to worry about, he says her victory is his priority. To that end, he has continually encouraged her to emphasize her progressive credentials.

"What I do is make sure that she's constantly reminding people of who she is," he said, adding that his role is not simply to groom her ego. "I think Kathleen knows that I'm going to tell it like it is. I'm not going to be saying things that make her feel good."

His loyalty appears limitless. It was Cummings who came roaring to her defense when she was taking heat over her potential absence at a candidate forum held last month by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Not only did he call her and urge her to attend (which she did), but he also began broadcasting her commitment to African-American causes — and listing Ehrlich's demerits.

A few days before the forum, he introduced Townsend to thousands of people at an event at the Baltimore Zoo. He hammered on a theme of how Ehrlich's congressional voting record earned him a grade of "F" from organizations such as the NAACP, the National Education Association and the AFL-CIO.

Townsend liked the ring of what she heard. By the next week, she had borrowed his style and was talking about her opponent's "F" ratings.

Yesterday, addressing residents at the Allendale Senior Center, they again mirrored each other's speeches. "Do not be fooled by Ehrlich coming in on a white horse and saying, 'I'm your friend,'" Cummings said.

"My opponent, he may boast 'Here I am.' Well, my question is 'Where have you been?'" Townsend said.

Cummings has counseled her to start talking more specifically about what she plans to do for Baltimore. He has suggested that she visit after-school programs and talk to students and teachers. And he is her source for what blacks in Baltimore are saying about her.

"I am constantly talking to

people, and I get a feel for what people are feeling. So I might call her up and say, 'This is what I'm getting on the streets today,'" he said.

Cummings is not alone in having an influence on Townsend. After hearing Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, a Maryland Democrat, describe Townsend's drug prescription plan to seniors in Montgomery County, Townsend adopted some of her language too — a crisper version of what she had been pitching. And there are a few others whom Townsend regularly talks to about strategy and policy.

But Cummings' link to her — and to Glendening — is especially strong. In 1995, Cummings was an early defender of Glendening's policies, which some political leaders complained were too conservative.

When Glendening's reelection seemed in doubt in 1998, Cummings invited President Bill Clinton to his West Baltimore church, a move credited with increasing voter turnout for Glendening.

Cummings' reward came this year, when the governor amended his congressional redistricting map after Cummings complained.

By helping Townsend so publicly now, Cummings is cementing a reputation as a key player in Maryland politics, which could help him in future political endeavors.

"By doing this, he will solidify that position and will continue to be seen in that light, as a good, loyal Democrat who will do the right thing for party candidates," said Robert G. Johnson, former executive director of the Maryland Democratic Party.

But Cummings and other African-Americans, such as state Sen. Clarence W. Blount, who also is working closely with Townsend, say their mission is not about personal glory — it's about making sure a Republican doesn't get elected governor.

"Yes, as a black person, I would have loved to have seen a black person on the ticket," Blount said. "But the fact is, Kathleen would continue that march toward equal justice under the law, and that's all black folks want. Now we've got to sell that to people in general, and to blacks in particular."