Family Values at Play in State Senate Race in the Bronx

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Photo by David Howard King

ALBANY, N.Y. — Maybe it was state Sen. Gustavo Rivera's vote for same-sex marriage. Perhaps it was that Rivera backed state Sen. Adriano Espaillat's run against U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel. It could also be that Rivera unseated Ruben Diaz Sr.'s fellow amigo, convicted state Sen. Pedro Espada, in the 2010 race.

Whatever the impetus, Diaz has been giving Rivera's little-known challenger for the 33rd State Senate District, Manny Tavarez, the support of his formidable ground operation in the run up to Thursday's primary. That operation includes a slew of vans and trucks equipped with loudspeakers that blast slogans and campaign workers that move through the Bronx handing

out stacks of literature.

Diaz Sr., also may have given Taverez financial support as well, but it is impossible to know because, as of press time, Tavarez hadn't filed any campaign finance documents with the state Board of Elections.

"It's not surprising that he has endorsed my opponent, given that he worked closely with my corrupt predecessor," Rivera said of Diaz' support for Tavarez.

Rivera does have the support of another Diaz: His son. Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., is seen as more progressive than his father, and has endorsed Rivera and made public appearances with him; the two have also worked together on a health initiative. Rivera told the Gazette earlier this year
that the borough president was his "hero" when it came to fitness and health.

Yet the same political machine that includes the fleet of vans and dozens of campaign workers that have worked in the past to get Diaz Jr., elected are now supporting Tavarez — and, in the Bronx, that alone might make the difference in the challenger's effort to unseat Rivera.

Neither Diaz Sr., nor his son responded to emails and phone calls requesting comment for this story over the past week. Tavarez also didn't respond to requests for comment.

Diaz, father and son, have kept a distance from each other in the public eye.

Diaz Sr., is seen as an old-school machine politician who blurs the lines between his status as a reverend and as an elected official.

That army of vans that Diaz has are housed at his church the Christian Community Neighborhood Church and, during election season, Diaz hosts block parties across the Bronx that are sponsored by his church. The parties gather groups of citizens that are then targeted by

Diaz's get-out-the-vote team. The Christian Community Benevolent Association, which owns the church, has been a major beneficiary of Diaz's status as a senator.

In fiscal year 2006-2007, Diaz was able to steer nearly $500,000 in member items to the CCBA. In May of this year, the financial officer for the CCBA was accused by prosecutors of embezzling $75,000 .

Diaz also hasn't exactly been a team player when it comes to being a Senate Democrat. In 2008, Diaz joined with Sens. Pedro Espada, Carl Krueger and Hiram Monserrate to hold the senate majority hostage for more power. It wasn't clear if Democrats would have a majority heading into session that year. Later, when Monserrate and Espada joined Senate Republicans and created the Senate coup, Diaz remained a Democrat but also stayed very friendly with the defectors.

Since then, Diaz has watched as Monserrate, Espada and then Krueger were either drummed out of the Senate or convicted on federal corruption charges. Rivera was able to defeat Espada in the 2010 Democratic primary before Espada was convicted. Diaz told The New York Times that he felt then-Attorney General Andrew Cuomo overreached in his charges against Espada and that it was part of a "vendetta" for the coup.

Diaz gnashed his teeth and stomped his feet while the Senate passed same-sex marriage in 2011, cursing fellow party members who voted for the bill and telling the Republicans they should be ashamed of themselves for even allowing such a vote.

His son, on the other hand, has projected an image of a new school Democrat and a team player. He has very publicly disagreed with his father's belief that there should be no separation between church and state and his sometimes vicious attacks on homosexuals.

"We have an agreement," Diaz Jr. told NY1 in 2009. "He doesn't tell me how to be borough president, I don't tell him how to vote in Albany."

The gay community has been critical of Diaz Jr., for not speaking up loudly against the vitriol his

father has spit at the community.

Ken Padilla, a Bronx district leader who went from working with the Diaz's to waging a public battle with them, says that he has never seen much separation between father in son when it comes to political decision-making.

"For the two years I spent working with them, the two made major decisions in the same room," he said. "The father would never do anything without consulting the son. He would never do anything to hurt his son's political career."

Padilla filed an IRS complaint against Diaz for storing his campaign vans at his not-for-profit church.

So while Junior may be publically supporting Rivera, Padilla says he thinks what really matters is Senior's endorsement of Tavarez — which comes along with an entire political organization.

"Junior may be going along with the party line and supporting Rivera, but it is the organization, the structure, the people, the vans that matter and the father controls that," Padilla said. "Senior's support comes along with the vans and the people. It's the same people, the same vans for junior and senior."

BOE spokesman John Conklin said that Friends of Manny Tavarez was formed on April 19, 2012, and has not filed any financial statements with the board since then.

The committee should have filed a July periodic statement and a 32-day pre-primary statement.

Conklin says the board has sent multiple letters to the campaign asking that it show cause for failing to file and has begun the process of suing the committee.

Born in Rochester in 1979 to Dominican parents, but raised in the Bronx, Tavarez previously worked for District Leader Hector Ramirez' unsuccessful campaign in 2010 for the 86th State Assembly seat (Nelson Castro, one of Rivera's supporters, won that race), according to his website. The website also says Tavarez had experience during City Councilman Fernando Cabrera's campaign in 2009. Before local politics, he was involved in baseball academies in the Dominican Republic.

On his website, under a section entitled "family values," a message reads: "Manny Tavarez is pro-life. He believes that life begins at conception and wishes that the laws of our state reflected that view. Taking innocent life is always wrong and always tragic, wherever it happens."

Rivera, on the other hand, is a member of the Bipartisan Pro Choice Legislative Caucus of the state Senate.