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Bill Walczak is no stranger to challenges

By Meghan E. Irons | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 09, 2013



Bill Walczak (left) met with bicycle advocate Galen Mook and others before riding with the group to Allston. Walczak says he wants to be mayor “because I really love Boston and I know what the potential is.”

In the early 1970s, Codman Square was burning down. Block after desolate block had the charred remains of people’s homes. Arson-for-profit schemes proliferated.

Many of the residents who had raised families in those cramped three-deckers fled the neighborhood. Bill Walczak, newly married, moved in and later helped start a revival.

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“There was a lot of work to do back then,” recalled the Rev. Dr. Bill Loesch, a former Boston City Hospital chaplain who met Walczak when they were both devoted to rebuilding Codman Square. “And the odds were against us.”

Over the next four decades, Walczak and a diverse group of residents helped to turn the neighborhood into a busy commercial center, with a sprawling health center that Walczak cofounded as its anchor.

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“Bill saw Codman Square as a place where something needed to be done,” said a close friend, Candice Gartley, who still lives in the neighborhood.

These days, Walczak, now living in Dorchester’s Savin Hill, is crisscrossing the city and making the case that he is the only candidate in the race bold enough to lead Boston forward. He’s the only candidate to come out against casinos, which he said would break the financial backs of the poor people he has long championed. As mayor, he said, he would push to reform the school department and modernize the Boston Fire Department. He proposes creating such things as innovation districts in East Boston, Allston, and Roxbury, hoping to bring new vitality.

But with just a little more than \$106,300 cash in hand as of Aug. 31, he says, he knew the race would not be easy.

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“I’m 59 years old,” Walczak said. “I started out of nowhere, but I’ve raised over \$300,000. ... I knew I was taking a risk.”

Walczak’s legacy in Codman Square, chronicled in newspapers through the decades, runs deep. It is a story of revival in diverse Dorchester, the city’s largest neighborhood, with nearly 90,000 residents. And it’s a story he hopes to replicate across the city.

Among his proudest achievements is the gleaming Codman Square Health Center, which provides high-quality care for some of the city’s neediest residents. A section of the facility bears his name.

Walczak’s history also includes a brief stint heading Carney Hospital, which had been losing money when he became its chief executive in 2011. There, Walczak met one of the biggest challenges of his professional life — and one of his biggest setbacks when the hospital would not accept his ideas.

“I have always been driven to success,” said Walczak, reflective as he sat in a Jamaican restaurant in Mattapan one muggy afternoon. “In my life I have always made things happen. I’ll figure out a way to get things done. In this case, there was no other alternative. There was nothing I could do.”

Walczak is a slender man, with a quiet voice, fervent enthusiasm for the city, and a reputation for creative ideas.

“The guy is an idea machine,” said Thabiti Brown, principal of Codman Academy Charter Public School and a Cambridge resident. “He really does have incredible thoughts about how systems could work better, so I was really excited when he decided to run.”



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Bill Walczak, his wife, Linda, their daughter Elizabeth, and son Matt kicked off his campaign at a restaurant in June.

He is the son of Bill and Irene, factory workers originally from Scranton, Pa., who moved to Elizabeth, N.J., to escape the Pennsylvania coal mines. His father never made it past the eighth grade. Their dream for their son was that he play the accordion in a polka band, he said.

As a youth, Walczak seemed destined for a career in the nearby factories, but his seventh-grade teacher saw that he had potential and urged his parents to enroll him at St. Joseph's High School in Metuchen, N.J., he recalled. He spent summers in Appalachia building homes for the needy, worked as the editor of the school newspaper, and joined protests against the Vietnam War. At graduation, he had earned a four-year scholarship to Boston University, he said.

"It changed my life," he said. "Nobody I grew up with went to college."

In Boston, he married Linda, a Dorchester native whom he met when they were both 18. He was hitchhiking back to Boston after a trip to Cape Cod. She was with a group in a rented U-Haul heading to a new apartment in Codman Square.

"I had no idea where Codman Square was," Walczak recalled.

Not long after, the two married at St. Gregory Catholic Church on Dorchester Avenue. Together, they joined in war protests and went on dates handing out fliers urging a boycott of iceberg lettuce for United Farm Workers union. Walczak, disenchanted with formal education, quit BU after one semester to work with the union. He and Linda moved to Denver for about six months to organize the lettuce boycott. When they moved back, he started attending community meetings in the square.

"You'd go to a neighborhood meeting, and you'd hear about who got mugged, who moved out of the neighborhood, which house was burned," said Walczak. "But there were people who wanted to make a difference, and that inspired me."



DAVID L. RYAN/ GLOBE STAFF

At the time, residents worried that the shuttered Codman Square library would be a target of arsonists and decided to turn it into a health center to help residents who did not have

immediate access to a physician. Walczak led the effort, but it stalled for three years while Mayor Kevin H. White refused to approve their use of the building, now the Great Hall at the corner of Norfolk Avenue and Washington Street.

Long involved in city issues, Walczak spoke to seniors at a Dorchester Haitian center.

The mayor eventually relented and the health center opened in 1979. Walczak became executive director, nighttime receptionist, and maintenance man. He was 25 years old. Eventually he went back to school and earned a history degree at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Linda, his wife, became a Boston public school teacher. They have two children.

By 2011, with Walczak in charge, the health center had a multimillion dollar annual budget, hundreds of employees, and was internationally recognized. It had a pharmacy, a fitness center, and programs such as adult education and financial literacy.

Among its achievements was Codman Academy Charter Public School, which Walczak helped found.

The school, located in the health care center, exemplifies Walczak's belief that finding pathways for education is critical to the success of a community. By linking health care and education, he says, poor students are assured good nutrition and treatment for issues like asthma, allowing them to focus on learning and forging better futures.

"From the first time I met him, he had a sense of values," said Loesch, who said he has not yet decided who will get his vote in the election.

When Carney Hospital recruited him, Walczak saw an opportunity to rescue the Dorchester hospital from closure, and he parted ways with the health center.

"It pained me," he said. "It was the most difficult decision of my life. But I knew I had to leave."

At Carney, he mapped out a turnaround plan that would create an obstetrics unit to attract more young Dorchester families. But he and the hospital's leaders at the for-profit Steward Health Care could not agree on the plan, and Walczak abruptly left in April 2012 after just 14 months.

Walczak said he should be mayor because he's a big thinker who can assemble a diverse, highly skilled team to carry out his vision.

His friends say he has a host of obstacles — time, a political machine, and money — in the race. But they are glad he is in it because he adds a sense of purpose to the campaign, they say.

“Why do I want to be mayor? Because I really love Boston and I know what the potential is,” Walczak said recently. “At the end of my [political] commercial, I said, ‘Come on Boston, let's think big.’ That's what I do. I think big.”

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