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## CAMPAIGNING: THROUGH THE EYES OF A BLIND CANDIDATE

By LYDIA V. SOLIS

**WEST COVINA** – By any account, running for public office is a grueling process. It involves solidifying a platform, developing messaging strategies, building an operational infrastructure, rallying for individual and organizational support, coordinating a decisive ground-game strategy, raising funds, speaking at events, mingling

in and among crowds, going door to door, being nimble enough to respond to the unexpected, and undertaking many other tasks.

Because of all this, the casual observer may wonder about how a candidate with a disability manages the rigors of all that such campaigning entails.

“It’s a question that I know may be on people’s minds,” said attorney and



Ollie Cantos, chairman of 'RespectAbility's' Board of Directors and attorney mentor for the American Bar Association Commission on Disability Rights, is a driving force in reshaping intersectional visibility (web image).



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former White House Domestic Policy Council Associate Director Ollie Cantos, District 4 candidate for West Covina City Council, who happens to be blind.

"Sometimes, folks wonder how I do what I do, especially since blindness is not typically a part of their life experience. I don't mind people asking questions, provided that the main focus is on my qualifications and platform. After all, when it comes to the bottom line, I am eager for residents to see how I may serve them directly."

Blind or visually impaired individuals holding elected office is not unprecedented. Past leaders have been from both major political parties and include Former U.S. Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma (distant relative of former Vice President Al Gore), former Kansas Assemblyman Richard 'Dick' Edland, former Minnesota State Representative and now State Senator Torrey Westrom, former Washington State Senator and later former Lieutenant Governor Cyrus Habib, and former New York Lieutenant Governor and later Governor David Paterson.

Ollie believes that disability is a mere characteristic as incidental as one's height or hair color.

"We may do things differently than others, but those alternative approaches are nevertheless just as effective."

Using a white cane that is more than 63 inches high – though Ollie is not able to see – he is able to navigate a variety of situations. Whether canvassing from home to home, casually walking through neighborhoods, going through large crowds, or making his way through other public spaces, he is able to manage on his own. When traveling by car, he typically rides with other campaign team members. When heading alone to a destination, Uber or accessible paratransit services are also available options.

A senior Federal Government official, he has approached cam-

paigning with the same intensity in which he pursues every other endeavor that he has conquered in life.

"When my husband and I raised Ollie," said Linda Cantos, candidate's mother, "we treated him like everyone else, because we would have the same expectations of him even if he could see normally. Life is about high expectations," she added. "Without them, we limit our potential dramatically."

Steve Herfert, former West Covina Mayor, who endorsed Cantos, recently, agrees. "Having served on City Council for more than 25 years, I have seen firsthand what it takes to lead this City. I expect a lot out of Ollie as he demands the best of himself."

The campaign trail is intense indeed. Using assistive technology on his iPhone, he reads materials via VoiceOver speech output. He also makes heavy use of his device's dictation feature. A self-described grammarian, he takes care to ensure that he writes with precision when composing emails, putting up posts on Facebook and other social media, drafting web content, and crafting language for other documents. When canvassing with his parents, he serves as navigator, using his phone's Maps feature, supplemented by voice output that gives street-by-street directions. In addition, like others, he uses a computer, complete with the Microsoft Suite.

Ollie Cantos has also assembled a team of volunteers who focus on ensuring that his web content at <http://www.OllieCantos.com> is both electronically compatible with assistive technology and is otherwise functional for end users.

On the physical campaign trail, when visiting residents, Orlando Cantos, the candidate's father, verbally provides supplementary information such as "doorbell to the left" or "branch at eye level to the right." This enhances speed even more as they keep a hectic schedule.

"My own father was a congressman back in Batangas, our home province in the Philippines," the elder Cantos said. "As Ollie gets involved by running for office like he is doing, it brings back old memories while rekindling how it felt to meet so many people from every walk of life."

Through a comprehensive turn-key process that Ollie developed, the campaign documents interactions with voters to ensure that everyone's concerns are noted and acted upon accordingly.

"Ollie began campaigning in early July," Herfert recalls. "As he greeted residents at the door of their house, his genuine introduction was always the same 'How can I be of support?' The responses were amazing. People who never had seen a candidate at their doorstep expressed shock and then communicated issues of concern ranging from a crack in the sidewalk to far bigger issues relating to public safety. It was an eye-opening experience for him, but he was up to the challenge."

These days, having a solid online presence has also been important. For that reason, campaign team members select and review images to lend a critical eye to ensuring that visual elements match intended themes.

Surprising to some, though, Ollie taught himself how to do self-fie videos, so this skill has come in handy. He learned techniques through much trial and error back in 2013, and put together the "Ollie Cantos Visionary Series," presently consisting of videos covering more than 30 topics. These videos were often self-recorded as he walked in the community and crossed streets, all the while, using his cane.

When asked about his campaign as a whole, he said, "I am grateful for the energetic and enthusiastic supporters literally from 14 to 93 who have dedicated their time, talents, skills, and/or treasure to our campaign. Their contributions have been invaluable and, as we



Ollie joins West Covina's Parade of Filipino American Heroes  
*(Photo courtesy of Steve Herfert)*



WC City Council 4th District candidate, moved to Washington, DC in 2002, to become general counsel and director of programs for the American Association of People with Disability (web image).



Kickoff campaign on July 23: Born blind, Ollie Cantos manages the rigors that campaigning blind entails. *Photo courtesy of Steve Herfert*

keep coalescing around a united message of results through collective action, WE will be victorious! It will pave the way for all the good to come!"

Community members wishing to show support may text "Ollie Run" to (626) 597-2987.