



The Ross Retort

by Lisa Ross

SHOW-AND-TELL POLITICS IN THE DA'S RACE

The March 5 primary election is rapidly approaching and even political junkies are reaching for boxes of No-Doz.

With the exception of former Sheriff Jim Roache, who unlike anyone else running for State Assembly, ever, has taken a special interest in this part of his district, and of course incumbent District Attorney Paul Pfingst who lives here, candidate sitings in our vote-rich part of the world have been rarer than a good movie at the Highlands theaters.

No wonder the contentious District Attorney's race, which took a strange turn a few weeks ago when challenger Bonnie Dumanis began discussing her bout with severe depression, has grabbed the attention of chronic CNN and MSNBC watchers who endure the endless Viagra and Selexia ads accompanying their daily dose of Democracy American Style.

Perhaps the urge to relieve the midterm election ennui inspired the first reporter to write about Dumanis' self-described suicide attempt in a story about a particularly nasty candidate forum featuring three challengers unceremoniously but unanimously beating on the incumbent, always a sign of underdog-dom.

Until that evening, Dumanis, aside from her sex, was barely distinguishable from the two other candidates in an uphill battle against the nationally applauded District Attorney Pfingst. Not unexpectedly, the challengers had already spent an entire football season throwing everything and anything they could fling onto the field, a choir of critics.

And then Dumanis pulled an intriguing rabbit out of her hat by talking frankly with a room full of voters about a serious depression that took her to the abyss after the death of her sister several years ago.

The disclosure was initiated by a question from the audience to all of the candidates asking about whether anyone had sought professional help for mental illness. Dumanis bravely grabbed the floor, the only candidate who answered the question. And the segment made TV news across the board.

Willingly or not (she protested that the questioner was a hostile plant), Dumanis may have elevated herself out of the rat pack incumbent feeding frenzy that night by walking the Oprah path in her quest to replace Pfingst, leaving the other two vultures to claw away at the popular DA's record and character while she shares her real life, including her sexual orientation.

And why not. We have come a long way since 1972 when Presidential candidate George McGovern asked his running mate Thomas Eagleton to step down when stories about the Missouri Senator's history of depression surfaced just days after the Democratic convention, a pioneering event in the history of negative campaigning.

Back then, in the pre-Prozac days, depression was a sign of weakness, a character flaw that implied an inability to deal with stress, and suicide attempts potential targets for Cold War blackmail. History, and perhaps those Vietnam era voters, judged McGovern the weak party in that sorry affair, assigning him to a mere footnote.

Today, when niggling accounts of political family or personal dysfunction emerge, like a Bush kiddie caught illicitly buying anti-anxiety medication or for illegally buying alcohol with fake ID's, the stories have a shelf life as long as a Ralph's bakery egg bread.

In fact, when the nation's number one dysfunctional marriage produced the apparently tres together Chelsea Clinton, as opposed to the Christmas card perfect Bush family's substance seeking offspring, judgments about political private lives and psyches seem remarkably absurd.

And it is probable that in today's world, where untold numbers of our friends, neighbors and spouses are buffering this bruising world with some sort of psyche-altering medication, candidates for office need no longer hide their psychotherapists, or psychotropic medications, and in fact might achieve a deeper connection with voters if they do talk about their personal mental health issues.

But, Dumanis does run the risk that the voter comfort zone regarding serious mental health issues from the past might not extend to the office of District Attorney, the county's top prosecutor of bad guys, arguably the highest stress job in government. She is betting that an enlightened electorate will view her struggle back from suicidal depression as a sign of strength.

Whether Dumanis survives the March 5 primary or not, she has raised the self-disclosure bar in local elections. Show-and-Tell politics has arrived in San Diego.

Please pass the No-Doz.