

Nov 12 2009: NAMCs Viviana Russell Wins Election

NAMC's Viviana Russell Wins Election as North Hempstead's Town Councilwoman

We are all very excited that one of our own staff people ran for office this election and won! We thought her experience would inspire you, so we conducted a brief interview with Viviana Russell.

Viviana's vision is based on her campaign SOWing into the community – ‘S’ for Strengthening bonds among residents and government, ‘O’ for Overcoming obstacles, ‘W’ for Welcoming new ideas. She plans to focus on reconnecting community to government to overcome obstacles and welcome new ideas.

NAMC: What made you decide to run for office?

Viviana: I was asked to fill a position that was going to be vacated by the current councilman Robert Troiano, who was running for Nassau County Legislator. They wanted someone who has been doing work in the community to ensure that the people of our community are represented by a person who has a working knowledge of how government functions and has the best interest of the community in mind. I also want to ensure that the projects initiated during the current Councilman's tenure are continued. I have a strong working relationship with Councilman Troiano, now Nassau County Legislator Elect and I believe we can partner together to successfully complete these projects.

I've been involved in the economic development visioning process that started over six years ago through a partnership with Sustainable Long Island, Unified New Cassel Community Revitalization Corporation, a local community – based development organization, and the Department of Planning and Economic Development of the Town of North Hempstead, and the local churches. This collaborative took the initiative to encourage residents to work together to develop a shared vision of what we want in our community as oppose to being dictated to by government. The purpose of the Visioning Process was to, over a period of five days, discuss what we want to accomplish in the community and the things that need to be done. Out of that, we came up with a visioning plan. Our community was one of the first to do this. Now it is a national model.

NAMC: You're a mom, working two jobs, with school age children. How do you find time?

Viviana: You make time for the things that are important to you. My husband Gary and I involve our kids in most of what we do and make it fun for them. Our children are ages 19, 14 and 6. When the visioning plan was adopted, I was pregnant with my youngest son. After he was born, he was there with us along with the two older ones. My older son and daughter would pass out literature and they answered questions on what they want to see in the community. They were and still are actively involved in the process. I get to spend time with them and they learn the value of community.

NAMC: What is impact on the kids?

Viviana: They love to give back! My 19-year-old son Gary Jr. volunteers with Red Cross and NY Blood Bank. My 14-year-old daughter, Imani, is a member of the Samaritan Women of God, an outreach dance ministry that gives back to seniors, the developmentally challenged, youth organizations, social services agencies and the community at large around the world. Most recently, she participated in a retreat for young girls that were victims of domestic and sexual violence. They have a heightened sense of awareness about what is going on in the community and how important it is to be involved. They care about people and the community. They are like mini adults. What they care about, most kids don't talk about. They are actively involved in everything as a result of being involved at a young age. They are not intimidated. The two boys especially are very outspoken. During my campaign, my six-year-old son, Malachi, looked forward to going out and talking to people every day and would even ask people if he could put a sign on their lawn. It is amazing how much he grasps at such a young age. And, they are all so proud of their mom.

NAMC: What is your plan now that you have won?

Viviana: The main job of a Town Board member is to be responsive to his/her constituents and help solve problems with government. Running for public office was simply an extension of the work I have been doing in the community. My experiences as a community liaison for Westbury on the staff of Assemblyman Charles Lavine, working in the Town of North Hempstead to resolve constituent concerns and being a community advocate, have given me the capability to make government work for the people of Westbury, New Cassel, Carle Place and Old Westbury. I have learned how to make government work for our community and I will apply those lessons to my daily work as a Councilwoman.

Now that I have been elected by the community to represent them I plan to continue the work I have been doing but now just more in the public eye. I'm not used to being in the forefront. I'm used to being in the background just doing what I love to do. It is an adjustment having to speak in public and being the "go to person." But I'm such a people person and I really, really love it. People are starting to recognize me as the new councilwoman. Some are surprised that I'm still going to the local store and speaking to them. I'm still me. I'm not going to change now that they know I'm an elected official and I want them to keep talking to me. I want to engage those same people in the process of being involved and having a voice. I need the input of people in the community now more than ever.

NAMC: How would you advise others who are interested but may be overwhelmed at the prospect of running for office?

Viviana: Just do it and trust God. I have been involved in politics and saw many things I didn't like. Even for me, the thought of it was overwhelming. Eleanor Roosevelt is someone who I have a high regard and esteem for because of her tenacity and curiosity to seek things beyond what was put before her. She once said, "curiosity will insure an ever-recurring interest in life and will give you the needed impetus to turn your most baleful experience to some kind of good service..." I think we need more people in government who are spiritually grounded and have a curiosity for how things work in order for the greater good to come about.

Start by attending any type of community meetings. Go to Town Board/City Council meetings. Attend hearings on things that affect the community. Talk to elected officials. Do an interview with them. Volunteer for them so you can get a sense of the inner workings of government because the work that is done behind the scenes is different from what you see on the outside. Even if you are not so sure, it cannot hurt to give it a try. Think about your skills and what you have to offer based on your background and interests. Be prayerful and, again, trust God for what He has planned for your life.

We wish Viviana luck in her new position and are looking forward to keeping up with her accomplishments serving her community.

