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Khazei tries to shake up Senate race

By Matt Viser, October 8, 2009

He is perhaps the least-known major candidate in the race to succeed one of the best-known US senators in history.

But Alan Khazei likes it that way. Relishing the low expectations, he is laying the groundwork for a campaign he says will look very different from those of his competitors, one led by an army of young people and active volunteers moved by his message of citizen empowerment.

Although he is a distant fourth in the polls, Khazei, a cofounder of the national service program City Year, is proving to be a formidable fund-raiser, and today he will formally announce an endorsement by Max Kennedy, the nephew of the man who held the seat for 47 years.

"The other candidates think, 'Oh, Alan Khazei, he's just a nice guy who did a youth program,'" Khazei, 48, said yesterday during an hourlong interview. "I have really strong experience that fits these times."

While the endorsement from a Kennedy family member is notable, the places they will campaign together - on college campuses across the state - signify something arguably more important in the race: Khazei's hope of recruiting young voters into the kind of grass-roots movement that lifted Governor Deval Patrick to office in 2006 and President Obama to the White House last year.

The difference, of course, is that he has only two months to do it. Voters will choose a Democratic nominee on Dec. 8.

"If I didn't think I would be the best senator, I wouldn't run," said Khazei, an animated presence who talks with his hands and speaks in rapid-fire sentences. "I've never been in politics before, but I feel this. I believe in a call to service, and I also have a track record of making change."

"The conventional wisdom in this election is wrong, on everything," Khazei added, predicting that turnout will be high. "We've never done this before."

Khazei believes that his lack of political experience could be a benefit, and he highlights his background in making change from the outside.

"No other candidate in this race has even tried to do that, let alone understand it," he said. "They don't. What's their track record? Have they built any movements? Have they helped to move government through citizen power?"

"I will put my track record of change - for Boston, for Massachusetts, for the country - up against any other candidate in this race," he said.

Khazei, who lives in Brookline with his wife and two children, cofounded City Year in 1988 and served as its chief executive until 2006. He then founded another organization, Be the Change, a nonprofit that seeks to unite people for social change.

In the Democratic primary, Khazei is running against two well-established politicians, Attorney General Martha Coakley and US Representative Michael E. Capuano, as well as Celtics co-owner Stephen Pagliuca.

Yesterday, Pagliuca launched a new television ad, a 60-second spot that highlights his biography, political views, and business background. Coakley's campaign, which staged a big rally with

supporters last night, released an internal poll that showed her far ahead of her opponents, with Coakley at 47 percent, Capuano at 12, Pagliuca at 4, and Khazei at 1. The poll, though, was conducted two weeks ago, with Pagliuca and Khazei barely in the race.

Khazei opposes the death penalty and supports abortion rights. He is strongly in favor of the same-sex marriage law and says he would fight to repeal both the Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as between a man and woman, and the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

He is wary of adding more troops in Afghanistan, saying the mission needs to be more clearly defined. And he is supportive of a health care plan that includes a public option, but is not ironclad in his stance.

"I will fight hard for a public option; I think we need it," he said. "But I also understand how that place works. . . . Will I draw a line in the sand? No, I won't."

He said he supports medical malpractice reform, and he plans to outline an education platform that will call for longer school days and longer school years so the United States can better compete with other nations.

Khazei, who raised \$1.1 million over about two weeks, has pledged not to accept campaign contributions from political action committees or registered lobbyists. Pagliuca, whose personal wealth has been estimated at \$400 million, has also taken that pledge, but Coakley and Capuano have not.

"That place is polluted!" Khazei said of Washington. "We're not getting health care now because of the lobbyists, pure and simple."

Capuano's campaign declined to comment. A Coakley spokeswoman said only that the campaign would disclose its donors, as required, in filings with the Federal Election Commission.

Max Kennedy and his wife were scheduled to fly in from California last night and plan to make a formal endorsement today before embarking on four days of campaigning with Khazei across Massachusetts.

Khazei made it clear that the endorsement is more about his personal connection to Max Kennedy, a son of the late Robert Kennedy, than it is a signal that he has the family's backing. Max Kennedy's wife, Vicki, was a volunteer at City Year, and Max is a close friend of Khazei's brother.

"This is a personal endorsement; it's not a Kennedy endorsement," Khazei said. "He's going out on a limb. It's a big deal to decide to get involved in this election, and I really deeply appreciate it."

Capuano has been endorsed by Stephen Smith, the son of the late senator's sister, Jean Smith.

Over the next few days, Khazei plans to go to Harvard University, Tufts University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Clark University in Worcester.

"I'm not so important that I can't show up for 20 people," he said. "I've just got to convince them, which I believe I can do."

