

DailyCollegian

KHAZEI'S MY MAN

By: Dan Rahrig | November 16, 2009

Last Sunday the University of Massachusetts hosted a debate between the candidates aspiring to fill Ted Kennedy's vacant Senate seat. As a registered Massachusetts voter, I decided to go hear the candidates speak so that I could make an informed decision in next month's special election primary, expecting to be wooed by one of the political veterans in the room, such as Michael Capuano, the current Congressman from Massachusetts' 8th district. But to my surprise, I found myself very impressed by the little-known Boston social entrepreneur in the room: Alan Khazei.

Though I had heard the name and was aware that he was running in the primary, I had never given much attention to Khazei's candidacy. But in a debate filled with the usual evasive political rhetoric and vague answers, Alan Khazei provided detailed and concise explanations of his stance on a wide swath of issues and his plans for fixing some of the biggest challenges currently facing Massachusetts and our country as a whole.

So who is Alan Khazei? He's a 48-year-old citizen activist currently serving as the CEO of Be the Change, Inc., an organization he founded in 2007 with the mission of building national coalitions of non-profit organizations and citizens to work on social issues such as education and poverty. Prior to that, Khazei co-founded and was the CEO of the very successful City Year, a pioneering national service program that offers 17-24 year olds the opportunity to participate in a year of civic engagement and service. City Year has become so successful that it employs roughly 1,400 workers at 19 different locations including 18 in the U.S. and one in South America. Because of his service and activism over the past two decades, Khazei was named one of "America's 25 Best Leaders" by US News and World Report in 2006, and has earned numerous awards including the Reebok Human Rights Award.

The impact of Khazei's work is much more significant than you would expect – his City Year program was used by Bill Clinton as the model for AmeriCorps, the national public service program boasting over 600,000 participants. Then, when AmeriCorps was almost derailed by widespread Republican criticism in 2003, Khazei helped to organize the "Save AmeriCorps" campaign that persuaded Congress to continue funding the program. Most recently, Khazei worked with Ted Kennedy on a major expansion of the AmeriCorps program that the Obama administration enacted earlier this year.

In terms of the issues, Khazei is your typical Massachusetts liberal: he's pro-choice, pro-gay marriage, opposed to the war in Iraq and favors a public option in the health care bill. And while he is not a career politician like his opponents, Khazei backs up each of his positions with clear explanations and solid plans for how he can influence some of the problems facing our nation as

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a Senator. Aside from being very knowledgeable, Khazei distinguishes himself from the rest of the Democratic contenders in a couple of very significant ways.

For one thing, Khazei is passionate about the issue of education reform. He explains, education is “the key to our economic recovery and the backbone of our international security.” Out of the four democratic candidates for the Senate, only Khazei shares the Obama administration’s view that the education system needs to be majorly reformed – Coakley and Capuano are both against lifting the cap on the number of charter schools allowed in a given state. Why is this significant? Because charter schools boast an average 80 percent graduation rate in America’s most troubled neighborhoods – nearly double the average. Being that education was one of the great causes of Ted Kennedy’s life, it seems only fitting that his seat be filled by someone with a similar set of ideals and beliefs.

The factor that makes Khazei different that the other Democrats running for the seat is that he has refused to take any money from Political Action Committees and lobbyists. This is a pretty compelling quality for a candidate to have because it means that as a Senator, Khazei would not be indebted to any big corporations or be sympathetic to any special interests; he’d be able to act solely in the best interests of the Commonwealth and the country in general. As he said in the November 8 debate, “I’m not taking their money; I’ll be able to take them on.”

Right now, Khazei is trailing in the Senate race, with only 4 percent to Coakley’s 37 percent according to the most recent Western New England College Polling Institute poll, but don’t count him out yet because there’s a lot of time left until the December 8 primary. He’s also been making a big push recently to get himself heard. Given his solid track record of getting things done, his strong stance on the issues dear to Kennedy and his pledge not to accept money from special interest groups, Khazei has the potential to gain a lot of support in the coming weeks. I’ll certainly be voting for him next month, and I hope that some of you will, too.

Dan Rahrig is a Collegian columnist. He can be reached at drahrig@student.umass.edu