

The Boston Globe

Khazei's Dynamic Flair

By Scot Lehigh, October 21, 2009

ON SUNDAY, I did some un-Patriotic duty, forsaking Tom Terrific and his talented teammates to attend a non-tailgate grilling of the Democratic foursome running to fill Ted Kennedy's Senate seat. My hope was that watching the aspirants being interviewed separately would help highlight important distinctions among the better-known candidates.

The real story, however, turned out to be citizen activist Alan Khazei, who sparked where the others plodded more prosaically along.

Khazei caught the audience's attention the second he came loping onto the stage at Merrimack College, kept it with animated answers during the eclectic Q&A session conducted by Globe columnist Renée Loth and Democratic State Committee member Mark DiSalvo, and left listeners laughing delightedly at his mischievous summation.

"Martha Coakley has done a great job as attorney general," he said. "She's only been there for two years. I don't know if we can afford to lose her. Congressman Capuano has 10 years of seniority in the House. He's very close to the speaker. I don't know if we can afford to lose that seniority. . . . So my pitch to you is, keep them where they are."

Much of what the others offered was Democratic boilerplate. Khazei, by contrast, had some real texture. He rattled off ideas to help small businesses and dove into the details of an error-acknowledging approach the University of Michigan Health System has used to reduce malpractice lawsuits. His infectious enthusiasm contrasted well with Coakley's circumspection and Capuano's sharper-edged populism.

Although I tend to be suspicious of candidates who want to start at the top, Khazei, 48, has long been a change agent. After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1987, he and his roommate cofounded City Year, which pays young people a stipend to spend 10 months doing community service. Begun in Boston, City Year now boasts programs in 19 US locations.

Don't mistake that for vow-of-poverty work; as City Year's chief executive, Khazei earned about \$240,000 annually in his last few years there. In 2007, he started Be the Change, a movement-building group, where he made about \$245,000 last year.

As he runs for the Senate, he's preaching "Big Citizenship," the need to bring active, informed, energetic citizens together

to win change from Washington.

But how would a Big Citizen get things done inside the staid, seniority-conscious confines of the Senate? Khazei points to his activism to help save AmeriCorps from assorted conservative attacks and to rally support for legislation, which passed in March, to dramatically expand the national service program.

Others back up his claims of effectiveness.

"He was the leader of the coalition that helped produce the Kennedy-Hatch bill and push it through," says supporter Harris Wofford, the Clinton-era CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees AmeriCorps.

Khazei helped lay bipartisan groundwork for that legislative victory by engineering a service summit that brought Barack Obama and John McCain together at Columbia University to support expanded national service.

"I remember thinking only Alan Khazei could have brought about this event," says Stephen Goldsmith, who chaired the national service corporation under George W. Bush and who served as a volunteer adviser to McCain.

Khazei says he would use his experience as an activist and platform as a senator to help forge and focus a progressive political consensus in Washington.

"I've done it as a citizen," he says. "It is so much easier as a senator."

Yes, this unconventional candidate is a long shot, particularly in a short primary. But this is a big Senate seat - and so far, the better-known or better-funded candidates seem more average than outstanding.

Khazei, by contrast, is shaping up as the eye-catching aspirant who regularly surprises. The \$1.1 million he raised his first few weeks in the race was second to Coakley's \$2.2 million. He used a recent endorsement by Max Kennedy and his wife, Vicki, to draw an audience for a dynamic speech laying out his vision.

Khazei is just the kind of public-spirited figure voters often say they want in politics. He deserves a closer look.

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