

Paterson may be first black, blind New York governor



New York Lt. Gov. David Paterson (left) is applauded by Russell Simmons (center) and New York state Attorney General Andrew Cuomo during the annual Martin Luther King Day observance at the Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network House of Justice in New York on Jan. 15. If New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer resigns as a result of his involvement in a prostitution scandal, Paterson would become both the first black and the first blind governor of New York. (AP photo/Richard Drew)

Michael Hill

ALBANY, N.Y. — The man poised to succeed Gov. Eliot Spitzer would not only become the first black governor of New York. He would also be the state's first legally blind governor and its first disabled governor since Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Though his sight is limited, Lt. Gov. David Paterson walks the halls of the Capitol unaided. He recognizes people at conversational distance and can memorize whole speeches. He has played basketball, run a marathon, and survived 22 years in the backbiting culture of the state Capitol with a reputation as a man

more apt to reach for an olive branch than a baseball bat. If Spitzer resigns after being snared in a prostitution scandal, the biggest changes in a Paterson administration would probably revolve around style. "He's a guy who had two handicaps: his blindness and his race.

And he never made excuses for it," said civil rights leader Al Sharpton, a longtime friend. "He's the guy who has said, 'I have been in a minority group and a minority within a minority group. And I can make it, so don't give me no excuses.'"

Paterson, 53, is the son of former state Sen. Basil Paterson, a member of the storied "Harlem Clubhouse" that includes fellow Democrats U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel and former New York City Mayor David Dinkins. The elder Paterson was the first in the family to run for lieutenant governor in 1970. He lost, but later became New York's first black secretary of state.

David Paterson lost sight in his left eye and much of the sight in his right eye after an infection as an infant. Refusal to bow to his handicap came early. When New York City schools refused to let him attend mainstream classes, his parents established residency on Long Island, where they found a school that would let him go to regular classes.

"He was in the plays and on the stage, and required no assistance in maneuvering around stage and on the playground," said Dr. Casmiro Liotta, Paterson's former principal at the Fulton School.

Assemblyman Keith Wright, an old Harlem friend, remembers Paterson playing basketball and generally

acting just like the other kids in the neighborhood. In 1999, Paterson completed the New York City Marathon.

After earning degrees from Columbia University and Hofstra Law School, he worked for the Queens district attorney's office and was elected to the state Senate in 1985 at the age of 31. He built a reputation for working hard in a place where not everyone does.

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— Rev. Al Sharpton

Though he can read for brief periods, Paterson usually has aides read to him. He also has developed the ability to remember entire speeches and policy arcana. State Sen. Neil Breslin recalled that he told Paterson his cell phone number once and he memorized it.

"He has one of the finest memories of anyone I've known," Breslin said.

In sharp contrast to Spitzer, who can sound like a legal brief, Paterson is known for dry wit and speaking off the cuff. Sharpton recalled Paterson's arrest with his father at a New York City protest over the 1999 police killing of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant.

Paterson quipped: "I'm going to tell the judge that I didn't see where I was going."

That easy demeanor belies Paterson's record as a savvy political **Paterson**, continued to page 23

Activists bare teeth in Ohio foreclosure fight

Adam Geller

CLEVELAND — Folks on Humphrey Hill Drive were still waking up on the icy Saturday morning the shark hunters came to town.

They rounded the suburban traffic circle in a pair of rented school buses after a half-hour ride from far more modest neighborhoods, rumbling to a stop at the Garmone family's driveway. Forty-two caffeinated Clevelanders piled out, their leaders carrying bullhorns.

Their quarry, Mike Garmone — a regional vice president at Countrywide Financial Corp., the nation's largest mortgage lender — didn't answer his door. So they deployed, ringing bells at the big homes with three-car garages, handing out accusatory fliers and lambasting Garmone and his company's loans. Before departing, they left their calling card — thousands of two-and-a-half-inch plastic sharks — flung across Garmone's frozen flowerbeds, up into the gutters, littering the doorstep.

The commotion was the work of

an in-your-face activist group called the East Side Organizing Project (ESOP), with a paid staff then of just two, mobilized to battle Cleveland's mortgage "loan sharks." Years before the rest of the country was rocked by the fallout from aggressive lending, their neighborhoods were already home to the nation's highest concentration of foreclosures — and they were fed up.

ESOP's people are proudly loud and abrasive, and they've long reveled in needling people with pull. But could they get a distant behemoth like Countrywide to the table?

On that morning in February 2006, ESOP executive director Mark Seifert had his doubts. For starters, he wasn't sure his group's research on Garmone even had the family's correct address.

Until two evenings later, when Seifert checked his e-mail and found a message from a top public relations executive at Countrywide's California headquarters.

We need to talk, it said.

Foreclosure, continued to page 10



Roxbury Community College's Ashley Murchison (with ball) navigates through traffic during a December 2007 contest against Massasoit Community College. After a four-year absence due to lack of student interest, RCC's Lady Tigers returned to the court with a vengeance this year, earning an 18-11 record. (Milton Samuels photo)

The comeback

RCC women back in the game after four-year hiatus

Liz Hoffman

Mark Leszczyk has a thing for lost causes.

In 1999, he took the girl's basketball coaching job at Our Lady of Fatima High School in Providence, R.I., which hadn't won a single game in four years. His first year, the team

won one game. The next year, they went to the league playoffs. Last Saturday, six years after Leszczyk had moved on, they played for a Rhode Island state championship.

And so when Leszczyk met with Keith McDermott, the athletic director at Roxbury Community College (RCC), last June, the coach saw

something familiar. RCC had once been a major feeder of Division I programs, but hadn't fielded a women's team in four years due to lack of interest.

Leszczyk saw one of the nation's best facilities in the sparkling Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center. He saw an A.D., McDermott, committed to reinstating the program. And he saw a challenge.

So he left Dean College, located in Franklin, Mass., where he had led the Bulldogs to back-to-back National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) title games, and signed on with RCC.

"People thought it was a hopeless case," he said. "I tend to gravitate towards those, I guess."

One girl showed up to his first practice. When Leszczyk told her to run a mile, she ran one lap and then sat down. Two weeks ago, that player and five others played in the Massachusetts junior college state tournament, a capstone to a season that surprised everyone but the coach that took them there.

RCC went 18-11 in its first year back on the court and earned one of four bids to the NJCAA state tournament. There, they lost to No. 1 seed Holyoke, 67-49, on Feb. 23 in what Leszczyk called their best-played game of the season.

RCC, continued to page 21

What's INSIDE

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT . . . 14-16
 BILLBOARD 16

LISTINGS

BUSINESS DIRECTORY 20
 CALENDAR 19
 CHURCH GUIDE 22

PERSPECTIVE

EDITORIAL 4
 OPINION 5
 ROVING CAMERA 5

CLASSIFIEDS

HELP WANTED 25-27
 LEGALS 23
 REAL ESTATE 24-25