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Staten Island Elects Its First Black Council Member

By **A. G. Sulzberger** November 4, 2009 3:45 pm

Staten Island has long been unique in this racially diverse city: a borough where whites constitute the vast majority. But over the last few decades and particularly in recent years, people of other races have been increasingly calling the island home.

From 1990 to 2000, the percentage of residents who identified themselves as black increased to 8.9 percent from 7.4 percent, according to census data [pdf], and in the most recent survey from 2008, the figure increased to 10.1 percent.

Now, for the first time, Staten Island will have a black City Council member. Deborah L. Rose, a Democrat who also ran with the backing of the Working Families Party, easily won the race on Tuesday with 57.3 percent of the vote, with the rest split by candidates on the Republican and Conservative lines.

A lifelong Staten Island resident who was a longtime member of Community Board 1 and runs a program at the College of Staten Island that discourages local students from dropping out of high school, Ms. Rose was making her third bid for City Council.

“This has been a very long journey to get here,” Ms. Rose said, adding that her victory should dispel stereotypes about Staten Island. “People went to the polls, and it wasn’t important that I was black, it wasn’t important that I was a woman, it was important that I was a vocal advocate and tenacious.”

(Video of the victory party — she dances at the end — was posted on the Web site of The Staten Island Advance.)

Ms. Rose, 57, will replace Kenneth C. Mitchell, whose tenure was most noteworthy for its brevity. In February, Mr. Mitchell narrowly defeated Ms. Rose in a special election to replace Michael E. McMahon, who was elected to Congress. (Mr. Mitchell had served as Mr. McMahon’s chief of staff and general counsel.)

The September primary offered a rematch between the two candidates, but this time Ms. Rose took 55 percent to Mr. Mitchell’s 39 percent. Mr. Mitchell remained on the ballot as the Conservative candidate in Tuesday’s general election, but won just 26.3 percent. Ms. Rose first ran for the seat in 2001.

The North Shore district that Ms. Rose will represent is where much of Staten Island’s increasing racial diversity has been concentrated. The district was 47.9 percent white, 22.6 percent black, 5.7 percent Asian and 20.4 percent Hispanic in the 2000 census. The other two districts, by comparison, were 2.1 percent black and 0.9 percent black, according to that census. (Some residents call the expressway that divides the diverse urban area from the mostly white and suburban end of the borough “the Mason-Dixon line.”)

Ms. Rose said the North Shore community was the most neglected in the borough, jumping into a well-rehearsed list of complaints and proposals from her campaign. Part of the problem, she said, is that for a long time people of color have not felt represented. “They were pretty much marginalized, and they were tired of it,” she said.

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