

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN REFORM DEMOCRATIC CLUB  
CANDIDATE FORUM #2, Wednesday, February 16, 2022  
Via Zoom electronic communication**

President Virginia Krompinger welcomed everyone. We have candidates from Congress, state senate, and local party positions tonight. She announced that civil court candidates were on the agenda but might not be speaking this evening; judicial candidates will be offered the chance to circulate statements to the membership. Sergio Villaverde asked if candidates would get the opportunity to submit a video. President Krompinger said she'd consider it. Vice President Bruce Feld reminded folks that we would not be voting tonight and material could be sent to club members in good standing.

President Krompinger stated that each speaker would get five minutes to speak with two questions after each speaker.

Vedat Gashi (16<sup>th</sup> Congressional District)

Remarks

- currently a Westchester County legislator
- chair of budget committee, oversees a \$2.2 billion budget
- redistricting made him decide to run
- there's room for the far left in our political discourse, but he doesn't agree with them
- worked to get Biden elected
- frustrated we control White House and both houses of Congress but we can't get things done
- didn't think vote against the infrastructure bill was good
- Bowman pulling his support for Abraham Accords was not in best interests of national security
- running as a Democrat, not as a Justice Democrat or a member of the Squad or Democratic Socialist
- is an immigrant, born in Kosovo, previously undocumented, is Albanian
- is a Progressive
- is a secular Muslim
- feels extremism is on the rise, economy is hurting, infrastructure failing, there's a climate emergency
- we need practical progress
- is a beneficiary of the American Dream

Q & A

- Q: Sergio Villaverde, Madam President, will we be getting their material emailed to us? Can we just see material without taking up time tonight?
  - If the candidates submit bios, we will get them to you
  - Mr. Gashi said he'd send a bio
- Q: Bruce Feld, What resources, support, and dollars do you have?
  - came to U.S. at age 4, lived in the Bronx, then moved to Yorktown
  - has a good number of pledges
  - there's a large Albanian-American community that has been supportive
  - just declared a few days ago so just started collecting
- Q: Ned Klein, You drew a distinction between yourself and Mr. Bowman, in particular his approach to governing. Do you have an example from your time in county legislature that would reflect your attitude toward incrementalism?
  - not that I disagree on lots of issues with Bowman, it's the approach
  - being right isn't enough, you'll fail if you don't communicate properly
  - you need to bring people together and communicate

Rev. Dr. Michael Gerald (16<sup>th</sup> Congressional District)

Remarks

- not a novice to politics or political campaigning
- has held appointed positions
- former undersheriff of Mercer County
- pastor, Shiloh Baptist Church
- former New Jersey state trooper
- lifelong Democrat
- worked on Obama campaign
- left-leaning Democrats have left the party altogether
- can't spout rhetoric that isn't helpful to our cause and be full of vitriol and name call
- you need to be in the district figuring out what's going on
- we send people to represent us, not the people in Alabama, CT, or CA
- unconscionable for the Squad to hold up infrastructure bill, gross dereliction of duty, is afraid infrastructure money might not make it to Mt. Vernon
- we have crumbling infrastructure
- will bring aid and dollars to the district

Q & A

- Q: Bruce Feld, You're in a unique position being a clergyman with experience in law enforcement.
  - we need to reform police, not defund them
  - we need more officers of color who police with empathy
  - with right training, we can fix problems of policing
  - believes in PAL leagues; he grew up playing football and baseball in the PAL
  - those things got him interested in being a police officer
  - more engagement in community by police as mentors and role models

Michael Heller (male state committee member)

- state committee consists of two members from each assembly district
- state committee is governing body and determines policy issues
- involved in Democratic politics since a teenager
- formerly served as district leader
- is a centrist Democrat
- we must package things to attract people to become Democrats
- is concerned we're scaring people away from the party
- loss of the Democratic county executive in Nassau was a catastrophe
- will attend all meetings upstate and down
- represent our local interests
- will work with people all over the spectrum

Johanna Edmondson (female Democratic state committee member, 81<sup>st</sup> AD)

- local businesswoman
- lives in the Bronx
- volunteers with many politicians, for e.g., Eric Dinowitz campaign
- has done phone banks
- fight against breast cancer
- founder of Riverdale Female Fight club in North Riverdale
- domestic violence awareness

## Q & A

- Q: Bruce Feld, You have described your background and family in a podcast. I think club would be interested. I want to invite you to tell us a little about yourself since you're new.
  - from a military family (Air Force) husband and daughter have served
  - interested in connecting with local leaders

## Ramdat Singh (male Democratic district leader, 81<sup>st</sup> AD)

### Remarks

- grew up in Norwood, now resides in Kingsbridge
- lifelong resident of the 81<sup>st</sup> district
- son of Guyanese immigrants
- attended the public schools
- grad of City College, masters from Brooklyn College
- is a special education teacher
- worked on policy positions for fully funding schools
- does civic engagement work
- member of Community Board 8, chairs parks & recreation committee
- cares deeply about community
- served for 2 years as director of community engagement for Caribbean Equality Project
- our democracy works best when we all participate

## Q & A

- Q: Ned Klein, has seen Ramdat at food giveaways, could you talk about your involvement with the club?
  - has been club member for a while, but because of grad school couldn't attend meetings
  - did phone banking in 2016 for Hillary Clinton
  - did petitioning in 2020
  - now that he's no longer in graduate school he can fully commit to running for district leader
- Q: Eric Dinowitz, Could you talk about defund police and other hot button issues?
  - I'm a Democrat
  - not for defund the police, but need to look at how we spend police budget
  - are we spending in ways that serve the community?
  - worked in Dept. of Education, we need to fund more schools
  - DSA [Democratic Socialists of America], part of New Deal for CUNY, which is for fully funding CUNY
  - profiled in *Daily News*
  - agrees with DSA for New Deal for CUNY but not for defunding police

## Bill Weitz (male Democratic district leader, 81<sup>st</sup> AD)

### Remarks

- speaks in front of club almost every month
- former Democratic state committee member, 81<sup>st</sup> AD
- member of Ben Franklin club for 25 years
- chief of staff for Eliot Engel and Jeff Dinowitz
- helped set up office of Eric Dinowitz after election to City Council
- attended local public schools, P. S. 24
- first published letter was to the newspaper was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade advocating for a traffic light at Blackstone Avenue & 235<sup>th</sup> Street

## Q & A

- Q: Eric Dinowitz, Where do you see yourself in some of hot-button issues in the party?
  - Slogans like Defund the Police are more harmful than helpful
  - sloganing it out is not good when it comes to defunding police
  - does not support DSA [Democratic Socialists of America]
  - I'm a progressive Democrat
  - does not support BDS [Boycott/Divest/Sanction Israel]
  - need to find a way to get to Medicare for all
- Q: Sue Dodell, What are you doing professionally now?
  - helped Eric Dinowitz get office set up
  - worked for Mr. Nadler for a time
  - lucky enough to take some time off
  - not full time right now
  - is interviewing right now
- Q: Ned Klein, Speak a little about your relationship with the club in recent years.
  - over last 15 years has represented the club at state party meetings
  - back in 1995 managed petitioning campaigns by setting up dry-erase board in the club with results so they could be ready at a moment's notice when the assemblyman called from Albany
  - handled distribution of petitions

Helen Morik (female Democratic district leader)

Remarks

- has been club member for more than 30 years
- is a former club president
- has been state committee person
- was district administrator for Ted Weiss
- member of the executive committee
- key to being a good district leader is to nominate and petition for progressive people
- will use Randi Martos as her model, she has been an outstanding district leader

James B. Gisondi (36<sup>th</sup> state senate district, currently the 34th)

Remarks

- is from east side of the district
- ran in 2020 primary that was affected by COVID-19
- is 59 years old
- he is an attorney
- lives in Throggs Neck currently
- has lived in Pelham Parkway, Morris Park, Pelham Manor (Westchester)
- Eliot Engel got him into politics while at Lehman where Engel was adjunct professor
- served two terms as state Democratic committeeman
- went to Lehman College and CUNY law school
- member of Community Board 11, chair of Land Use committee, also served as treasurer
- has been law secretary to a state Supreme Court justice
- is a moderate, centrist Democrat, has traditional Democratic values
- his experience and knowledge make him the best candidate
- if he can, he will have offices on both east, west Bronx, and Westchester sides of district to focus on constituent services
- quality of life is very important

Q & A

- Q: Mary Ann Amodeo, What social issues are of importance to you? What about crime?
  - family economic issues are primary
  - quality of life issues like graffiti
  - there's a spike in crime, we have to look at why we have high crime rates
- Q: Bruce Feld, What resources do you bring to it in terms of dollars and support?
  - has a campaign manager
  - has three or four fundraisers set up
  - has seven volunteers and a social media person
  - will self-fund campaign
  - can run an efficient and viable campaign

Lisa Do Hofflich (36<sup>th</sup> state senate district, currently the 34th)

Remarks

- community organizer, dedicated public servant
- social justice advocate
- first-generation American, Vietnamese refugee
- proud graduate of Head Start, mom of 5
- husband is small businessman in Mount Vernon, dentist practicing out of home
- belongs to PSAIR synagogue
- Hudson Valley regional director and special advisor for Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand
- legislative advisor to Amy Collings
- worked in assembly to pass law on maternal health equity, justice for survivors of sexual assault
- has held positions in NOW, Junior League
- ran Yonkers satellite office of Hillary Clinton campaign in 2016
- running to help get children better futures
- wants pragmatic, progressive policies
- parents struggled to put food on the table, dad worked as supermarket stocker
- wants language-appropriate resources for immigrants
- had to take time off to be at-home mom, so understands need for quality childcare
- will fight for education opportunity, job training, and quality, affordable childcare

Q & A

- Q: Bruce Feld, You describe yourself as a pragmatic progressive. What do you mean by that?
  - in NY Legislature we will have to work across the aisle
  - we can't push so far to the left that we push people to the right
  - there are compromises and friendships we have to make to get our progressive policies across
  - we don't defund police, we make investments in law enforcement so they can do their job and communities of color are not adversely affected
- Q: Mary Ann Amodeo, I'm interested in your experience in social justice. What can you offer our youth?
  - take ideas from the federal model for education and job training that I would love to bring to the state
  - collaboration between schools and higher education and industry partners to create accelerated pathway to a degree
  - also, internships for these students
  - wants opportunities for our children to succeed
- Q: Ned Klein, I just want to thank everyone who came. It signifies you're serious about running. Keep in mind who we want to put our weight behind.

Miguelina Camilo (34<sup>th</sup> district, new 36<sup>th</sup> state senate)

Remarks

- resident of Riverdale
- attorney and community activist
- president of Bronx Women's Bar Association
- Dominican, child of immigrants
- former Bronx commissioner for the Board of Elections
- worked to ensure we have access to poll sites

Q & A

- Q: Sergio Villaverde, As an elections commissioner is there anything about elections you'd work on?
  - would like to be on the voting rights committee because I do have the inside knowledge
- Q: Bruce Feld, This is a big district. It takes in a lot of Westchester. What's your appeal to Westchester?
  - has formed many coalitions working as an attorney. I am also part of women's bar that works with 20 chapters across the state.
  - has done panels with judges across the state
- Q: Mary Ann Amodeo, What issues are most important to you?
  - public safety
  - job security
  - mentorships for Bronx youth
  - education is very important
  - creating opportunities for people going through the criminal just system to see people who look like them to get out of that system
- Jeffrey Dinowitz, How can politicians work cooperatively?
  - was in family court and saw herself as a peacemaker finding common ground in tense situations
  - 100% about working in community
  - will listen to those who came before her and will look to build partnership

Mary Ann Amodeo (civil court judge)

Remarks

- club member since 2005
- spent 12 years as a court attorney in Bronx Supreme Court
- has been court attorney in civil and criminal terms
- has done a lot of petitioning and campaigning
- was a tax lawyer in the U.S. tax court in the Treasury Department
- was administrative judge for NYC Dept. of Finance
- enjoyed conferencing with litigants and trying to understand their problems
- likes to negotiate, there's a lot of room for settlement
- has participated in a lot of trials with Judge Rodriguez
- likes a challenge and civil court judge is right challenge for me at this time

Q & A

- Virginia Krompinger, Q: How would you manage the heavy caseload?
  - she is a worker bee
  - would like to be engaged in writing opinions, sharing workload with her court attorney
  - will work with staff, especially since civil court jurisdiction limit has been raised to \$50,000
  - wants to get trials going as expeditiously as possible

Congressman Ritchie Torres (15<sup>th</sup> District, incumbent)

Remarks

- looking forward to working with us even though he never expected to represent Riverdale
- knows what it's like to grow up in poverty
- knows what it is like to be raised by a single mother on the minimum wage of \$4.25 per hour
- knows what its like to live in slum conditions with mold and mildew
- know what it's like to struggle with depression
- has been in elected office for 8 years
- knows what its like to have family members incarcerated
- former city council member
- was an advocate for public housing while at City Council
- decided to run for Congress because that is where the rules are made, that's where the purse strings are; there was a limit to what he could do on state or local level
- vice chair of the homeland security committee
- in charge of investigations
- it's not just a job, it's a mission, a vocation
- I can assure you I will work my heart out
- highest priority at the moment is to pass Build Back Better, a generational investment in our country
- wants to address needs of disabled and senior citizens

Q & A

- Q: Helen Morik, Regarding Build Back Better, are you willing to work with other members to take out portions so we can get it some of it?
  - I'm a pragmatic, progressive Democrat. Some is better than none at all. We are at an FDR moment. If we don't get some of it now, I don't know when we'll get another chance.
  - we need to address the need for home care, child care
  - a compromise bill is not a ceiling but a floor
- Q: Ben Jackson, You recently made comments very critical about Defund the Police. What led you to make those comments? What's your vision for police?
  - DSA has called for defunding NYPD by 50%, but I think that's irresponsible
  - defund government is arbitrary; Republicans do that
  - we don't want under-policing or over-policing; people want better policing
  - wants to bring accountability to police
  - abolishing qualified immunity
  - holding worst police officers accountable
  - critical of abuses of policing
  - communities like mine are hit the hardest by gun violence
- Q: Jeffrey Dinowitz, Redistricting has been good to us. Welcome. Thanks for voting for infrastructure.
- Q: Helen Krim, Has been reading about efforts to privatize Medicare. What is your position on that? What would you do to stop it?
  - foundation is Social Security
  - preserving Medicare as a public good is important. Is there a specific bill you have in mind?
- Q: Helen Krim, Medicare Advantage is being assigned without the consent of the patient.
  - Medicare Advantage is privately administered
  - you should have the option to remain with traditional Medicare

- you're right, privately-run systems have the appearance of cost savings

Yadhira Gonzalez-Taylor (civil court judge)

Remarks

- born and raised in the Bronx
- ran in primary for civil court judge last year
- married to retired fire lieutenant
- raised three children in the Pelham Gardens section
- former prosecutor
- attorney with 20 years of experience
- was in military police as reservist
- Family Court system has suffered, cases not heard in time
- has prosecuted corrupt police officers in Police Dept.
- hearing officer for schools for 13 years
- part-time professor at Monroe College, teaching criminal procedure

Cynthia Isaies (civil court judge)

Remarks

- long-time member of the Ben Franklin club
- court attorney in the Supreme Court since 2011
- born and raised in the Bronx
- executive board member of Community Board 10
- raised one son as a single mother
- supported phone banking, carrying petitions for the club
- has volunteered for many community events
- worked in housing court, Supreme Court criminal and civil terms
- former prosecutor
- practiced every type of law except Family Court
- would be honored to have support of party and this club

President Krompinger said instructions for voting on endorsements would be going out soon. The meeting was then adjourned.

*Minutes by Nona Louise Dunbar*