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COMMENTARY

Donn Esmonde: Democracy marches with army of 35

Donn Esmonde

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This is how change comes. This is how the revolution is won. It is won on the back of Ann Tworzydlo, 65, who carried it door-to-door on a gimpy knee, walking as if her parts needed oil. It is fought in the heart of Tom Tworzydlo, graying and nearing 70, his ropy forearms a legacy of years of driving a forklift in a Pepsi plant.

The Tworzdylos live in a neat brick house a few steps from the whoosh of traffic on Clinton Street, with a pine tree on the front lawn and a splash of red flowers edging the driveway. They are sweet people who want to feed anybody who shows up at their door. They were also the unlikely foot soldiers of a revolution.

The shot they helped to fire in West Seneca is being heard in every village and town across the state. The echo carries a message: People have a say in their futures. Folks can cut government down to size. Politicians work for people, not the other way around.

"It's not like we live in Russia or China," said Tom Tworzydlo, sitting Thursday morning at his kitchen table. "We should have a say in our own government."

They earned that right Wednesday. The Tworzdylos were part of a volunteer army of 35, headed by civic leader Kevin Gaughan, that collected more than 4,000 signatures in recent weeks. Because of that, folks in West Seneca will decide in November whether to cut the Town Board from five members to three.

Board members refused last month to let the citizens decide on downsizing. It did not matter. Gaughan unearthed a state law that puts the question on the ballot if enough folks sign petitions. They did. Ann and Tom Tworzydlo, going out every other night after dinner, got more than 200 people onboard.

The majority of the volunteer army looked like the Tworzdylos — older folks who worked all their lives, who watched their adult kids leave for greener job pastures, who wonder why their tax bill buckles their knees. And then the Town Board tries to gag them on the size of their own government.

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“People get beaten down,” Tom Tworzydlo said, “to the point where they don’t care anymore.”

As the Tworzdylos showed, sometimes you have to take democracy into your own hands.

“Ninety percent of people,” said Tom, “once they realized what [the petition] was about, were like ‘Where do I sign?’ ”

We have far more politicians than most other places. The layers of bureaucracy cost us in tax dollars and in muddled vision. After hearing Gaughan’s call last month for petition-carrying volunteers, Ann Tworzydlo called. Fifteen minutes later, Gaughan was sitting at her kitchen table.

They appreciated the attention and were committed to the cause. The cost of everything from gas to groceries keeps going up. The Tworzdylos’ retirement checks stay the same. Tom fills up the tank on the Seneca reservation. They nearly canceled their vacation.

“You have to pinch,” said Ann, “wherever you can.”

According to Gaughan’s recent study (www.TheCost.org), we have 10 times as many elected officials as the Baltimore area and five times as many as jobs-rich Charlotte. We pay a high price in salaries and benefits for a broken system. “So many of the people we talked to said there were no jobs for their kids,” Ann pointed out. “This is a beautiful town, but things need to change.”

The Tworzdylos and dozens of folks like them struck a blow. Gaughan threw a party for the volunteers Tuesday night, handing out — in the Olympic spirit — “gold” medals that looked suspiciously like painted cardboard disks. No matter. It was the thought that counted.

“We were all elated,” Tom Tworzydlo said. “It felt like we won the Super Bowl.”

In a way, they had.

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