

Announcement Speech  
4/29/2002  
By Vivian A. Houghton

You know, today is a very special day for me. It's special because I'm doing something different than I've ever done previously. Although I've been involved in political activism of one type or another for most of my adult life, I've never been a political candidate before. This is because during much of my political activism I have been a behind-the-scenes person. In this behind-the-scenes capacity, I've run other people's campaigns for political office, I've successfully challenged court decisions that have denied people their electoral rights, and I've also worked with other grassroots people to design strategies for single-issue campaigns pertaining to women's issues, racism, the environment, and a variety of economic concerns.

But today I'm not here to do any of those behind-the-scenes things. Instead, I'm here to do something else: to announce my candidacy for the office of Delaware Attorney General on the Green Party ticket! With your help, and with the help of people you know and others you don't know, I plan to run an all-out telling-it-like-it-is campaign from one end of the state to another, and I can promise you this: with you at my side, when this election is over both the Democrats and republicans will be stunned because we will have inaugurated a new era in Delaware politics.

Of course, we're still months away from that moment. This is just the campaign's beginning and the hardest part still lies ahead: a lot of day-to-day activities. It is during those activities that we will bring our message to tens of thousands of Delawareans, discuss issues with them, and draw many of them to us with our independent spirits, the steadfastness of our convictions, and our grassroots political vision.

I'd like to take some time now to sum up some of the things I stand for so those of you who are here today can leave with a solid grasp of at least part of how I view the state's criminal and civil justice needs, and also how I see the body politic.

In discussing what I stand for, I'd like to begin by saying something about the Attorney General position and the concept of supporting equality under the law.

As you know, the Attorney General is the state's head prosecutor. It is the Attorney General's job to uphold state law and bring to justice those who violate it. Such a job seems black and white on the surface: there are laws, and the laws must be enforced. But as is often the case, what seems black and white, frequently isn't as simple as it appears.

Take, for instance, the baby murder case two years ago against two Filipinos, 20-year-old Abigail Caliboso and her boyfriend 19-year-old boyfriend, Eric Jose Ocampo. As most of you will remember, Caliboso and Ocampo lived in Virginia where she gave birth to an 8-pound girl in a motel room. After the birth the couple drove to Delaware and left the newborn in a portable toilet at a Bear construction site. By the time the infant was found, it was dead.

One reason this case received so much coverage was because infanticide is a horrid crime, which grabs people's attention. But there also was a second reason that national attention was focused on the trial. This second reason was that the Delaware Attorney General's office persisted in demanding much harsher sentences for Caliboso and Ocampo than the office had given to Amy Grossberg and Brian Peterson, two middle class white kids who also had killed a newborn and were sentenced to two and a half years and two years respectively. Caliboso and Ocampo, on the other hand, received 5-year prison sentences in spite of having cooperated with the police far more openly than either Grossberg nor Peterson had done. The Attorney General's fiercer hardball tactics in the Caliboso/Ocampo case than in the Grossberg Peterson one clearly raises the question about the possibility of racial bias in the sentencing and how the attorney General's office, which is supposed to be the conservator of peace throughout the state<sup>2</sup> could fall into such a trap in this case, especially given other Delaware evidence of a racially unequal criminal justice system. To give just one of those pieces of evidence now: although Delaware has a people of color population of approximately 20 percent, over half those on death row are non-white, a startling disproportion.

Clearly the criminal justice system must be looked at in terms of the racial equity - or lack of racial equity - in its sentencing.

Such problems show that the state's Attorney General must be far more than a bull in a china shop, crashing around from one part of Delaware to another in a state of prosecutorial ecstasy during which some people get punished more harshly for their crimes than do others.

What we need is an attorney general who is determined to enforce the law, but who also is determined to examine all the racial, gender and economic nuances that must be understood in order to guarantee that equality under the law becomes a reality and not just a slogan.

Another point I should talk about with regard to my campaign for Attorney General is what it means that I am running as a Green Party candidate and not as a Democrat or Republican. Just the other day someone asked me, Isn't the Green Party basically a one-issue party, a party that's only interested in environmental questions? If that's all it is, why do you want to just be associated with one issue?

This is a good question, and because it's a good question, I want to answer it here tonight.

First of all, yes it's true that the Green Party is interested in the environment. For instance, like others in the party I do not like the fact that, according to the Environmental Law Institute in Washington, D.C., Delaware has lost - and this is a direct quote - a higher percentage of its native plant species than any other state in the United States because of over-development and lack of industrial oversight. The same report also indicates that 236 of the state's animal species are on the endangered or at-risk list for the same reasons I just stated.

Such issues are important because if you destroy a people's land and waterways, you run the risk of destroying people's bodies too. Of all the country's citizens, Delawareans should know best what I mean by this. Every year tens of thousands of us are forced to listen to the Delaware Department of Health tell us a story that never changes: that we have one of the highest cancer rates in the country. Now where does local government think this cancer comes from? It's not coming from drinking bottled water, I can tell you that. And it's not coming from the state's low-income people. Where it is coming from is this: It's coming from industrial poisons polluting our air and lakes and streams and infecting us as well as infecting the state's other life-forms. According to national records, Delaware possess some of the nation's worst pollution records. For instance, New Castle County ranks among the top 5% of U.S. counties that emit toxic substances like mercury, benzene and arsenic compounds.

If being interested in such issues means that I am an environmentalist and that the Green Party is an environmentalist organization, then yes we are. But the truth is that the party is not just an environmentalist organization. In fact, when we use the word environment, we use it in a broader and more daring way than either Democratic or Republican leaders -- and even some environmentalists -- have the courage to imitate.

For instance, we believe in an environment of economic clear thinking in which big corporations would not be rewarded with giant tax breaks for downsizing their workforces and throwing whole communities into disarray.

We believe in an environment of fairness in which Mr. Perdue should not be allowed to force immigrant workers to labor under horrendous conditions.

We believe in an environment of sanity in which the state shouldn't allow corporate executives to write city, county or state laws that give those very executives and the corporate elite whom they represent special privileges.

We believe in an environment of good health in which HMO's should not be allowed to manipulate the law in such a way as to deny patients' necessary medicines or medical procedures.

We believe in an environment of democracy in which the Attorney General should be brave enough to cancel a company's corporate charter if that company either commits a gross violation of its charter or repeatedly violates state business regulations.

And we believe in an environment of human value in which gays and lesbians are treated with the same regard as heterosexuals, in which people of color are treated with the same regard as whites, in which women are treated with the same regard as men, and in which the law is fully mobilized toward these ends.

As some of you know and some of you don't know, I used to be a Democrat. In fact, there was a time when I successfully managed ten campaigns for Democratic Party candidates. I was proud of the work I did then. I believed that I was playing a vital role in making the party more women-friendly and in opening it up to modern methods of coalition building.

But somewhere along the line, I recognized that no matter who was in office, Democrats or Republicans, the state's policies remained more or less same.

An example of this is provided by the recent national Enron scandal, which has a Delaware dimension.

The role that Delaware's pro-corporate laws played in the Enron scandal is an example of how the state's bias toward big money creates a context in which it is easy for corruption to operate invisibly. As reported in the Philadelphia Inquirer on Jan. 31 of this year, Enron's national rise to power was helped along by the company's good luck in finding in Delaware a bunch of laws that helped the company to avoid local taxes, and shroud high-stakes deals from investor scrutiny. These laws helped Enron to set up 685 subsidiaries in our state. These subsidiaries allowed Enron to hide its true financial status from its investors, including thousands of its employees who were encouraged to invest in Enron stock for their retirement even while the company was collapsing.

Delaware's maze of pro-corporate legislation draws outside companies to the state like fresh blood draws killer sharks toward the wounded and vulnerable. And yet in spite of the pro-corporate tilt of our laws, neither Democrats nor Republicans in the state have made any effort to reassess what it means to the state's population that our laws lean so noticeably in favor of the rich.

Even state agencies that supposedly protect the public often seem as if they are owned lock, stock and barrel by the state's corporate elite. Take, as an example, the state's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control - better known as DNREC. Theoretically, DNREC is supposed to oversee Delaware companies to make sure they don't break state laws. Unfortunately, DNREC is an utter disaster in terms of protecting workers or citizens from harm. Instead, the agency has allowed companies like Rodel, Motiva and General Chemical to repeatedly break state environmental laws while only giving them token financial penalties, which have done nothing to stop their violations. One of the first things I will do when I am elected Attorney General is to establish a task force to investigate possible criminal negligence charges against DNREC.

In conclusion, let me say this.

I can't tell you how happy I am to be here with you tonight, and how seriously I take this chance to run for Attorney General. And I also can't tell you how much I will have to rely on you over the coming weeks and months. I will need your input, your critiques, your suggestions, your physical assistance.

As you know, running a grassroots campaign that intends to kick butt and stun Delaware's political status quo is no easy matter. It will require a lot of elbow grease and long hours, a lot of brainstorming and strategy development. But if we do this together, not as a bunch of isolated individuals but as a unit, we can win.

The truth is that this campaign is not just my campaign, it is our campaign. It is not just a politics-as-usual campaign; it is an insurgent politics-of-the-people campaign. Those of us who are here today are bound together by our independent spirits, our vision of a more equal justice system, our refusal to be taken for granted by the powers that be, and our willingness to put our shoulders to the grindstone and fight for a new, more open politics here in our home state.

So, let me tell you this, my dear friends, with Democrats and Republicans having established themselves as ineffective guardians of we the people's rights, I am honored to step forward in the Green Party's name today and declare the beginning of a new state politics, one that finds its voice in the throats of the people and not in the wallets of political good-old-boys or corporate elites.

With love and in solidarity to you all, let's win the election!

Thank you!



*People First In the First State  
It's About Time!*