

'Frontrunners' Brings Presidential Race Home

BY LINDA J. WILSON

One candidate sees himself as a shooin, as do his backers. Another cherishes her outsider status. Yet another got into the race more or less by accident. And still another, despite having won another elected office previously, still carries an air of mystery about him that may ultimately work against him.

All the candidates could be among the seekers of the presidency in the 2008 election. In fact, Director Caroline Suh's documentary film "Frontrunners" follows this group of very smart, funny and sometimes shockingly mature teenagers as they vie for the presidency of the student union at Stuyvesant H.S., one of the most competitive public schools in the country and New York City's most prestigious public high school.

The teenaged candidates face the same issues as candidates of any age, such as picking the "right" running mate, shaking as many hands as possible, preparing for televised debates, impressing the pundits and journalistic community, addressing sensitive race-related issues and mobilizing an apathetic voter base. A microcosm of the U.S. Presidential elections, Suh's film shows politicking and pluralities through the lens of the adolescent experience.

Stuyvesant is regarded as the most aca-

demically demanding of all the city's elite public high schools, one reason the lone female running for president in May 2006, Hannah Freiman, decided to seek admission. As they fiercely compete for office all the candidates say they are running for the good of the school—George Zisiadis, a first generation Greek-American, born and raised in Astoria, seeks to push the Student Union budget past the \$100,000 mark—and campaigns for cheaper candy as well. Currently serving as Chief of Staff (a presidential appointment), George is

"At heart, 'Frontrunners' is of the genre of documentaries known as the 'campaign film', but in this case, the candidates are not famous or professional—they are teenagers busy living, while also figuring out the world and their place in it..."

running with Vanessa Charbhumi under the populist and broad "Go Vote" slogan. Having an Asian as a vice presidential running mate might have been a shrewd choice on his part, although he believes she's the best person for the job. He follows his own self-prescribed path at Stuyvesant, where he has worked hard to excel at a variety of different activities. He's the second-ranked bowler in Manhattan, founder and president of the

juggling club and a student of the age-old art of Greek Dance. His most outstanding claim to fame at Stuyvesant may be "The Lounge", fuchsia and yellow curtains hung around a column in the school corridor and describable only through its slogan, "It's not described, only experienced."

One of Zisiadis' three opponents, Michael Zaytsev, an active volunteer in school events, was Sophomore Class President and has been given the serious responsibility of being in charge of the

budget as the school's CFO and Freiman, a relative outsider, promises to change the stagnation of the Student Union's insider administrations.

On entering Stuyvesant, Freiman became one of those rare creatures known as a "famous freshman", a high-profile darling of the seniors. She backed up her high profile with substance, quickly emerging as a school leader as head of the cheerleading and dance squads (she is

known as the best hip hop dancer at Stuyvesant), as well as the acting club. As an actress, she's tackled the stage (in difficult roles in school performances of "Burn This" and the "Children's Hour"), as well as the big screen, appearing in Todd Solondz' controversial "Palindromes". Even with all these extracurricular activities she still managed to maintain her A average. Her choice for vice president is Lauren Gonzalez; the two run under a "Choose the Chicks" slogan.

Only Alex Leonard seems to be running for no particular reason. He leverages his height as a basketball player, and perhaps as a hockey player, too. Leonard is widely known for being "tall", a fact that distinguishes him from the other candidates as far as recognition, but may not be enough to ensure a victory.

The film presents a good argument for the thesis that politicians are born, not made. All four have chosen their running mates to appeal to the school's demographics—men choose women, Westerners choose Asians (who make up 55 percent of the student body)—and Freiman chooses another female as her running mate, but one whose experience in the Student Union balances her own relative obscurity.

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