

HISTORY

TULLIO vs. CANNAVINO

By Mark Toriski

Erie's 1965 mayoral primary election is widely regarded as one of the most infamous elections the city has ever seen. Two men, both of Italian descent, both representing two different sides of the city geographically, and both eager to run Erie vied for the candidacy. The winner would go on to become the longest-running mayor in Erie's history, but first he had to lose the election.

At the end of the 1964 presidential election, Louis C. Tullio, the Business Manager of the Erie School District, made a bold political move by announcing his intentions to run for mayor of Erie the following November. His brash decision was believed to be a tactic employed to scare away any other hopefuls, who would know that the wealth of contacts he had accumulated during his tenure in the school district would make him almost a sure win for the Democratic nomination. That proved effective, as the ensuing year saw the primary election come down to a two-man race between Tullio and City Councilman Mike Cannavino.

Cannavino, a self-proclaimed champion for the "little people," spent much of his life pursuing the top seat in the city. He had lost prior Democratic mayoral primaries in 1947 and 1961, both by small margins. A strong fixture in the community, Cannavino would use his position as councilman to help as many citizens as possible. He once sent a fire truck to assist a local church in need of repainting. Some of his creative campaigning included stopping at funeral homes to offer condolences and attending weddings, whether he knew

Tullio at his desk in the middle of his 24 years as mayor of Erie

Photos: Tullio Collection (Sr. M.L. Franklin Archival Center, Mercyhurst College)

the families or not. Cannavino's supporters felt his calculated charm and networking skills were his strongest assets in this election.

Like Cannavino, Tullio was considered a charismatic figure with a warm presence. However, both men had very different views of where Erie was headed. The thesis "Why Lou Tullio: How Erie's Most Powerful Mayor Came to Office" states that Cannavino had the mindset that Erie was a "big small town" while Tullio believed that Erie had the potential to become a "small big town."

Cannavino's bid for mayor did not start out as hoped; he suffered a serious heart attack less than a day after launching his campaign, leaving him in the hospital for a month. Rumors began spreading about whether the ailing candidate would be able to finish his campaign, let alone handle the general election campaign later in the year. Numerous deals were offered in attempts to remove the Cannavino from the race (one promising a position with Tullio's administration, assuming Tullio could defeat incumbent Mayor Charles Williamson). Cannavino refused, promising that upon his release a "full-blast campaign" was in order. He ignored the advice of doctors, jumping right into work in lieu of rest and making every effort to court voters. He had lost two close primary elections already and was determined not to lose a third.

As the election loomed, the relationship between the

two candidates began to disintegrate. Tullio's sister was married to Cannavino's brother. In spite of the family tie, both campaigns launched personal attacks. Tullio criticized Cannavino for having a lack of expertise in business practices. He also criticized Cannavino for being a bachelor, which was considered a political liability during the time. Tullio was attacked because he had no prior experience in city-government.

On May 18, 1965, with a voter turnout of 66%, registered Democrats in the city elected their candidate of choice. Cannavino won five of the six wards, finally achieving his goal of winning the Democratic primary for mayor. He began to plan for a rigorous mayoral campaign. Tullio considered Cannavino the "toughest politician ever."

Continuing on the success of his campaign, Cannavino made as many public appearances as possible. As the demands increased, and the time to election decreased, the toll on Cannavino's physical health began to show. Many of his aides and supporters began to wonder if he would be physically able to finish his campaign. At a campaign rally at the Knights of St. John, he was exhausted by his efforts and showed signs of extreme fatigue. Many were horrified at the sight of an extremely pale and almost incoherent Cannavino.

The following morning, October 23, Cannavino was found dead of a heart attack in his hotel room. A stunned city entered a two-week stage of mourning at the request



Tullio campaigning in the community

of Mayor Williamson. The Erie Democratic Committee conducted an emergency meeting to begin finding a replacement candidate that could run a successful mayoral campaign in a matter of days. Tullio's supporters immediately began lobbying for the Democratic Committee to attempt at making contact with the former candidate (who was out of the city) to notify him of the recent developments and convince him to return to Erie.

Tullio was located gambling at the Garden State Horse Track near Philadelphia. By the time he returned to Erie, he had the nomination guaranteed. He was unanimously approved by the committee. He began organizing a campaign for an election in just five days. "It was terrible and exhausting. We did everything other candidates would do over a long period of time in just a few short days. People worked morning, noon, and night, and I don't think I slept more than two hours a night," states Pat Liebel, who worked for Tullio in the school district and served as his Administrative Assistant throughout his entire career as mayor.

Tullio's main strategy during his brief campaign

came down to three main points: calling attention to his experience as the school district's budget manager, evoking the emotions of a still-grieving city with his notion to "complete Mike Cannavino's mission," and questioning Mayor Williamson's capabilities by acknowledging the increase in taxes citizens had seen during his term.

Many of Cannavino's top supporters joined the Tullio effort to show a strong and united Democratic Party.

Nearly one year to the date he announced his candidacy, Tullio defeated Williamson on November 2, 1965, taking five of the six wards. The primary election of 1964 is remembered as one Erie will never forget. It was an election in which one legacy ended and another legacy began. Tullio would go on to serve six consecu-

tive terms as mayor from 1966 to 1990 before dying of amyloidosis (a rare protein disease) on April 17, 1990, at his residence. *EL

Source material: Kyle Foust's M.A. Thesis "Why Lou Tullio: How Erie's Most Powerful Mayor Came to Office."



Mayor Tullio (3rd from right) with his campaign chairman and labor leaders

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