

Posted on Friday, Apr. 17, 2009

D.A. candidates on gun violence in unique forum

The debate included three journalists and a panel of victims' relatives.

By Michael Matza
Inquirer Staff Writer

Striving to sound smart - and hard-nosed - about the city's most pressing crime problem, the six candidates for Philadelphia district attorney offered strategies to combat gun violence at a unique forum hosted by CeaseFire PA, Pennsylvania's largest gun-control group.

In a city where some neighborhoods are awash in illegal handguns, crimes with guns are the ultimate challenge to law and order, the candidates agreed last night at the Community College of Philadelphia.



But the five Democrats - Seth Williams, Michael Turner, Dan McCaffery, Brian Grady, and Dan McElhatton - and the lone Republican, Michael Untermeyer, also differed in substantive ways.

Turner said past efforts to defeat gun violence had failed because proponents of gun controls used the "failed paradigm" that pits public safety against the Second Amendment's right to keep and bear arms.

State law prohibits cities from enacting their gun laws. Philadelphia, where more than 80 percent of homicide victims are African American or Latino, has had to conform to the political will of mostly rural Pennsylvania, where hunting is popular and most of the lawmakers in Harrisburg are white.

Turner said the next district attorney needed to take a "civil-rights" approach to the argument that Philadelphia should be able "to enact its own gun laws."

What made the event unusual as political theater was its format. In addition to three journalists asking questions, there was a panel of four people whose lives were forever altered by gun violence, including Larry McDonald, father of slain Philadelphia Police Sgt. Patrick McDonald, and Dorothy Johnson Speight of the group Mothers in Charge, whose son Khaaliq Jabbar Johnson was shot and killed in 2001 in a dispute over a parking spot.

The survivor panelists didn't just ask questions. They recounted in heartbreaking detail how their loved ones had been murdered.

When Chase Wexler, whose father, Harold, was killed by robbers on the 8000 block of Ogontz Avenue in 2004, asked the candidates how they would stop gun crimes, McCaffery was forceful.

"What it's going to take," he said, "is someone with enough balls - excuse my language - to stand up to" soft judges. "If I have to go to war with the judiciary, I will."

The mild profanity opened the way for two other candidates - Turner and Grady - to use the very same word, and evoked the "tough-cookie" image of District Attorney Lynne M. Abraham, who after 19 years elected not to run again.

Untermeyer said he would press the state Sentencing Commission to toughen guidelines. He said it could be done without legislative approval. He also pushed for a form of laser branding of weapons that would make it easier to trace guns used in crimes.

Williams said he would aggressively prosecute "straw buyers," who purchase guns for criminals.

"Handguns aren't made at 52d and Florence. They are brought here," he said, vowing to crack down on illegal street sales. He said the next district attorney also needed, in effect, the skills of a social worker to try to "change the culture of young men who feel they have to be strapped to be a man."

Grady said the most dangerous criminals needed to be incarcerated for decades. He faulted a system in which assistant district attorneys prepared hard to win trials, then fell down on the job in the sentencing phase.

"Sentencing is not a day off for the A.D.A.," he said. "Sentencing day is a day of reckoning."

The candidates all favored laws that would require owners to report lost or stolen guns. They all bemoaned the fact that every year in Philadelphia, thousands of people are shot, hundreds die, scores are left paralyzed, and more than \$100 million is spent on assault-related hospital charges.

In the sparsely attended auditorium, however, McElhatton seemed to offer the night's crowning observation when he said the district attorney couldn't lead the effort alone.

"If this forum were about property taxes . . . or wage taxes," he said, "this room would be bursting at the seams. Until we get the wide breadth of the city to participate, we will not succeed."

Contact staff writer Michael Matza at 215-854-2541 or mmatza@phillynews.com.