Viva la Feminista: Thoughts on the Cook County Board President Forum

Despite all the candidates (R, D, G) confirming their attendance, only four showed up for a forum to discuss how their administration would address violence against women, girls and the LGBTQ community. The forum was cosponsored by Chicago Foundation for Women, Center on Halsted, Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network, Loyola University Chicago and Rape Victim Advocates.

Toni Preckwinkle, Dorothy Brown (arrived late), Tom Tresser, and Todd Stroger answered questions by the fabulous moderator Kimbrell Kelly (Editor, The Chicago Reporter). I have to start out my post with major props to Kimbrell. As a journalist, she exhibited what one should expect from the fourth estate - she knew her topic and pressed the candidates for real answers. And believe me, that was tough to do.

Due to life, I ended up taking the kid with me to the forum. About half way thru she left with her dad to grab some food and focus on her homework. When I caught up with them she asked, “So who won?”

SUMMARY
I would have to give this one to Preckwinkle. Given her opponents, she could have taken a nap in the middle and still won. She was organized, knew her audience and gave thoughtful answers to most questions. Second place would have to go to Brown as she did have some answers although she could never get “LGBTQ” to roll off her tongue correctly. I know even I get tongue tied with the acronym at times, but being a candidate, you should practice this one over and over. Third place goes to Stroger because he attempted to answer the questions. Last place obviously goes to Tresser and that fact really hurts, which I’ll explain later.

Q&A
This first question asked the candidates to state what they would do in their first 90 days. Stroger said he’s done a lot to reach out to the community in the last three years. He also called for a community meeting. Preckwinkle said she’d address issue that women don’t report rapes & other violent crimes, work on incarcerating only violent offenders, remove non-violent offenders & focus on drug treatment, education/training and home monitoring. Tresser responded by talking about corruption and that he wasn’t taking money from PAC’s, unions or had the support of Madigan (he held up the front page of the Chicago Tribune for effect). The moderator followed up with him about the issue - violence against women, girls & the LGBTQ community. Tresser continued with his anti-corruption talking points, but also interjected that the people in the room should be the ones in charge at the County. Preckwinkle added in that she would begin by addressing rape as a member of her family was raped and the justice system failed her, thus she went to civil court for justice. She followed up that neither her or Stroger had Madigan money or support.

OPENING STATEMENTS
Since Brown came in late, the opening statements were actually after the first
question. Brown mentioned that she had been a victim of teen dating violence and that her office has a violence liaison. Tresser stated that this was his first run at elected office and reminded us that he fought against the Olympics for a year. Preckwinkle talked about how she has worked to rebuild her ward, wants to repeal the Stroger tax, look at new revenue streams and make the independent health panel permanent. I missed Stroger’s statement.

BACK TO Q&A

The next issue was violence and sexual assault against LGBTQ youth at our youth detention centers. Stroger said his hands were tied due to federal jurisdiction/oversight. Preckwinkle said that better training is needed.

Asked who should be prosecuted in the youth prostitute - pimp - john relationship, Tresser returned to his message that advocates in the room should be in charge and when pressed said that we need to address the issues that result in youth living on the streets and finding themselves in the sex trade. Brown talked about a need for alternatives. Preckwinkle called current laws that focus on prosecuting prostitutes as sexist.

Now here was an unbelievable moment in the forum. The candidates were asked about four pending federal lawsuits from women shackled during labor while incarcerated. Stroger, our current Cook County President, claimed that he had no knowledge of the issue or lawsuits. He said that he will talk with the Sheriff right away! Preckwinkle said she would settle the lawsuits and then cited a program from Washington state that allows incarcerated new moms to keep their newborns with them for a time being. Does the Alderman read Ms. magazine? Brown said she can’t believe it is happening and said that even if it was legal, it’s a bad practice period. Tresser said he’d zero out the Sheriff’s budget until the practice was stopped. Brown & Stroger then jumped in to explain why that just can’t happen and thus why his tax increase was and still is needed. Brown disagreed on that last point.

When asked to address the historical lack of support for domestic violence and rape survivors in the county, Preckwinkle discussed her idea of setting up a way to support community organizations and a model that the city uses which honestly I got a bit confused about. I would love feedback from providers on this one! Stroger said he has six people looking for grants right now and would make sure there was a focus on DV issues. Tresser said no need to wait for grants, just cut out corruption which wastes up to 10% of our budget!

The last question from the moderator asked how each candidate would address the obstacles survivors and agencies face when attempting to gather information from the Cook County State Attorney’s office. Stroger stated that the state attorney can’t without information and with a new law that was passed in the state assembly, almost everything is available. The moderator jumped in to make the point that while the Freedom of Information Act is a tool, FOIA requests are often challenged and not as simple as Stroger made it sound. Preckwinkle made a point to state that the President is just one person on the board and that there are about 9 other elected officials in the county. She called for more training. Brown said she would work with advocates to change the laws. She would also work with the Commission on the Status of Women (If she meant the state commission. It was disbanded by Bagovich) and the Cook County women’s relations office. Brown also mentioned that we needed to have high ethics. Tresser sang his anti-corruption song and said he would put everything he could on the internet.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONS
How would you address the role of men in fighting violence against women and girls?

Preckwinkle returned to goal of reducing the non-violent offender population in the jail system so there was room to incarcerate violent offenders. Brown mentioned rehabilitation of offenders, especially juveniles, while they are incarcerated.

President Stroger, please address what progress your administration has made in addressing violence against women, girls & the LGBT community.

Stroger replied that he gave Sheriff Dart the ability to hold johns more accountable by
towing cars and fining the men. Said that we need a holistic approach to women in the sex trade, they need services.

How will you provide violence against women service providers when the state fails to hold up their end of the funding equation?

Tresser said simply, “VOTE GREEN!” He then said that the County President should be in DC to get money. Also said we need to get the churches involved and tell men to just stop. There were some other responses, but no one really answered it.

The next question asked if the candidates felt that one way to combat bad media images of women and LGBT persons was to incorporate gender sensitivity education to elementary schools.

Brown said YES! She thinks that we should be teaching character education in schools as well as tolerance for everyone. Stroger put the blame on parents who listen to terrible music which fuels the difference fire. He called it “hateful noise labeled as entertainment” that targets gender, color and LGBT persons.

How will you address women with disabilities and the abuse they face in nursing homes and battling the nursing home lobby?

Preckwinkle: We need to segregate the populations: mentally ill, LGBTQ and those with disabilities. We need state legislation to help screening of employees and remain vigilant on hiring employees.

A senior from Dunbar asked about school-based health centers and how will each candidate support them as President.

Preckwinkle said she thought they were wonderful ideas and would support expanding them. She sees them as part of strengthening a community since schools are the heart of communities. She especially liked the idea of high school based ones since it allows for ease of access to health facilities for teens who may have a hard time talking to their parents about obtaining birth control or treatment for STDs.

CLOSING STATEMENTS
Brown said that she couldn’t stay for the reception afterward because she was hosting an online townhall meeting and would continue to connect with voters thru online townhalls. She wants to reform the justice system, create more jobs and help small businesses.

Preckwinkle thanked everyone for attending and restated her independence. She quoted one of the newspaper endorsements she received where it was stated that she had the best chance to fight corruption.

Stroger pointed out that while the state and city have turned to furloughs and blackout dates, the county is economically sound. He has helped many people with their mortgages. He said he was a good fiscal manager.

Tresser said to go Green... again.

THOUGHTS
Being a feminist is hard when it comes to electoral politics. It’s hard when we have a two-party system that caters to a huge moderate population. This often means that we can only go so far with feminist action. Abortion? Sure, but only if you can pay for it yourself missey. Child care? Sure, but only if you can afford a safe placement. Family leave? Darn footing! But again, it’s on your dime. The President of the United States calls himself a feminist and yet he allowed the religious forces in this country to throw women under the bus during recent healthcare reform negotiations. In the recent Massachusetts Senatorial race, I heard from feminists who felt that Coakley just wasn’t good enough, that she had a track record that showed she said feminist things, but did otherwise. Some feminists feel that having a known enemy is better than being swept off our feet by a feminist candidate only to be left heartbroken by their actions (ahem, Mr. President!). We are very good at maintaining the status quo as we saw in the second Bush administration. Yes, we lost ground, but we also held back the bigger flood we feared would drown us to Glead. The first year of the Obama administration was a disappointment, to say the least, when we felt that we could push our issues in a progressive direction.
That leaves many feminists to ponder what the hell to do when it comes to elections. Should we start our own party? Do we back third parties? For me, unless a candidate jumps out at me as awesome, I always investigate if the Green Party has a candidate. As someone who was against the Olympics, I saw what Tom Tresser was doing and had to tip my hat at his work. In 2006, I voted for the Green candidate Rich Whitney for Governor. I did it because I thought some of his ideas were good, but also to help the Green party become established in Illinois. When I vote Green it is not just as simple as a protest vote. I want to vote for ideas. Tom Tresser had a perfect venue to reach a community eager for change and he provided no ideas. Some people might vote for an anti-corruption candidate, but when I chatted with a few people afterwards, they were very disappointed he didn’t provide ideas on how to address the very real issues we live with corruption or not.

I’ve been keeping an eye and ear on Toni Preckwinkle for a few years. She’s voted with the Mayor a bit more often than not (55%), but she’s also shown the most independence in the rubber stamp City Council. She was also the most prepared candidate at the forum. She offered some good ideas and knowledge of the issues discussed.

For me the biggest issues that the county deals with is our public health care system and the jail. These are two areas that impact so many of us, even if we don’t realize it. I want the leader of the county to at the very least respect these issues if not agree with how I think we can address them.

For the record, I haven’t volunteered for any candidate nor given any of them any money.

The election is February 2, 2010, so get out there and vote!

NOTES
While I took notes by hand, @DestaChristina tweeted as well and I referred to her tweets to help fill in things I may have missed while mothering the kid. If you were there and have a different recollection of what happened, please leave a comment. I know I didn’t come close to capturing everything said.

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