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Why Domingo Garcia is running against the father of his godson

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**BODY:**

It was the night of Domingo Garcia's annual Christmas party, but not every guest was in a festive mood. In fact, Sylvana Alonzo couldn't stand the idea of attending her third holiday party in three nights. "Roberto, do we have to go tonight?" she said tiredly as she was getting dressed.

"Yes," her husband responded. "I have to settle somethingz with Domingo." He told her he was hearing persistent rumors that his good friend was planning to run against him for state representative. "I need to hear it from him," Alonzo told his wife.

They headed out to Club Babalu on McKinney Avenue, where Garcia was hosting his law office's annual holiday party. As usual, Garcia spared no expense. Tonight he had arranged for a catered dinner, two disc jockeys, free beer, and frozen margaritas for 300 people--all the makings of a fun time in a swingin' place with a distinct mambo feel. "It's the ultimate Latin high in here," says club owner Efrain Echevarria. "It's a throwback to the Ricky Ricardo days--when Ricky was always saying, 'Lucy, Lucy, I'm getting tired of playing at the Tropicana. I want my own club.'"

How fitting, then, for Garcia to come to Babalu. Like Ricky Ricardo, Garcia was in search of something--something big that could resuscitate a political career sidetracked by an unsuccessful bid for mayor.

Though he had been thinking about what position to run for, what Garcia really wanted was to be in the Texas Legislature. But there was a hitch. His good friend Alonzo--padrino at Garcia's wedding, father of Garcia's godson-- was already in that job.

Details, details.

"I walked into the party, and the first thing I said was, 'Are you going to run?'" Alonzo recalls. "And Domingo said, 'Let's talk later; this isn't the place to talk about it.' And I said, 'Yeah, man, it is the place. You invited me. This is your party.' And he said, 'OK, no, I'm not going to run against you. I support you for state rep.'"

Garcia tells a different story: "He did ask me if I would support him, and I told him I would not." Despite the revelation, Alonzo stayed and partied with him, Garcia says, though "only for a few hours."

Later, both agree, Garcia grabbed the DJ's microphone and proudly introduced the elected officials present, including his friend, "State Representative Roberto Alonzo." The two posed for a photo for a Hispanic newspaper, which ran it the following week, along with a front-page story declaring that Garcia was endorsing Alonzo.

"They're running a retraction so I don't sue them for libel and slander," says Garcia. The newspaper owner stands by the story.

Whatever transpired, the two men drank beers that night. They danced. "They played a lot of disco music from the time we were in college--a lot of 'YMCA' and Saturday Night Fever," says the 39-year-old Alonzo. "Everybody at the party was saying, 'This is great. You two are together again. You're laughing. ' A good time was had by all."

Two weeks later, Garcia filed to run against him.

Ah, Domingo. We hardly knew you. Or perhaps I should say we badly underestimated you.

We knew you were in search of greatness--10 political races in 15 years is about as ambitious as it gets, though only four of those bids were successful. And your last race was especially brash, seeing as how you remade yourself virtually overnight from bomb-throwing Democratic activist to stalwart conservative--shaving off your trademark moustache in midcampaign and charming your way, just as Desi would have done, into the heart of every North Dallas women's clubber.

But this? No one could have suspected this, not even the one who knew you best--the one who knew how much you craved the limelight and the power, the one who worked side by side with you in all your campaigns. Not even Roberto Alonzo suspected you would stoop this low. "AAh, que Domingo?" Alonzo said miserably one day last week, sitting in his law office on the eighth floor of the NationsBank building in Oak Cliff. "AAh, que Domingo?"

Alonzo had been repeating these three words for about five minutes. Tears were in his eyes. Taken aback by this outpouring of emotion, I asked him to translate. "'Why, Domingo?'" Alonzo says. "It means 'I can't believe it, Domingo.'"

Actually, Alonzo was not referring to Garcia's decision to run against him. That shock was over. No, Alonzo was reacting to something Garcia told me the day before, sitting in his law office, just a mile up the road. "You know, Roberto's only had his moustache a couple of years," Garcia told me, shortly after I noted that Garcia's moustache was still absent. "You know why his moustache is so thin?" he added with a mischievous smile. "He has a tough time growing one--because, you know, he has Indian blood."

Yes, this race is going to get ugly. And Garcia seems plenty willing to make it happen. "Let me make it clear that I believe it's time for a change in this district," Garcia said last Thursday afternoon at a press conference to formally announce his candidacy. "I received literally hundreds of phone calls from people asking me to run. Secondly, you have to have effective leadership. You can't just elect people who become furniture and don't do anything."

If Garcia got hundreds of phone calls, his many supporters must have been busy that Thursday. Only 55 people attended the press conference--six of them children and most of the rest family and law-office employees.

Only two political notables joined Garcia at the podium. Neither was an elected official, and neither has political ties south of the Trinity River, in the contested district. Worse, both were forced to begin their remarks by explaining why they were supporting a former political enemy.

"I know some of you wonder why am I supporting Domingo Garcia," began lawyer Adelfa Callejo, whose family supported Darrell Jordan for mayor and who would support a rodent for state rep as long as the opponent was Roberto Alonzo, her archenemy.

"If anyone was out saying, 'Rene Castilla is supporting Domingo Garcia, they'd say, 'What?'" began Castilla, the former DISD school board president, whom Garcia once recruited a candidate to run against.

One elected official did finally show up--Justice of the Peace Diana Orozco--but she never approached the podium, and she didn't stay long. "Please don't mention that I'm here," she said when I approached her. "I'm so embarrassed. I was asked to meet someone here. I didn't know it was a campaign announcement for Domingo."

Conspicuously absent were the key people who had always helped Garcia on his campaigns--his inner circle of former law-school buddies and law associates and their wives, who had launched Garcia's political career, and then, with Garcia's help, launched their own. That group included the Alonzos, Dallas County Justice of the Peace Juan Jasso and his wife, Delia, and Dallas City Councilman Steve Salazar and his wife, Glenda, sister of Alonzo's wife Sylvana. Two other members of the inner circle--Mario Casarez, whom Garcia appointed to several city commissions, and lawyer Jose Angel Gutierrez, for whom Garcia had obtained several city contracts--were also noticeably absent. All are supporting Alonzo or staying publicly neutral.

Actually, Steve Salazar, who is supporting his brother-in-law, Alonzo, ought to be silently praying that Garcia wins this race. If he doesn't, it's a good bet that Garcia will take aim at Salazar next. "I know that's a possibility," Salazar says, "but when I ran for this seat, I made it clear to Domingo that I planned to run for re-election."

Details, details.

It seems clear that Garcia regards all these positions as his: He led the charge to create these Hispanic seats; he was the first one to get elected to one of them; he has the right to decide which friends should have which seats for how long.

Last summer, shortly after he'd lost the race for mayor, Garcia asked Alonzo to lunch at the Top of the Cliff restaurant in Alonzo's office building. According to Alonzo, Garcia was mellow, subdued, thoughtful. "He said, 'I still want to be involved. I want to be in a position because if you're not in a position, you don't have power.' He was thinking and thinking."

According to Alonzo, Garcia had been thinking about running for justice of the peace against their mutual friend Diana Orozco, the sitting justice of the peace they'd both strongly supported two years before. He'd thought about a position on the board of the Dallas County Community College District--the seat Steve Salazar had vacated to run for Garcia's council seat. And there was always the City Council. Perhaps, he told Alonzo, he'd move over to Chris Luna's district and run against him. Then, of course, there were always new lawsuits and the 2000 census poll to look forward to perhaps opening up the County Commissioners Court, the U.S. Congress, or U.S. Senate.

Garcia concedes he told Alonzo he'd considered moving to Luna's district, but only if Luna didn't run again. He denies eying either the DCCD board or Orozco's seat as justice of the peace.

Sitting there that day, listening to his friend's political fantasies, Alonzo couldn't help but think back to another benchmark conversation between them four years earlier, when a federal lawsuit and the 1990 census created the first predominantly Hispanic Dallas seats on the City Council and in the Texas Legislature.

The two men had been working together for seven years, cheek to jowl, to get Garcia elected to something. They had been successful only twice--getting him elected to the Democratic National Committee. Three separate bids for state rep' (against my husband, Oak Cliff incumbent Steve Wolens) had come up short. Finally, after so much hard work, success seemed assured. The two men were ready to divide up the spoils.

"I said, 'OK, Domingo, what do you want to do? Take your choice,' Alonzo recalls, referring to the November 1991 City Council race and the May 1992 Democratic primary for state rep'. "He said, 'I want to run for City Council, and then I want to run for state rep'.' I said, 'Domingo, you can't do that. You'll get killed.' And he said, 'But I've always wanted to be state rep'.' But I said, 'No, you pick.' So he took the council seat, which was the first one available." And Alonzo took the other.

Garcia says it was always understood that he would run for the City Council and Alonzo would run for state rep'.

Last year, the two men actually thought about, in effect, swapping their positions. Garcia was running for mayor, opening up his council seat. Alonzo was serving his second term in the Texas House, and he began to wonder if it might not be better for his law practice and his family to quit his legislative post, which took him to Austin for five months every other year, to run for Garcia's seat. That way, if Garcia lost the mayor's race, he could run for Alonzo's state seat.

The scheme collapsed when Alonzo decided to stay put. "It was too complicated," he says. "Plus, if I stayed in the Legislature, I'd start to build some seniority, which is how you start making things happen down in Austin. Of course, Domingo wishes I'd gone the other way on it."

Now--irony of ironies--Alonzo and Garcia will have to rely on those dreaded voters to determine their destinies.

Sitting with Garcia last week, it was clear to me that he believes he has this race wrapped up. Eighty-five percent of the people in Alonzo's state- rep' district were in Garcia's old council district, he informed me, and he carried 67 percent of the votes when he ran for the Council in 1991. (In 1993, he didn't have an opponent.) He also did well in this area when he ran for mayor. He walked door to door when he ran for state rep' in the past.

Yes, but this time you're running against your best friend, I reminded him. "The average voter out there doesn't know we're friends," Garcia says. "It's only the handful of politically active who know that."

On that point, he's mistaken. While the establishment media in town are all but ignoring this race, the Hispanic media are feasting on it--the No. 1 theme being that you never, ever turn on your compadre.

Councilman Steve Salazar sums up the sentiment nicely. "I asked my dad about it," Salazar says, referring to his 70-year-old father, a U.S. resident who moved here from Mexico 53 years ago, "and his response was, 'May God forgive him.' It's unheard of. It just doesn't happen. There's a bond between the church and the Hispanic community, and Domingo is willing to break that bond."

Luis Delagarza, talk-show host for Hispanic radio station KXEB, puts it this way: "People call in to the radio stations and say, 'How can you expect me to give you my vote when you do this to your compadre?'"

Delagarza and two Hispanic newspaper owners to whom I talked last week said that Garcia has other problems besides loyalty.

For one thing, they said, Alonzo has built himself an impressive public-relations machine in his four years as a state representative. He sends the 10 Hispanic newspapers, two Hispanic TV stations, and five Hispanic radio stations a six-to-eight-page missive on legislative matters every week. And Alonzo never misses a community event--a lunch, a dinner, a reception, a neighborhood meeting--no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential.

"If I printed everything Alonzo sent me I'd have to change the name of the newspaper to the Alonzo News," says Marcos Suarez, owner and founder of El Hispano, circulation 35,000. "This is the type of political machine that is hard to beat, and I don't think Domingo realizes this. If you ask me, I don't know what the hell Alonzo has done for the community. I can't name one thing he's done. But he is everywhere, and that builds votes."

True, Alonzo stumbled by trying unsuccessfully to forge a truce between Hispanics and John Wiley Price last month. But Garcia's been completely invisible to the community since he went on the City Council four years ago, these people say, and that's worse. "Before the Council, Domingo was like Alonzo--not since," says Suarez, who recently published an editorial strongly criticizing Garcia's decision to run. "He lost track of what is happening in the barrio, and that's where the election will be decided."

Not only did he lose track, he flat-out ignored the barrio when he ran for mayor--focusing instead on Anglo neighborhoods where he wasn't well-known. Worse, he did the whole staunch conservative thing--an image that the Hispanic community knew was bogus. Says Suarez: "I said to him, 'How can you say you're a conservative? You were the guy in chains in front of City Hall two years before.' People remember these things."

Sergio Puerto, editor of Novedades News--the newspaper that published Garcia's Christmas-party picture--says that Garcia's bid for state rep', like his chameleon race for mayor, only confuses people. "I don't think it's very healthy for the community for Domingo to run, and I think at the end Domingo will find the voters are the ones who give you a position."

It really is a shame that Garcia is running. Of the three candidates, Garcia is probably the sharpest, and he's certainly the most polished and most articulate. (West Dallas lead-smelter activist Luis Sepulveda is the third man running but has little name ID in Oak Cliff; when he ran for mayor last year, he captured only 2 percent of the vote.) Garcia moves more effortlessly in circles outside Oak Cliff; he contributed greatly to the thin intellectual dialogue at City Hall.

But Garcia has always had an overly healthy ego and an insatiable desire for recognition and power--a bad combination. "He wants it now," Alonzo says. "He always wants it now."

At his press conference last week, Garcia ended his speech by talking about (gulp) personal values. "The values of your state rep' have to be the values of the community she or he represents," he said. "My values are very straightforward."

Yes, they are. That's why Domingo Garcia might find himself sitting out of politics for a while.

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