

The risks of campaigning while black in 'progressive' Maryland



Pediatrician David Myles, shown here with his family, is running for a city council seat in Rockville, Md. (Handout)

David E. Myles

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Do I have my nametag? Am I wearing a shirt with a front pocket in case I have to video record a police interaction? Is my shirt tucked in? Avoid any houses with a “no soliciting” sign. Am I standing too close to the door? Did I knock too loud? Be sure to be home before the street lights come on.

I am a tall black man running for a city council seat in Rockville, Md., and that is a small subset of my “campaign checklist” — the litany of questions I ask myself each time I go to knock on doors (canvass) to meet voters.

One might be surprised that I must ask these questions in a city that prides itself on being one of the 10 most diverse cities in the nation and whose mayor and city council passed an ordinance banning police officers from asking about a person’s immigration status.

Related:



<https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/nation-world/ct-tamir-rice-20150613-story.html - nt=standard-embed>

This past Saturday was a beautiful summer day with low humidity and plenty of sunshine — a perfect day to canvass. After finishing my shift as a pediatrician in the emergency department of Holy Cross Hospital, I was soon out canvassing. I didn't even bother to change out of my scrubs as I wanted to knock on as many doors as possible. For good measure, I wore my ID badge that had the word "DOCTOR" printed in a font larger than my name.

Despite having sufficiently completed my "checklist," someone called the police on me because I was canvassing. Fortunately, the responding officer saw my ID badge, read over my campaign leaflet bearing my image and let me go on canvassing. While this may seem like a routine encounter, I (and many African Americans) see it as a blessing. The officer could have used lethal force as I pulled the leaflet out of my back pocket to show him. Or worse, the officer could have harbored the same prejudices held by the person who called the police, which could have resulted in a bad outcome no matter what I did or did not do.

The readership of this paper should be familiar with the many incidents of black men, women, boys and girls who have had the police called on them for simply living — barbecuing in a public park, selling bottled water, sleeping in a dorm common area or cutting grass. While many of us are fortunate enough to walk away from these encounters, others are not (e.g. Tamir Rice, Botham Jean and others).

However, many people who are not African American do not understand how consequential calling the police can be.

I encourage anyone who is concerned about a black person who is going about an everyday activity to have a conversation with her or him in the same manner that the officer and I spoke. Last month a similar incident occurred when I was in a more affluent part of Rockville. A woman across the street came over to my parked car and asked who I was and what I was doing. I gave her a campaign leaflet and discussed my platform. She thanked me for my time, and I thanked her for listening. While I am unsure whether I convinced her to vote for me, I am grateful that the police were not called and that I was not stopped from simply campaigning.

In a perfect world I would provide medical care for children all day, every day. However, it has become increasingly clear to me that the challenges (e.g. substandard housing, unsafe drinking water, bias) facing my patients will not be solved during my one-on-one patient interactions. Addressing those challenges in a more efficient manner is why I am entering public service.

I knew that running for office would be life changing in many ways for my family and me. Never did I imagine that I would have to possibly put my life at risk to be a public servant. I only hope that I can continue having conversations with voters and that this starts a much-needed dialogue about when it is appropriate to call the police who are sworn to serve and protect us all — including black people.

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