

## Democrats have a star on the rise in South Jersey As McGreevey era ends, party eyes Assemblyman Greenwald

Monday, September 20, 2004

BY JOE DONOHUE Star-Ledger Staff

Most political leaders in New Jersey agree: Louis Greenwald will run for governor at some point.

After distinguishing himself as chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, the 37-year-old lawmaker from Camden County is seen as one of the brightest prospects for a Democratic Party now reeling from the political demise of Gov. James E. McGreevey.

"He's a natural," said Assembly Majority Leader Joseph Roberts (D-Camden), a longtime friend and mentor. "Many of us who are as impressed with him as I am see him as governor of the state one day, and I think he would do a marvelous job."

Assemblyman Kevin O'Toole, Republican chairman in Essex County, says Greenwald is to Democrats what Tom Kean Jr. is to state Republicans: the next generation of political leadership.

"At some point, he'll be governor," O'Toole said. "He's probably one of the most gifted and talented legislators on the Democratic side."

Right now, Democrats are looking to popular U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine as their favorite 2005 campaign choice to replace McGreevey, who has said he will resign Nov. 15, after announcing last month that he is gay and had an extramarital affair with a man.

A Corzine candidacy could keep New Jersey's top political prize out of reach for nearly a decade. But anything can happen in the topsy-turvy world of New Jersey politics, where the mightiest of politicians have quit due to scandal or political appointment.

Greenwald could get a chance if this November's elections yield victories for Senate Democrats or Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry and that tempts Corzine to stay in Washington. There is also talk of putting a constitutional amendment on the ballot next year that would create a lieutenant governor's post even if Corzine does run. Greenwald is often mentioned for that spot and concedes some interest.

While not overtly encouraging such speculation, Greenwald says he is flattered.

"It's not practical at this time," Greenwald said of a 2005 run for governor. "We don't know what the future holds. I just truly believe that if your heart is in the right place, you work hard at what you do, if your purpose is to make a difference in this business, good things will happen."

While downplaying his gubernatorial ambition, Greenwald has begun building the kind of network that would be critical to a campaign for governor. Last year, Greenwald's election fund loaned \$123,000 and made \$124,000 in donations to nearly two dozen Assembly and Senate candidates. He distributes a newsletter to up to 10,000 people.

O'Toole said Greenwald is viewed as a top prospect for several reasons. He is photogenic, a good speaker, and, like his late parents, an impeccable dresser. He would have the fund-raising clout of the powerful Camden County political machine behind him. Colleagues say he works hard and has a consensus-building style.

Greenwald was just 9 when his mother, the late Maria Barnaby Greenwald, answered a newspaper ad in early 1977 soliciting residents who were interested in good government. The housewife-turned-politician went on to become a beloved Cherry Hill mayor, the first female freeholder director in the state and a county surrogate.

Robert Uyehara, an assistant Camden County prosecutor and a childhood friend of Greenwald, said that as a kid, he was "one of those guys who did everything well, and you liked him at the same time."

However, Uyehara said, Greenwald's interest in politics didn't surface until his mother was killed in an auto accident in 1995 at the age of 54.

Greenwald said he ran for Assembly that year as a tribute to his mother, saying "his greatest compliment" was when people said they were "comforted to see the name on the ballot." He won an upset victory over incumbent Republican Lee Solomon.

As a new member of the Republican-run Assembly, Greenwald drew little notice. But after Democrats won control in 2001, he got his plum post on the powerful Assembly budget committee, which helps decide how billions in state dollars are spent each year.

He also pushed auto-insurance reform, incentives for filmmakers, and a state Amber Alert program for missing children. When his mother-in-law got cancer, he learned most area residents had to travel to Philadelphia for treatment and pressed hard for a South Jersey Cancer Institute.

John Tiene, a former insurance industry lobbyist, said Greenwald's willingness to delve into details of a complex auto-insurance reform package last year helped ensure its passage. "He knew the bill better than we did," he said. "He wasn't the kind of sponsor who put his name on it and walked away. He's a very substantive individual."

But Greenwald will face obstacles if he becomes a statewide candidate. Candidates from less-populated South Jersey traditionally have a tougher time in statewide races. Republicans have sharply criticized the record spending in this year's budget. And he has exhibited a brashness that rubs some colleagues the wrong way.

"He is a hard-working, dedicated legislator who is overcoming some early immaturity," said Sen. Joseph Doria (D-Hudson), who clashed with Greenwald and other South Jersey lawmakers when he was Assembly minority leader.

Greenwald has strong ties to South Jersey Democratic political boss George Norcross, who helped bankroll his campaigns and is one of his chief political mentors. Norcross can raise gobs of cash, but Greenwald runs the risk of being portrayed by opponents as a political puppet.

"I would like Lou Greenwald to open up a little more and take the machine on because it is very cor-

rupt," said Allene Ammond, a former state senator who has been one of Norcross' biggest critics.

Greenwald doesn't apologize for his close ties to Norcross, saying, "I am not ashamed of my friends in this party." He says while Norcross may be a political adviser, he follows his own counsel when it comes to government policy.

Political opponents may also hit Greenwald on the "pay to play" issue because he is corporate counsel at engineering firm Remington and Vernick, which regularly makes big campaign donations to try to gain and keep public contracts.

Greenwald said he ensures all donations are legal, but does not tell the firm's partners how they should dole them out.

"They've been doing work long before I was alive. They didn't need Lou Greenwald to get work," he said.