

OUT OF THE CLOSET & INTO THE CHURCH



Chuck Allen always kept his sexuality a secret during his political career. Then came love. Then came wedding bells. Now he wants to declare his homosexuality—and campaign for the black community to challenge its homophobic ministers.

By Paul Bass

Chuck Allen has survived some of Connecticut's deadliest urban politics. He lived through dirty campaigns, double-crosses, scandals, personal attacks. He was known as the politician with nine lives.

Over the last seven months, he has tested that proposition: He survived nine cancer surgeries. Four of the operations have been on his spine.

"I have more titanium in my back now than the average nuclear bomb," Allen remarks. "I have four screws in my back."

But that's not what Allen wants to talk about as he sits on his bed at a Harlem convalescent home. He wants to talk about the declaration he recently made to his family and friends: That he's gay. And that he's planning to tie the knot, in a black church, in a ceremony conducted by Episcopal priests.

Allen was already 50 by the time he came out. Before that he kept his private life a secret even from those closest to him. Falling in love with art dealer Tod Roulette, then planning a commitment ceremony, forced his hand.

Allen wants to make the declaration publicly in order to promote his next campaign. This one differs from the campaigns he ran for state senator and New Haven alderman, or the campaigns he helped other office-seekers run statewide. This campaign aims to convince other black gays to come out, too, and challenge the black church to rethink its vehement opposition to gay rights.

The black church has stood on the forefront of civil rights battles in America, until now. As the same-sex marriage issue explodes in Connecticut, fundamentalist black ministers are marching on the other side. They've put up some of the most visible and effective opposition to proposals to recognize gay and lesbian couples.

"Gays in church—everybody knows we're there," Allen says. "But nobody wants to talk about it, to acknowledge it. That's why it's so important for me to speak out. Maybe it will make it easier for other people to speak."

SHHHHHH

Allen was one of those silent gays. "Church has always been part of my life," he says. The son of factory workers, he grew up attending the former All Saints' Chapel in the Hill neighborhood, then, when his family moved to the working-class black Newhallville neighborhood, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. He continued going there as an adult and serving on committees.

The Episcopal Church is more liberal than many others in the black community. But it still wasn't a place to discuss his growing realization in his early teens that "I was different"—that, as he came to understand in his later teens, he was gay.

He never considered himself "in the closet." He just didn't bring the matter up. Neither did family and friends. Mom stopped asking about when the grandchildren were coming.

Opponents did whisper about him. And in politics, he made plenty of opponents.

Allen was a ward heeler and then, for 12 years, a city alderman. He started out as a student of the Democratic machine, learning how it stole votes, manipulated allies, punished opponents. That knowledge—combined with his training as an accountant, his strategic brilliance, his prep school polish and rhetorical flair—made Allen dangerous when he broke with the machine. Even after losing political battles, he kept re-emerging. After losing his aldermanic seat, he won a term in the state Senate from 1990-92. He lobbied at the state Capitol. He served as a mayoral aide.

In one particularly bitter state Senate campaign, an anonymous flyer appeared in black wards. It cited Allen's long service with the Boy Scouts. It suggested the community "knows about" Allen and wouldn't want him near children.

The incident "felt bad," he recalls. "It caused me to face up to the fact that I had to change my relationship to the Boy Scouts of America," which at the same time was on a national offensive against openly