

Maryland Politics

As Rushern Baker leads Pr. George's, his wife's memory fades

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By Miranda S. Spivack

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An invitation to a dinner for Howard University, his beloved alma mater, normally would have been the perfect evening for Prince George's County Executive Rushern L. Baker III and his wife, Christa Beverly, also an alum.

But looking forward to the event in March, Baker was anxious. What if Beverly became confused and disoriented? What if she forgot where she was?

Baker would accept the invitation, he told the university, but only if he could also bring along someone familiar to his wife, who could guide her through the evening and chat with her — even if the conversation did not make sense.

Few knew then the private struggle Baker and his family had been living with for two years, ever since Beverly, a 52-year-old civil rights lawyer and well-known presence in Prince George's, received a diagnosis of early onset dementia.

On that night, all went smoothly. "I spoke, I sat down," said Baker (D). "It worked well."

But as Beverly's condition has deteriorated over the past few months, Baker has had to balance the high-profile demands of running a county of nearly 900,000 people with being the husband of a woman who is becoming harder to recognize.

Baker, 53, said that as the severity of his wife's illness has become obvious to people outside their close circle of friends, he felt compelled to speak openly about it.

"I had to make a public statement," he said at a restaurant near his Cheverly home for his first published interview about his wife's illness. "I don't want people thinking that she doesn't like them anymore. I don't want anything to be misinterpreted."

By day, he manages a \$2.7 billion budget in a county trying to emerge from the taint of corruption left by his predecessor, Jack B. Johnson (D). He runs a county that had nearly 100 homicides last year. Many of his

constituents lack health insurance. The county schools superintendent is decamping for Philadelphia. And Baker is in the middle of a political fight to bring a proposed casino to National Harbor.

In the evenings, Baker tries to leave all that behind. He's learning to make dinner. Salmon and crab cakes just the way she likes them. The Baker children do the grocery shopping. Dad makes up the list, something he rarely did before. He balances the checkbook, too.

But home can be a strange place.

"When I go home, I don't know what I am getting into," he said.

Will his wife be happy? Angry? Morose?

"It is hit or miss."

He tries to remain his normal, optimistic self and still goes through the routine of describing his day to her.

"Aww, that's nice," says the woman known as Sis. "I like you. You are the best."

Recently, Beverly has been having trouble sleeping. To deal with that, the couple will get in their car and tour the county, looking at public-works projects, assessing neighborhoods, just driving. Eventually, Beverly is tired enough to sleep.

"I have looked at ways to deal with it, short of medicine," Baker said. "Exercise, driving around, playing calming music. Most nights she is able to sleep. It is only rarely that I can't figure out a way to deal with it."

Biggest supporter

The news came in a phone call a few minutes before Baker took the stage at Prince George's Community College in a 2010 debate in the county executive's race.

His wife's mysterious condition finally had been diagnosed. The outlook was not good.

As the debate got underway, Baker was verbally pummeled by his four opponents and did little to defend himself. Top aides huddled afterward to discuss whether he should quit. Baker also wondered if he should give up his eight-year quest.

Beverly, who was then still fully cognizant of the world around her, insisted that he stay in the race.

"You are going to win," she told him. "I am going to see you put your hand on the Bible as county executive." A few months later, Baker was sworn in.

For the first year and a half of Baker's term, daughter Quinci, then in high school, was the first home in the evening, allowing her father to stay late at work as he built his new administration.

About six months ago, Beverly's condition began to worsen, and her public absences became more noticeable. Constituents who asked for her when they couldn't get Baker for an event were puzzled, sometimes even offended, when the request was turned down. When she does go out in public, she sometimes will wear clothes that aren't quite right: jeans at church, a raincoat on a hot summer day.

Baker, too, has become somewhat less visible. His staff has pitched in to speak in his place when he decides that he must be home at night. He has cut back on weekend speaking engagements. He recently took a week off to look for a new caregiver. Sometimes he goes home for lunch.

So far, he, his friends and colleagues say he is able to juggle his public duties and the private care of his wife of 26 years. Baker, a former member of the Maryland House of Delegates who ran twice for county executive before finally winning, said he is planning to run again for executive in 2014.

"Running again is based on the job itself," he said. "Come 2014, I will be working and I will be taking care of my wife. It would be great to be able to do that in this job that I love."

Later, he said: "My intention is to run again. She would want that. It is what we worked toward as a family. And I am 100 percent sure this is what she wants me to do."

But nothing is as certain as it once was.

Confusion sets in

The disease crept up slowly. When Beverly's behavior began to change in 2008, Baker and the children thought she was depressed. The normally blunt-talking wife and mother was oddly subdued. For nearly two years, she passed every neurological test she was given.

"I just figured she had not had a job for a while and she wanted to get back into the work force," said [Rushern Baker IV](#), 24, an artist, now home to help care for his mother.

Aja Baker, 20, a rising senior at St. Mary's College in Southern Maryland, tried to get her mother to do more puzzles to boost her memory.

"My mom was always on top of every little thing," Aja said. "She knew what everyone was doing all the time. You couldn't get anything past her."

But Beverly did not return to normal. She got lost driving back home to Cheverly after a regular visit to her parents in Richmond. She became confused about the route to the library. She forgot to pay bills.

Baker and daughter [Quinci](#), now 17, took on most of Beverly's care. "I started feeling maternal over her," Quinci said. "We got very close, and it stopped being a mother-daughter relationship. We switched roles, and I became my mother's mother."

Baker, meanwhile, is losing his beloved best friend and closest political adviser. But he is figuring out how to cope. Six months ago, he hired the daytime caregiver, and he has lined up a second person to help in the evenings if he can't get home.

“I try to remind the kids and try to remind myself we are extremely blessed,” he said. “We have great support from family and friends. It is kind of hard to feel sorry for ourselves.”

But Baker knows that life is not going to get any easier. Recently, he gathered his children to explain what was coming.

“Here's where Mommy is,” he said. “It is going to be different. Things are going to change, and they are going to change a lot more rapidly than we expected.”

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