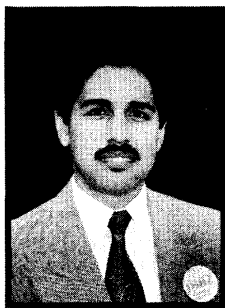


WITH DEL TORO GONE,  
EAST HARLEM VOTERS  
HAVE A REAL CHOICE

## Battle for El Barrio

BY ED MORALES

It's a sunny Saturday afternoon in East Harlem and TV actor Malik Yoba is working the crowd at a plaza in front of La Hermosa Day Care Center on 109th Street. "¿Quiere bailar conmigo? ¡No hay problema, mujer!" Yoba cajoles a Latina in the crowd, asking her to dance. The theme of black-Latino unity is flying high at this block party, and ready to take advantage of all the good vibes is the politician formerly known as Prince (see "Prince Beats Frog," *Village Voice*, March 28, 1995) Francisco Diaz Jr., whom Yoba introduces by bellowing, "¡Bienvenidos a Sábado Gigante!" and displaying his knowledge of the most popular show on



Diaz Jr.: an aw-shucks, church-devoted homeboy

Spanish-language television.

Diaz returns Yoba's enthusiasm triumphantly: "We should be proud to know that Malik is willing to come back to our community and say, *Presente*, I'm present. I'm giving back to my community."

In the shadow of one of Charles Rangel's district offices, Diaz—who last year won a dazzling campaign that wrested a state assembly seat from the heinous Del Toro clan—was delivering



Denzel: a fast-talking wisecracker with a heart—and a plan

the message of grassroots unity and Hope for a Democratic Future. I'd been following Diaz from his leafleting post in front of the Met Food at 105th and Third Avenue, then across 106th Street where he stopped to talk to the seniors in front of the projects on Second Avenue, and witnessed his seemingly universal approval from young and old, who smiled and waved, encouraging him in this, his third campaign.

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REFORMER GOES UP AGAINST THE  
MACHINE IN 17TH DISTRICT RACE

## Alvarez v. Santiago

BY ANNETTE  
FUENTES

Two weeks before the Democratic primary, two-term State Senator Nellie Santiago was reportedly in sunny Spain while challenger Nilka Alvarez was home in Bushwick, pasting up posters and rallying voters in the 17th district.

For those who know Santiago, one of the state's most elusive and tainted elected officials, it's no surprise. Her appearances on the streets of the north Brooklyn district are as rare as Halley's comet. The only real question in this race is why anyone should cast a ballot for the incumbent, who has been dogged by charges of lying and cor-

ruption since she was first elected.

Nellie Santiago came into office in 1993, just days after she was forced to resign as administrator of the Brooklyn Manor nursing home, owned by her husband, millionaire businessman Benito Fernandez. State regulators said Santiago ran the home so badly residents were in jeopardy, citing one instance in which a resident choked to death on food after staffers "inappropriately" applied first aid. The inspectors' report also alleged that Santiago falsified records and lied about attending state-required training. Fernandez's license to operate the Manor wasn't renewed in 1993, but he has managed to hang on pending legal appeal.

Santiago also has a persistent resi-

dency problem. Since her first campaign, she has claimed her legal address as 2689 Pitkin Avenue, a shabby building in East New York. But it's been reported for the last three years that she actually lives in a posh Upper East Side apartment, far from the gritty streets of her constituents. Nevertheless, Santiago's petitions for this year's race still list the Pitkin Avenue address.

To top off the litany of scandals, Santiago's campaign manager this go-round is Howard Lieberman, a former employee of Brooklyn Manor who was accused by the state's Department of Social Services with raping a female patient and stealing \$45,000 from another patient in 1993. The state ordered Lieberman's dismissal.

Her opponent in the 17th senate race is 36-year-old Nilka Alvarez, a longtime community activist who most recently worked for the Commission on the Public Health System, battling privatization of public hospitals. As

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PERENNIAL CANDIDATE JOHN O'HARA  
TO CHALLENGE FELIX ORTIZ

## The Last Hurrah?

BY JAMES  
BRADLEY

It's a cloudy summer morning, and state assemblyman Felix Ortiz is distributing campaign literature in front of a subway station at Smith and Ninth streets in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. "Good morning, my friend!" he says to grumpy subway riders, most of whom barely make eye contact as they take his fliers. Ortiz doesn't hide his enthusiasm for campaigning. "I love this," he beams. "It's very exciting."

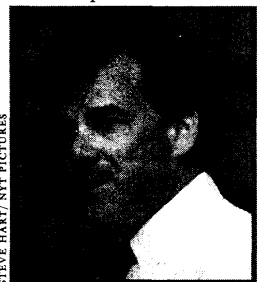
Unlike the slick political display at last week's Democratic Convention, Felix Ortiz is something of a throwback when it comes to his assembly race in Brooklyn, campaigning in a simple, old-fashioned way. He has been spending the past few weeks shaking hands and saying hello at churches, senior centers, and subway stations.

The pudgy-faced, 36-year-old rookie assemblyman is facing a tough challenge in next week's Democratic primary. His opponent is the ubiquitous John Kennedy O'Hara. If that name sounds familiar, it's for good reason. He has run for office nine times, an even more astounding figure considering he's only 36 years old. He's run for the Assembly, City Council, and the local school board, and has been knocked off the ballot repeatedly for petition fraud as recently as 1994. This time, he boasts, his losing streak will end. "I failed the bar exam six times before I finally passed," says O'Hara in his thick Brooklyn accent.

The contested seat is the 51st Assembly District, which consists mostly of heavily Latino Sunset Park but also includes Red Hook and parts of Park Slope. A diverse, working-class neighborhood, Sun-

set Park has pockets of gentrified brownstone blocks, streets with single-family homes and apartment buildings, a significant manufacturing base along the waterfront, and several bustling commercial strips. But it is also a neighborhood troubled by economic uncertainty, drug dealing, and gang violence.

On the stump, Ortiz takes a break from campaigning to talk about his proudest achievement in office thus far—co-authoring a bill to crack down on sweatshops, which are prevalent in his district.



John Kennedy O'Hara's nine lives.

Ortiz even posed as a sweatshop worker to see what it was like. He lasted for about three hours.

But the important issues facing this beleaguered district are obscured by the presence of John O'Hara, the bane of Brooklyn's reform movement. "He's a psychopath," says Jim Brennan, the Park Slope assemblyman who has spent a good part of the past 10 years or so fighting O'Hara, in the courts and at the ballot, usually successfully. Critics contend that O'Hara has been targeting the white vote in his challenge to Ortiz. Susan Maltoff, a community organizer running for local district leader, who is white, says she has

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Now that Rudy Giuliani has bounced the mob out of the San Gennaro bacchanal, city workers this week installed light stands along Mulberry Street. Previously, that was the job of Arnold Migliaccio, who last year billed the feast more than \$150,000 for his work. Migliaccio was used to being paid cash for his electrical supplies; now, he is apparently out of power.



ANDREW GOLDBERG

# Barrett

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

missioner and where county leaders exercise virtually unencumbered influence over decisions in their own boroughs, cost Genovesi an early opportunity to knock Goldstein off the ballot. State Supreme Court Judge Bill Garry, the former party secretary, also ruled against a Genovesi challenge to Goldstein. But the Appellate Division reversed Garry, and Goldstein, who has not reported a single contribution to her campaign (her husband loaned it \$7000), may yet wind up off the ballot.

While Goldstein's petitions are now going through a signature-by-signature review, Genovesi has written Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau seeking a criminal probe of the Goldstein candidacy. A Genovesi press release charges that Goldstein "permitted herself to be used" by Feinberg, "with the understanding that in the future, the Democratic County Organization will support Goldstein for the Democratic nomination for justice of the supreme court." Norman controls the supreme court selection process.

A second candidate, Desmond Green, an unknown black attorney, is also still embroiled in court challenges. Quietly encouraged, but not materially aided by Genovesi forces, Green was initially knocked off the ballot by Garry, who was again reversed by the Appellate Division. Widely seen as damaging to Feinberg, whose candidacy depends on support in black districts where Norman has methodically rounded up endorsements, Green's petitions have recently been invalidated by a second Brooklyn judge, and he is appealing the highly technical ruling. Ironically, the attorney handling the Feinberg-connected challenge to Green on the second go-around was none other than the law partner of Bill Garry Jr., the son of the judge.

Howard Lasher, a City Councilman who is also seeking the post, is not regarded as a serious contender, but both sides agree he will probably take votes away from Gold. In a primary where as few as 15 per cent of the borough's Democrats are expected to vote, Lasher's share in Jewish districts may prove to be a decisive margin.

Feinberg, who has been a civil or supreme court judge for 14 years and a supervising judge for six of those years, is far more experienced than Gold, who was first elected to the civil court in 1993. Gold has held a variety of appointive administrative law judge posts over the years, including one at the Department of Motor Vehicles, but a *New York Post* story indicated that she was "the subject of numerous complaints" and was "forced out" of a position as a hearing examiner in Brooklyn Family Court. On the other hand, a *Daily News* story early this year detailed how Feinberg collected tens of thousands of dollars in campaign cash from lawyers whose case scheduling he controlled.

Norman has in recent years been frequently named in news stories as a subject of city, state, and federal probes involving his prior association with a law firm that obtained no-bid city contracts. State law bars county leaders from noncompetitive municipal work. But nothing has ever come of any of

these investigations—which focused on Kings County Hospital contracts—and Norman once charged they were Giuliani-instigated.

In addition to the county leader and mayoral implications of the surrogate's race, Assembly Speaker Shelly Silver has aligned himself with Norman and is aiding the Feinberg candidacy even though he is a Manhattan official who has never before been involved in a Brooklyn primary. Genovesi opposed Silver for speaker in 1994. Assemblyman Dov Hikind and City Councilman Noah Dear—the two most powerful Orthodox elected officials and putative rivals for a congressional seat once redistricting is completed—are on opposite sides of the bloodbath. Hikind is actively pushing Feinberg, while Dear has endorsed Gold but done little to aid her candidacy.

The race is such a hot potato that other prominent borough pols like Congressman Chuck Schumer, a long-time Genovesi ally who is expected to run for governor in 1998, have remained neutral, ostensibly concerned about alienating the Norman-led party organization. Such longtime fixtures of borough politics as Assemblymembers Rhoda Jacobs, Frank Barbaro, and Al Vann may well be running for the last time, with Jacobs facing a tough one-on-one primary against a black opponent in an overwhelmingly black district, Barbaro preparing to resign and accept a supreme court nomination, and Vann reportedly seeking appointment to a top surrogate position should Feinberg be elected.

Research: BRET BEGUN

## Morales

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

The 37-year-old pol projected a feeling that at last East Harlem has a benevolent, homegrown leader—who with his family had taken an abandoned building and renovated it with their own sweat—a gentle man of the people, heading for certain reelection, starting with the primary on September 10. Certain, perhaps, if it weren't for a devil's advocate, a trickster, a single guy, an usurper from Washington Heights, Nelson Denis, a fast-talking hyperactive wisecracker with a heart.

Forget what you've read in *The New York Times*. ("[I]n many ways, the two candidates are strikingly similar." Yeah, right, we all look alike.) Frankie and Nelson couldn't be more opposite.

On the surface, at least, one's an aw-shucks, church-devoted, Julia Richmond High School-Lehman College homeboy, and the other's a hard-assed left-wing Ivy League shark. Sources who would rather not be quoted say this race is too close to call, and judging from time logged north of 96th (the district runs north to 129th Street from Fifth Avenue to the East River, with a chunk on the West Side between 100th and 109th, Amsterdam and the park), there's an equal amount of street enthusiasm for both candidates. Denis, who is making his fourth pass at an assembly seat from the back of a legendary blue bus, and who wields campaign posters, Xeroxes, and faxes like a Norse god would thunderbolts, seems to be winning the visibility war. But Di

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

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Wed., Sept. 11, 8 P.M. at the Lesbian & Gay Community Services Center, 208 W. 13th St.

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Tuesday, September 10, 7 P.M.  
GMHC, 129 West 20th Street, Third Floor

This fall, GMHC offers ten-week groups for HIV-positive, HIV-negative, and untested gay men who use drugs/alcohol.

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For more info and to register, call 337-3343

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Wed., Sept. 18, 8 P.M. at the Lesbian & Gay Community Services Center, 208 W. 13th St.

A workshop for HIV-negative gay men to explore sex, risk-taking and staying negative.

### Sex & the HIV-Negative Gay Man

Mon., Sept. 23, 8 P.M. at the Lesbian & Gay Community Services Center, 208 W. 13th St.

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Monthly discussion group with topics of interest to gay and bi men of color.

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## Morales

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

az has all-important incumbency on his side, as well as the support of "almost every single elected official," including Ruth Messinger, Adam Clayton Powell IV, Rangel, former mayor Dinkins, Bronx potentate Roberto Ramirez, and behind-the-scenes operatives like 1199 president Dennis Rivera and former deputy mayor Bill Lynch.

Support from a group of such entrenched pols leaves Diaz open to criticism that a machine is at the root of his power. While Diaz's victory was interpreted as a disruption of the Del Toro corruption cycle, a damaging July article by the *Daily News's* Jim Dwyer has raised questions about just how much of a reformer Diaz is. A \$71,000 loan from union 1199 intended for Diaz's first City Council campaign in 1993 was never paid back; the Campaign Finance Board ruled it an illegal campaign contribution, and it cost Diaz matching funds. Welfare payments were being sent to an apartment, which voter registration records say is Diaz's. Diaz says the payment was intended for his uncle, who lives in the same sweat-equity renovated building on East 102nd Street. He says he had simply moved from the apartment his uncle now occupies and did not amend his voter registration form. And, four months after his 1995 special election, Diaz endorsed Pilar Santiago, a former Del Toro campaign treasurer, for district leader.

Diaz and his supporters have claimed that Denis, a former prize-winning editorial writer for *El Diario-La Prensa*, planted the story. "He's using the press because of his friendships with some reporters," said Diaz, dismissing the story. "Every politician that runs for offices has a debt that they pay off over 20 years of their course in public office. I have done nothing wrong. I've not been indicted." As far as being supported by a political machine, Diaz comments, "I understand the reality of being an elected official. If you don't have alliances with other elected officials, your ability to influence change is minimized."

While Denis says suggestions that he planted the story border on "slander," it's also possible that it was the work of the East Harlem Partnership for Change, an anti-Del Toro community group. Just two weeks before the Diaz article, Dwyer wrote a column highlighting the Partnership's lambasting Charles Rangel (a supporter of both Diaz and, formerly, Del Toro) for his inability to attract jobs to the neighborhood. The Partnership's critique brings up a significant difference between Denis and Diaz: Diaz, who has claimed that Denis doesn't have a "vision," found it hard to get off the topic of residential and commercial real estate, focusing on claiming vacant land and buildings for construction and renovation, redeveloping the neighborhood with townhouses like the ones on 110th between Second and Third, encouraging the Pathmark project and the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center.

While improving housing and attracting business to East Harlem are laudable goals, Diaz's "vision" doesn't address the need for jobs except to mention the influx of "new private in-

vestment, like Dunkin' Donuts and Kentucky Fried Chicken." Denis, on the other hand, uses his skills as a lawyer, talking about creating "an outfit like America Works," which offers meaningful job training to welfare recipients.

Denis's pitch is peppered with references to the Community Redevelopment Act and holds banks responsible for investing in the community. "Of the seven banks in East Harlem, none are lending what they should," said Denis. "The only way to pressure them is during merger testimony so that bank regulators are less likely to approve the deals. On the other hand, my opponent took a \$500 contribution from Fleet Bank," which community groups have called a red-liner.

Denis also articulated strong progressive positions on alternatives to prison building and misused educational funds. His use of the Latin Kings and NETAS street gangs was an admirable but risky attempt at reaching youth—a move he was forced to drop for political expediency. Of the troubled youth of East Harlem, Diaz says things like, "Many of my friends have died of AIDS, are addicted to drugs, homeless. If we don't have an adequate health system in place, our people will die one by one."

Denis, of course, has some skeletons in his closet, though he has credible explanations. His détente with the New Alliance Party several years happened when "I asked them to simply not run anyone against me, but there was no quid pro quo." And Denis denies accusations that he was terminated from the Harlem Community Development Corporation because he was campaigning during office hours; instead, a combination of reorganization efforts and pressure from Diaz prompted his departure. "Frank Diaz is on the board and he was pressing to have me fired," said Denis. "It was the day after the Dwyer article when I was let go."

Denis is accused of carpetbagging, but he's still a bona fide Latino Manhattanite. His says his lack of support among elected officials is set off by the support of district leaders like Carmen Quinones (who defeated Pilar Santiago) and Cedric McClester, as well as, he hopes (yikes!) State Senator Olga Mendez. The fact that he's an outsider might be part of what emboldens him to take on the machine. Despite his Ivy League pedigree, his anomalous blue eyes, and his manic, intellectual demeanor that would supposedly separate him from the "people," Denis speaks flawless Spanish and charms the old ladies as well as any pol.

At a subway stop at 103rd and Central Park West, he captures a matron for a photo op, smooches her, saying "¿Tú eres más linda que yo?" ("You're much cuter than me"), then leaps back to his policy-wonk patter with me, saying, "Welfare is only 1 per cent of the federal budget. Less than half of that goes to blacks and Latinos. There's no welfare queen out there."

A three-time assembly loser who refuses to pack it in, Denis looks more and more like he's a dark horse whose time has come.

*Diaz and Denis will debate September 5 at The Vito Marcantonio School, 101 Street and First Avenue, 6 p.m.*

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