

Election '84: The BARBER POLL

By Carl Kovac

The establishment with the redwood-shake facade at 3227 Superior Ave. is your basic no-frills neighborhood barbershop — a full range of tonsorial services, four chairs, little or no waiting and bubble gum for the kids.

But the Brothers 4 barbershop, in the heart of one of the city's blue-collar ethnic neighborhoods, is where a lot of City Hall types — including Mayor Voinovich on occasion — judges, lawyers, businessmen, newspeople, cops, federal agents and servicemen come to get trimmed or, with crew cuts still in vogue in some professions, shorn.

"We get everybody, from all over the city," says John Stefanec, who owns the shop and mans the chairs with brothers Joe, Steve and Frank. "There's a guy who comes in here, he's a multi-millionaire. We get priests and bums. The police chief gets his hair cut here. Maybe only 2% of our customers come from the neighborhood."

It's also the place where, in 1980, a Washington Post reporter went to find what was really happening in a city that was trying to recover from default.

Politics is spoken here. And based on what they hear over the snick of scissors and the buzz of electric clippers, the Brothers Stefanec predict elections. Their customers listen.

"Forget about Gallup and Harris," the brothers say, setting up a shameless pun. "We're the Barber Poll."

Says Norman Krumholz, city planning director under mayors Stokes, Perk and Kucinich and a regular at the shop since the brothers opened in 1969: "Those guys are tremendously well-informed. They should conduct seminars for local politicians — give them advice."

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The Stefanecs, left to right: Steve, Joe, Tamara, John and Frank.

PHOTO BY LYNNE SLACKY

They do.

Frank Stefanec recalls that Voinovich, in for a haircut early in his first term, asked if they thought his proposed 1/2-of-1-percent tax levy had a chance of passing. "We told him it would, but not to try it again."

Krumholz, now director of the Center for Neighborhood Development at CSU's College for Urban Development, remembers that passage of the levy "looked like a touch-and-go situation. The voters had turned down several previous levies. The taste of default was still in their mouths. They (the Stefanec brothers) felt the levy would pass as a testimony to Voinovich's popularity." It did — for whatever reason.

"So far, we're batting a thousand," boasts Joe Stefanec. "We've been right on every local and national election. On the Kucinich recall, we gauged from talking and listening to people who come in here that he would return to his job. When Carter ran, we said he'd get elected. It was close. It seemed like the public was split on that one."

Brother Steve predicts the Reagan-Mondale contest will be tight, "a lot closer than people think."

Joe disagrees. "That's his opinion. It's my opinion that the election would have been a lot closer if Mondale would have chosen Gary Hart as vice president instead of a woman. Why in the world would Mondale choose a woman running mate? He would have been farther ahead if he

had picked Hart. Hart is more popular throughout the states than Ferraro. It was a grave mistake for him to go with a woman at this time. Mondale thought he would capture 99.9% of the female vote. He was wrong. A lot of women don't like Ferraro. His barber gave him bad advice."

This barbershop quartet is not always in harmony; Steve notes that two of the brothers are Democrats, two Republicans.

"Why don't you speak for yourself, man?" says Joe. "I'm as liberal as can be." This statement brings a sure-you-are roll of the eyes from his brothers.

John's 21-year-old daughter, Tamara, who cuts hair at the shop three times a week, declined to reveal her political persuasion. "She'll probably vote for Ferraro," her father suggests.

"I'm not a women's libber," she retorts. "I'd rather be home baking cookies."

Frank predicts that Mario M. Cuomo, "the governor of New York who gave that speech, that man will become president if he runs after Reagan's out of office."

Here are the Stefanecs' selected picks in Tuesday's elections:

"Let's face it, you've got to go with Reagan," says John. "People will be voting on personality."

In local and state races, they give the edge to Democrats: They see incumbent Edward F. Feighan defeating Matthew J. Hatchadorian for

Barber Polls

Four Stefanec
brothers make
predictions

By CARL KOVAC.....14



the 19th District congressional seat and Louis Stokes keeping his job in the 21st District; Ronald M. Mottl taking Gary C. Suhadolnik in the race for state senator in the 24th District; State Rep. Patrick A. Sweeney retaining his seat in the 9th District and Ronald J. Suster defeating Culver F. Eyman III in the 19th.

In the contest for two county commissioner seats, the Brothers Stefanec see a tossup — Vincent Campanella, Benny Bonnano and Virgil E. Brown in a tight race, with Mary O. Boyle fourth.

Gerald T. McFaul will stay as Cuyahoga County sheriff, defeating former sheriff Ralph E. Kreiger, and Francis E. Gaul will be elected treasurer over Richard Ward Sander. Ronald A. Stackhouse should edge Thomas J. Neff for county engineer.

There it is, on the record. Match their choices against Wednesday morning's results.

Or maybe you scoff. Four barbers predicting elections, you sneer, here's a quarter, go call someone who cares.

Sure they have a good time, but they take their politics seriously. They come from a place and a time where being able to vote for the candidates

of one's choice is something people only hear about.

Meet the Stefanecs.

John, 47, married, one daughter, the aforementioned Tamara. He and his father fled from their hometown in Yugoslavia near the Hungarian border to Austria in 1952. After spending almost four years in a refugee camp, they were brought to the United States under the aegis of a Cleveland church group. In 1961, they were able to bring Joe, now 37, Steve, 36 and Frank, 34, to this country.

John, Joe and Frank all served in the U.S. Army, with Frank picking up a Purple Heart in Vietnam. "I stayed home making new citizens," Steve quips.

Among them they have eight children. "We all married foreigners," jokes Frank. "John's wife is from Cleveland, Steve's is from Michigan, Joe's is from West Virginia and I married a girl from Canada. I went up there fishing one time and caught her. I ended up being the bait."

They haven't forgotten their heritage. They're able to converse with customers in Croatian, Slovenian, Hungarian "and hillbilly," says Steve.

But their shop reflects a love of their adopted

country. Framed along the walls are Frank's Purple Heart citation, a stylized picture of President John F. Kennedy, and several plaques and certificates of appreciation from the U.S. Marine Corps Recruiting Service.

"We get lots of Marine, Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard recruiters and reservists in here," Steve explains. "We give all active and reserve servicemen discounts on haircuts."

A photo of Maj. Gen. George McMonagle, former commanding general of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, S.C., also adorns a wall, inscribed: "To the Stefanec family. My sincere appreciation for the friendship you have extended to the United States Marines. My best regards always."

"He came in and we cut his hair for free," John recalls. "He sent us that picture and invited us and our families to go down and tour Parris Island as his guests."

"This country has been good to us," Joe says. "See that tree out there?" He points to a locust, banded by alternate red and white stripes on the tree lawn in front of the shop. "That's our barber pole. Someone stole our real one. As that tree has grown, so have we."

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