

[← Back \(/search?](#)

pub%5B0%5D=MLCP&text=No%20Headline%20Available&date_from=2003&date_to=2003&content_added=&pub%255B0%255D=MLCP&page=3)

No Headline Available

July 23, 2003 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 3031

Virg Bernero says Tony Benavides reminds him of his father. He remembers the time the two men met – Benavides, a Mexican immigrant, and Bernero’s dad, an Italian immigrant of about the same age – in his backyard during a fund-raiser for his race for the state House of Representatives in 2000.

“My father and Tony really hit it off,” Bernero recalls. “That’s why for me there’s no personal animosity.”

But today, Bernero is running for mayor of Lansing against Benavides. It would be easy to characterize Bernero as the young (39) insurgent challenging the Establishment figure, since Benavides, with more than 20 years’ on City Council, is a staple of local politics. But pitting generations against each other, in an age-old story of the changing of the guard, would be a simplified assessment.

For in some ways Benavides could be characterized as more of an outsider than Bernero. Benavides still bears the accent he brought with him from Mexico as a teen-ager, when his parents emigrated to Lansing as migrant farm

workers. And it is Benavides who carries on his shoulders the dreams of an immigrant group still working for social, economic and political acceptance.

Bernero, on the other hand, is a second-generation member of an ethnic group that has been well integrated into American society. A former county commissioner, his election as a state representative and then last year as a state senator demonstrate his acceptance on a larger political stage than Benavides, who represented Lansing's 3rd Ward for two decades, until his ascension to the mayor's office in January.

By virtue of being Council president, Benavides, 66, became mayor when David Hollister stepped down to accept a cabinet position in Gov. Jennifer Granholm's administration. Bernero is his most serious challenger in the Aug. 5 primary election, in which voters decide which two candidates will face each other in the November general election. The winner this fall will complete the remaining two years of Hollister's term starting in January. Other candidates in the primary election are Melissa Sue Robinson, a maintenance administrator for SBC Communications, state retirees Leon Black and Mary Ann Prince, and a drywall finisher, Gerald Rowley.

PROUD OF THEIR HERITAGE

Both men speak fondly of their heritage. Bernero proudly admits that his Italian background is part of his identity. His father, Julio, emigrated from the northern Italian town of Tomasi, and the family of his mother, Virginia, came to Michigan from the southern Italian city of Cosenza. Bernero recalls large family gatherings for pasta after church. Growing up in Pontiac as the youngest of five, he says Sunday afternoons were reserved for spending time with the family visiting relatives and gathering around the kitchen table. "It wasn't about sitting in front of the TV, it was about conversation."

The Michigan senator said that as a child he always wanted to join his father as he went to deliver the vegetables to his grandfather's market in his big red truck at 3:30 each morning. But Bernero was then too small to lift the heavy baskets, and "Bernero Produce" shut down in the early 1970s, after his father was hit by a drunk driver, which injured his back. Julio Bernero then took a job at General Motors.

Bernero's older sister, Vicky, lives in Pinckney, and works as a dietitian at the University of Michigan. His second sister, Tina, is an X-ray technician in Clarkston. Tragically, his older brother, Victor, died of AIDS in 1990, the day Bernero was first elected Ingham County commissioner. Victor's twin brother Vince, who lives in Oakland County, suffers from schizophrenia.

It was actually his brother's illness that brought him into politics, Bernero says. When Vince developed symptoms of schizophrenia, his parents, who both speak Italian at home, were exhausted by their efforts to access the health care system and to find proper medical treatment. "I became my parents' advocate for my brother," says Bernero, who was 13 when the diagnosis was made. He said the fate of his two older brothers gave him "a sense of seriousness early on."

Bernero remembers returning home to Pontiac, in order to help Vince figure out how to brush his hair and his teeth again, after he'd suffered a breakdown from schizophrenia. "I also saw my second brother, Victor, die of AIDS. I've felt guilt at times. But I guess I've turned it into a sense of obligation." When campaigning in the gay community, Bernero refers to his brother as a major reason he supports gay rights. (As a Council member, Benavides opposed a gay rights ordinance, costing him the "very positive" rating that Bernero received from the Lansing Association for Human Rights Political Action Committee.)

As a teen-ager, Bernero got his first taste of politics when he helped his Aunt Betty Fortino campaign for Oakland County commissioner. Fortino now works as township clerk in Waterford, after serving as Oakland County commissioner for 16 years. The candidate calls his aunt a "great role model, who's honest to a fault." Added Bernero: "She tells people what they don't want to hear. I hope I can be the politician that she is. I will try hard to tell it like it is. That's such a rare commodity over there at the Capitol."

At Adrian College, Bernero fell in love with and later married Teri Johnston, after recruiting her to work in his campaign for student body president. In 1986, he graduated with a B.A. in political science and ran unsuccessfully for county commissioner in his hometown of Pontiac. In 1987 he went to work on the communications staff of the speaker of the House. In 1991 he became the chief legislative aide to Sen. Jim Berryman (D-Adrian). That same year, he was sworn in as an Ingham County commissioner from south Lansing, a position he held for eight years. In

1995, Virg left the Capitol to serve for four years as a development officer for Alma College and as executive director of the Michigan Association for Children with Emotional Disorders.

When they moved to Lansing, the young family searched extensively for an acceptable apartment in downtown so Bernero could walk to work and save on parking and the cost of an extra vehicle. Unable to find a place, the Bernero family moved to South Lansing instead. "Quite frankly, if you look around today, it's not much better. We've got to get quality housing downtown."

The Berneros have two daughters, Virginia (12) and Kelly (15), who go to school in Holt and East Lansing. Bernero has been criticized for sending his children to schools outside of Lansing, which he said he did at the request of his older daughter, who said she was being harassed by other pupils at Gardner Middle School. Both went to Holt, but Kelly asked to move again to East Lansing, while Virginia chose to remain at Holt, Bernero explained. His wife is a former elementary school teacher who is principal at Lansing's Lewton Elementary School.

Lansing, according to one of Bernero's campaign slogans, has the "ingredients of greatness" but hasn't yet fully reached its full potential. The candidate said he doesn't understand what is taking the city so long to consider attracting 2,000 Cooley Law School students to downtown by providing housing. "Those students don't drive rust-buckets but SUVs and fancy cars, and I think they go right on the expressway off into Okemos, East Lansing and Haslett. I think they would love to live down here." Bernero says creating more residential space and developing the riverfront are key factors in downtown revitalization. "If you get a critical mass of people living downtown, then you get the merchants and the nightlife."

Asked whether he thought the City Council's decision to publicly finance a parking ramp and permit the construction of 110,000 square feet of additional office space -- a deal Benavides help broker -- was a good idea, Bernero said: "I really don't know. I'm trying to get a clear picture on that." If elected mayor, Bernero said he would introduce regular meetings with the state's Department of Management and Budget to assess the need for new office space. "We all want downtown Lansing to fly, but we need better cooperation."

As a county commissioner, Bernero helped to create the Otto Health Clinic in Lansing, the Ingham Health Plan, and the Capital Area prescription drug program for seniors.

Just nine months ago, 53 percent voters in the 23rd Senate district picked Bernero to represent them in the state Senate after his one term in the House. Bernero defeated a well-known Democrat, former state Rep. Lingg Brewer, in a rough-and-tumble primary. In the general election, his Republican opponent, state Rep. Paul DeWeese, was a Williamstown physician who campaigned against abortion. Bernero, who was raised catholic, is pro-choice. In the state House and Senate, Bernero's legislation has focused on improving public education, strengthening mental health services and protecting the environment.

This year, he sponsored Senate Bill 230, legislation that would make it easier for Michigan cities to demolish abandoned houses. Bernero said that if elected mayor he would appoint a new cabinet-level housing "czar" who would be in charge of reducing the number of Lansing's 500 red-tagged homes.

If not elected mayor, Bernero said he would continue working to make mental health a higher priority in the legislature. As state senator, he said he's tried to pass more progressive mental health legislation and laments that although Michigan ranked last in helping people with mental diseases, former Gov. John Engler continued to cut existing services. "We cut the services, and we end up paying for them in the prison system. It's inhumane."

FAMILY STRESSED HELPING PEOPLE

Like Bernero, Benavides is quick to bring up his family as an important influence in his role as a public official.

Benavides was born in San Vicente, a small town in the state of Nuevo Leon, in northern Mexico, and grew up in the city of Comales, a few hours south of San Vicente.

Asked why he became a politician in 1981, when he was first elected 3rd Ward City Councilman, Benavides recalled, "When I was a little boy in Mexico, my parents always told us that each must serve the other. Survival was extremely important. I used to sell watermelons and oranges. I've always felt that I have something to offer to the community."

In the 1920s Benavides' father came to Texas to work on a farm. His mother followed, and the couple began a family. During the Depression they repatriated to Mexico, where Tony was born. His four older brothers, who'd been born in the United States, each returned at the age of 15 to their aunt's house in Texas.

In 1952, the family moved to Lansing. Benavides said his two older brothers Rudy and David moved to Lansing from Texas for work at General Motors. Their parents and siblings, including 15-year-old Tony, followed.

In Lansing, at a Catholic church dance, Benavides met his future wife, Carmen, whose parents had emigrated from Mexico and lived in San Antonio, Texas. While Benavides' parents were farming the onions, lettuce and radishes in the Stockbridge area, his wife's parents worked on farms in the St. Johns area on sugar beet and peppermint crops.

Today, Carmen Benavides is a retired school principal who spent 33 years working in the Lansing School District. The Benavides' four children are a son in Lansing, a son in Germany, a daughter in Tucson, Ariz., and another daughter in Detroit.

Looking back at his family's history, Benavides says he is grateful. "My parents wanted to better their family's lives," he says. "Obviously, that's the reason why you come to the United States. I truly believe that this is the greatest country in the world. You can be anything you want."

Benavides remembers the ambitions he felt after first arriving in Lansing. Twice a day he took English lessons at West Junior High School, in order to catch up with his peers. Initially, he'd been placed in seventh grade, two years behind for his age. But: "I remember my tutor telling my older brother David 'If Tony learns the language, we will promote him to a higher grade,'" Benavides said

Of course Benavides did learn English and quickly adapted to his new environment. A 1957 graduate of Sexton High School, Benavides became the executive director of the Cristo Rey Community Center in north Lansing in 1969. For 33 years, Benavides would develop his vision of building a community organization that offered social services for Lansing's lower-income population. When Benavides began working at Cristo Rey, the center predominantly served the needs of the Hispanic community, but according to center staff its scope is more wide-reaching today, and Hispanic residents make up just one fourth of the total number of visitors.

Under Benavides' directorship, Cristo Rey developed from a center with a \$50,000 annual budget and three employees to one with a \$2.8 million dollar budget and staff of 75 when he quit this year to become mayor.

As a 22-year veteran of Lansing City Council, Benavides has been Council president half a dozen times and sat on every committee.

Benavides says he is disappointed that the Chamber of Commerce endorsed Bernero. Benavides says he lost the endorsement because he supported legislation for a living wage for City Hall employees, whereas Bernero did not. He said that he would not back down when the chamber asked him to "hide the living wage under the carpet." Added Benavides: "This is a labor city. I've been taught by my parents not to promise something that I don't have in my back pocket."

When asked about citizens' concerns about urban sprawl in Lansing, Benavides agreed: "Yes, we can stop it. I think everything centers around economics." He also said that the living wage was an important part of his economic plan to make Lansing a more livable city. "I see young mothers in City Hall who make \$6.50 an hour. They have two jobs, and three kids at home. And even this isn't enough. I believe we need to have a living wage for all the people," he said.

Benavides says he would not wish to pick one specific accomplishment to represent his 22 years as a City Council member. But he says he was proud to have voted for a development project to transform the old Boys Training School. In December 2002, City Council unanimously approved the sale of a 25-acre parcel on the grounds of the former BTS for an upscale housing development. Critics wanted the green space saved or to keep the land for the school district.

Benavides stressed that in his 22 years in City Council he has always been pro-business. "As a matter of fact, I was the president when we were doing the negotiations for the first GM plant."

When it comes to General Motors, Benavides and Bernero seem to have similar perspectives. Asked whether he knew how much the city had spent in order to keep GM in the late 1990s, and whether it had been worth it, Bernero replied: “I don’t know, and I think it was worth the price. GM is the No. 1 asset in Lansing, and I will do whatever it takes to keep and to grow GM here.”

If the chamber’s endorsement was a coup for Bernero, Benavides evened the score by receiving the blessing of Hollister. Both candidates invoke the former mayor’s “vision” when they talk about their plans for Lansing. Hollister’s endorsement of Benavides may have left something to be desired (“Tony will carry on the vision,” the State journal quoted Hollister as saying. “It would be hard to do a lot of damage in two years”), but it was still Benavides who received a nod carrying much weight with voters, not Bernero.

A group of 18 African-American ministers have so far endorsed Benavides, while Bernero has been endorsed by the Lansing Fraternal Order of Police, the Operating Engineers Local 324 and Iron Workers Local 25.

THE LAST WORD

With less than two weeks before the primary election, Bernero appears to have built significant momentum as he makes the rounds of candidate forums, rings doorbells and speaks at coffees. His major fund-raising event at the Country Club of Lansing brought out about 200 people at \$150 a head, he said.

Bernero is careful not to predict he will beat Benavides in the primary – an expectation he does not want to be measured against. Bernero may have youth on his side, but Benavides has decades of name recognition. One 40ish woman said she’s supporting Benavides because she remembers when he attended an event when she was 18.

Members of City Council and other community leaders have pointed out that it all boils down to style, credibility and a concern for public opinion. Four City Council members – Joan Bauer, Sandy Allen, Randy Williams and Harold Leeman – said they were staying neutral. Larry Meyer said he supports Benavides because he has more experience. Three Council members, Geneva Smith, Carol Wood and Brian Jeffries, did not return calls. (Wood and her mother, her next-door neighbor have a Benavides sign planted on what appears to be their shared property line.)

Leeman, who worked with Benavides on City Council for the past seven years, said that Bernero might very well be a fabulous campaigner and a slick politician, but adds, “This is not a Senate race. This is Lansing, Michigan. Small-town America.”

Leeman called Bernero a “new commodity.” He pointed out that Hollister had been a state representative for 20 years before becoming mayor, and a county commissioner before that. He questioned Bernero’s qualification for City Hall, saying municipal government and county government are two entirely different things.

The City Council member said that Benavides’ biggest disadvantage is that he’s “too much of a nice guy,” which could negatively impact his ability to lead the city. But Leeman also pointed out that Benavides was very good at listening to people’s opinions, something that was perhaps influenced by his bilingualism.

No doubt style is going to play an important role in the outcome of this race and the overwhelmingly likely rematch in November. Both men promise to fulfill Hollister’s vision of a greater Lansing, and so far huge policy differences between the two of them have not emerged. Benavides’ sometimes halting English may frustrate some voters, but to others Bernero may be too fast a talker, just as they think his rise in politics is too swift. That may well crystallize where much of the public is today: torn between supporting a known quantity with known weaknesses and gambling that a less familiar, brasher quantity might get Lansing to where both men agree they want to take it.

Care to respond? Send letters to letters@lansingcitypulse.com. View our Letters policy.

Lansing City Pulse (MI)

Date: July 23, 2003

Copyright (c) 2003 Lansing City Pulse. All rights reserved.