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IN THE RUNNING

Once Alienated, and Now a Force in Her Husband's Bid for Mayor

By **Michael Barbaro**

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She was the seventh-grader too frightened to stand in front of the room because her white classmates would mock her, contorting their mouths to make their lips look big. She was the smoldering teenager who took to writing poems every day to wrestle with her isolation and anger. She was the eldest daughter of one of the only black families in Longmeadow, Mass., who arrived home to see their new

house scrawled with racist graffiti.

“I had never had a deep sense of belonging anywhere,” recalled Chirlane McCray, whose husband, Bill de Blasio, is now the front-runner to become the next mayor of New York. “I always felt I was an outsider.”

Now, this onetime student of powerlessness, a woman whose early identity was profoundly shaped by feelings of alienation — because of her race, her gender and her evolving sexuality — is emerging as the ultimate insider: a mastermind behind the biggest political upset of the year and a sought-after voice as the city re-evaluates what it most wants from its first family.

New York has begun to digest the jarring contrasts that Mr. de Blasio, an avowedly activist, tax-the-rich liberal, would provide

should he capture City Hall after 12 years of rule by a data-driven billionaire.

Less understood is the role his wife, a 58-year-old poet, has played in molding his political vision and propelling his ascent toward the mayor's office.

As much as anyone on his staff, Ms. McCray has built and guided her husband's campaign, thoroughly erasing the line between spouse and strategist.

Political meetings are planned around her schedule. She sits in on job interviews for top advisers. She edits all key speeches (aides are known to e-mail drafts straight to her).



Bill de Blasio's wife, Chirlane McCray, as a teenager in 1971.

Her encounters with city life directly influenced Mr. de Blasio's approach in the campaign. Ms. McCray was horrified when parts of St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village were

demolished to make way for luxury condominiums: 30 years ago, despite the fact that she had no health insurance, doctors there kept her alive after an acute asthma attack. So at her urging, the closing of city hospitals became a central theme of her husband's candidacy.

Together, Mr. de Blasio and Ms. McCray are as much a package deal as Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton, a reality etched into the campaign hierarchy affixed to a wall of the de Blasio political headquarters. It lists "Bill/Chirlane" above a sprawling team of aides.

In an interview, Ms. McCray embraced the model of the Clintons' working partnership, saying that the former secretary of state is the first lady she most admires. She acknowledges feeling so passionately in 2002 about which way her husband would vote on the next City

Council speaker she threatened to divorce him if he backed the wrong candidate.

He sided with his wife.

(The candidate Ms. McCray opposed later went to prison. “He was a slimeball,” she said.)

Asked if she had ever considered playing a less assertive role in the mayoral race, Ms. McCray physically balked, leaning in from across the table at a Brooklyn diner.

“No, no,” she said. “It’s not who I am. It’s not who Bill and I have been as a couple, either.”

She added, “We’ve always been partners in the campaigns and any major thing we have taken on.”

They are, in their relationship, their politics and, above all, their lifestyle, a striking departure from the city’s reigning pair, Michael

R. Bloomberg and Diana L. Taylor, his longtime girlfriend.

Ms. Taylor, a banker, rarely campaigned with the mayor and kept a studied distance from City Hall, adopting the role of his glamorous sidekick on the city's charity circuit, often seen but seldom heard.



Ms. McCray with her sisters Cynthia, center, and Cheryl, right, in Longmeadow, Mass., on an Easter Day in the mid-1960s.

“We are very different people from him and Diana,” Ms. McCray said.

She does little to disguise her deep distaste for the Bloomberg era, when, by her lights, the ranks of the poor surged to unconscionable levels (“that’s not sustainable” she said), gentrification brought a commoditized sameness to once quirky neighborhoods (“we are losing our communities,” she worries) and New York City venerated its swelling class of ultrarich.

“I mean, our leader was a billionaire; I think that contributed to it,” she said.

Ms. McCray recalled, with a mixture of awe and amusement, the experience of dining at Mr. Bloomberg’s opulent home on the Upper East Side a few years ago, a home she described, dryly, as “very structured.”

“It was all very, to me, very stiff,” she remembered. “I think everyone was, like, on their best behavior.”

Ms. McCray has taken her dismay to the ballot box, saying she had not once voted for Mr. Bloomberg. She yearns to restore New York’s reputation as what she called “a progressive capital,” worrying it has trailed behind cities like San Francisco, Seattle, even Cleveland.

“They are all doing exciting new things,” she said. “And what are we doing?”

Her anti-establishment sentiment runs deep. In high school during the late 1960s, where for a time she was the sole black student, she caught the attention of the faculty by calling out cruel classmates in a column for the campus newspaper, a social outcast publicly challenging her tormentors.

“She was subjected to what clearly today would be called bullying,” recalled Michael McCarthy, her Spanish teacher and mentor. “I was probably the only friend she had in school.”

Her greatest fury, however, was reserved for the adults who let her down: the white construction workers who spit at her as she rode a bike in town, the parents who excluded her from boy-girl mixers, and the instructors who allowed students to mock her with racial epithets.

“The shocking thing is that the teachers wouldn’t do anything,” Ms. McCray said. “It was horrible. To know that they could get away with it, that it was condoned behavior.”



Ms. McCray and Mr. de Blasio posing with their son, Dante, then just a baby, and their daughter, Chiara, for a family photo in November 1997.

There was little sympathy at home, where her father, an inventory clerk at a military base, and her mother, an assembly worker at an electronics factory, waged their own battle to fit into an upper-middle-class town of strivers near Springfield, Mass. Ms. McCray was instructed to tell anyone who asked that her mother was a homemaker, just like the other women in the neighborhood, a lie she learned to repeat reflexively.

So she poured her disillusionment into poems and short stories, many of them laced with adolescent self-loathing. “I’ve spent my life as a Black girl,” she wrote years later. “A nappy-headed, no-haired, fat-lipped, big-bottomed Black girl and the poem will surely come out wrong like me.”

Her four years at Wellesley, an all-women’s, liberal arts college, brought both a long-sought

social acceptance and a new form of rejection. Her being a lesbian was discovered when a classmate found her in an intimate dorm-room embrace with another woman. “Some of the women in my dorm were totally freaked out by it,” she said.

It was then that her social and political activism took root, building on the belief, articulated by a nascent group of like-minded women in Boston, that black lesbians had something different to say about discrimination and identity than the mainstream women’s liberation movement.

Ms. McCray joined what would become the Combahee River Collective, an influential collection of black feminist intellectuals, many of them gay, who felt overlooked by the 1970s politics of Betty Friedan and Ms. magazine.

“We knew it was revolutionary,” Ms. McCray

said. “Just by sitting down and talking to each other, it was breaking through the madness.”

By the time she started a job in the press office of New York’s City Hall in 1991, there was no confusion: she had zero interest in dating a man, a message that Mr. de Blasio, then a lanky, bearded operative across the building, jauntily ignored.

He flirted with her mercilessly, she said, calling nonstop and trying to steal an unwelcome kiss. “I actually told him, ‘Slow this down,’ ” Ms. McCray said. Her resistance became less diplomatic: “Back off.”

But a romance blossomed: Mr. de Blasio, five years her junior, won over her family with an overnight visit that earned him a new moniker: “Brother Bill.”

For Ms. McCray’s lesbian friends, her

engagement to Mr. de Blasio, in 1993, was a stunning turn. Not all of them could stomach it. One of them refused to attend the wedding.

Their marriage was defined by politics and activism. He ran for school board, City Council, then public advocate. She wrote speeches for Mayor David N. Dinkins, City Comptroller William C. Thompson Jr. and State Comptroller H. Carl McCall. A stint in the public relations department at Citigroup, the Wall Street bank minting cash in the early 2000s, ended after six months when she realized “this was not a good fit for me.”

Even as their clout grew, they kept their distance from Manhattan’s corridors of wealth and power, making their home in Brooklyn’s left-leaning Park Slope, a place so woven into the family’s identity that Ms. McCray feels conflicted about uprooting her son, Dante, a

high school junior, should they move to Gracie Mansion on the Upper East Side.

She has been taken aback by the sudden stardom of her Afro-favoring son who has been mobbed at public events, deluged with requests to appear on television and irritated that those who approach him only want to talk about his hair.

“What blows my mind is how much there is, it’s amazing,” she said. “I don’t think anyone — not one of us — anticipated it would be such a thing.”

These days, Mr. de Blasio and Ms. McCray are a ubiquitous tag team on the campaign trail; at times the candidate interrupts voters midsentence to introduce them to his wife, as he did with victims of Hurricane Sandy in Far Rockaway a few days ago.

It can seem as if a moment is incomplete for him unless his wife has experienced it, too.

In Harlem recently, Mr. de Blasio was walking to his city-issued S.U.V., a large crowd of residents trailing behind, when he stopped and looked around, disoriented. Ms. McCray was not there.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he said. “Let the first lady through.”

A correction was made on Oct. 8, 2013: An article on Wednesday about the role Chirlane McCray plays in the New York mayoral campaign of her husband, Bill de Blasio, overstated the extent of the demolition at the former St. Vincent’s Hospital campus in Greenwich Village to make way for luxury condominiums, a plan that Ms. McCray said horrified her. Many of the buildings were torn

down, but four buildings were converted or restored; the entire complex was not razed.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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