

“Don’t let me be known as the politics and panties guy for the rest of my life!” pleaded Victor Bernace with a nervous laugh. Bernace, a Harvard-educated lawyer from Inwood who is running for a City Council seat in District 7, was referring to the current media hype surrounding his decision to hold a non-traditional campaign fundraiser, which he himself describes as a “sexy, erotic dance show.” Although the upcoming September 8 event, billed as “Havana Nights,” has created scrutiny – some of it negative – from all over the country, Bernace credits it with getting his name into the public eye and generating enough funds for his campaign.

Bernace credits his past, primarily a tumultuous childhood involving abuse, welfare, and foster care with providing him with the drive to take risks such as this controversial fundraiser. “One reason I think I’ve succeeded in life is because I’m not ashamed,” Bernace said in a phone interview on Saturday, August 27. He went on to describe his success in life despite facing adversity.

According to Bernace, his mother suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, and moved the family around often – from Chicago to Miami to West Virginia and then Ecuador, where his father died of alcoholism, before settling in Inwood when Bernace was in the fourth grade. Bernace describes his childhood relationship with his mother as one of “fear.”

With his mother’s hospitalization, Bernace entered the foster care system. Irene Butler, a friend of Bernace’s who taught with him at Kennedy High School in the Bronx in the 1990s, described in a telephone interview what she knew of Bernace’s experiences in foster care. According to Butler, the couple with which Bernace lived worried he would hurt himself accidentally and limited his activities. While other children were playing together and riding bicycles, Bernace spent time alone, “reading books” and “playing with toys,” Butler said. Through such solitary activities, Butler indicated, Bernace “got a lot smarter.”

By the time he began attending Kennedy High School in the Bronx, Bernace and his mother had reunited. Ivan Khoury, a friend of Bernace's since the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and currently the treasurer of his campaign, described in a telephone interview how he found his friend's mother's illness to be "striking." She was "really crazy," Khoury said, "but all 15-year-old boys say that" about their mothers.

Despite the difficulties of his childhood, Bernace is not angry with mother today. "It's not her fault that she was mentally ill," he said, citing that she "thought everyone was trying to kill her, including her son." Currently, his mother lives in an apartment 7 blocks away from Bernace's own apartment in Inwood, and he tries to visit her at least once every week. "She has her own little world," he said of his mother's current situation, which he said has improved since his childhood. He described how his mother thinks he has "make-believe children and a make-believe wife" and even "leaves food under the bed" for her non-existent grandchildren.

His mother's illness and hardships, lonely years projected him towards law as a career. Bernace described his motivation to become a lawyer, one that he developed in high school and share with his friend Khoury, by saying, "You can't believe you'll be on welfare all your life." He attributed his success to the hardships he faced early on in his life, saying, "I think it makes you stronger."

After successfully attending NYU and then Harvard Law School, Bernace returned to Kennedy High School for six years as a teacher, where, he said, he taught social studies in Spanish and English to new immigrants as well as a law program. Johanna Caceres, the secretary for the Bernace campaign, was one of Bernace's students at Kennedy High School, which she attended from 1994 to 1996. Caceres was part of the law program at Kennedy, the same program Bernace and Khoury attended when they were students there. In a telephone interview, Caceres described how Bernace tried to instill in his students a value for their education. He used, Caceres said, "a lot of metaphors" about "how lucky we are to get an education." However, Bernace did not, Caceres said,

speaking about his own misfortune as a child. Caceres, who has worked on each of Bernace's campaigns for City Council – he ran in 2001 and 2003 prior to his current bid – said she “learned more about him as a person” when she began working with him.

Bernace has worked as an educator in other situations. According to Khoury, he and Bernace volunteered for an Upward Bound program while the two attended NYU. This program, Khoury said, involved tutoring students at risk of dropping out of high school as well as students with learning disabilities. Khoury indicated that Bernace continued to work with that organization until 1997, long after he left NYU. Bernace, who turned back to law and began representing Dominican cab drivers in court when they faced infractions for “running red lights” and “speeding tickets,” now teaches two evening classes in the Puerto Rican and Latin American Studies Program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan.

Bernace says he is eager to make yet another career change as he campaigns to unseat the District 7 City Council incumbent, Robert Jackson, in the Democratic primary on September 13. If elected, Bernace said, he would focus on spending money on “food for kids” and improving the condition of public transportation to Upper Manhattan, an area that he claims is often neglected by city officials since the neighborhood does not draw. He said, “If you don't have proper transportation, you become a third world country.”

In addition, Bernace acknowledged the problem of increased asthma rates among the children in his district. He said that “roach excrement” has contributed to the problem and that “slum landlords” must be held accountable for the deteriorating conditions of their buildings that create the roach problem. He commented upon the need to “improve housing conditions,” which is a part of his work as a reporter for the cable show “Rent Wars.”

Though he has some ideas about how to improve housing, Bernace indicated that the people he wants to represent have the best ideas. “Many solutions come from the voters,” he said, and

described how his current mass mailing invites people to his home to meet him and to discuss issues and possible solutions.

Despite his accomplishments and his campaign's goals, the "Havana Nights" fundraiser dominates media coverage of him. Bernace calls this coverage a "double-edged sword."

Myra Colon, the marketing director for the Bernace campaign, came up with the idea. Colon, who has worked as a publicist in the entertainment and music industries for such artists as Diddy and Whitney Houston, said in a telephone interview that she designed this event to "celebrate" Bernace's Cuban-American heritage and to "tap into a younger demographic." Bernace described that target audience as the "MTV" generation.

Bernace described his own negative past experiences with traditional political fundraisers. "Most political events are very boring," he said, with "people wandering around like lost souls, sitting at a table eating cheese." He indicated that some of his past events have had few if any attendees. Since announcing the "Havana Nights" party, however, his campaign has managed to raise enough money through the advance sale of tickets to qualify for matching funds from the city, a goal his opponent has not yet attained, Bernace said. "Now we're in a panic of how to spend the money," Bernace added.

The exact details of "Havana Nights" remain secret in order to maintain what Colon regards as "elements of surprise." She did describe the event as "Harvard meets Cirque de Soleil" with "a Latin Theme" and featuring dancers who will have 60-80% of their bodies exposed. Bernace said there would be women in bikinis and men in Speedos. He added that no one had responded to the request on his self-maintained website ([www.Bernace.com](http://www.Bernace.com)) for volunteer "go-go" dancers.

According to both Bernace and Colon, about half of the tickets have been sold, though both declined to give exact figures. Kely, a secretary at the Umbrella Lounge who gave only her first name, said the venue holds 200 people in the main space and an additional 75 people in the new V.I.P. area. The Umbrella Lounge is a posh Inwood establishment decorated with a ceiling full of

white umbrellas, large pots filled with fresh flowers, flowing white curtains, wine-red seats and walls, and a full bar. An Italian Renaissance-style painting featuring nude figures covers the ceiling in the V.I.P section. According to Kely, the lounge is very popular among local Inwood residents.

Some people find the concept of “Havana Nights” to be inappropriate as a political fundraiser. On a hot, sunny Saturday afternoon on August, 27, three young Dominican men in their twenties and dressed in similar outfits of white shirts and blue jeans stopped outside Emerson Playground in Inwood Hill Park near the apartment building in which Bernace lives to give their opinions about the party. None had heard of Bernace or his campaign. One of the men, Yoel, who gave only his first name, leaned forward against the low gray stone wall that separates the park from the sidewalk and the street and stated that Bernace’s idea “not a respectable way to raise money.” He also stated that “just because it’s on T.V. we don’t need someone shaking their asses in our faces” referring to Bernace’s attempt to appeal to the “MTV” generation and to his claim that Spanish television contains much sexuality.

The oldest of the group, 29-year-old Peter Michael Garcia expressed dismay about the sexual element of the party. “We all came from a woman. We should show respect,” he said.

When informed that the party would also include “men in Speedos” as Bernace had claimed, each of the young men groaned. “That’s even worse,” Robert, who gave only his first name, said, shaking his head in disbelief and cringing behind the red lenses of his sunglasses.

Even Caceres, the campaign’s secretary, said she was “shocked and stunned” when she first heard about the event but claims she has since “warmed” to the idea. She, along with Butler and Khoury, immediately responded negatively when asked if she would volunteer to be “go-go” dancers at the party. “Absolutely not!” Caceres said with a laugh. “No,” Butler firmly stated, calling the event a “gimmick” and saying the event “sounds a little wacky but interesting as well.” When asked if he would volunteer to be one of the men in Speedos, Khoury replied, “You wouldn’t want me to!”

Despite the controversy surrounding the event, Myra Colon remains confident that it will be a success. “The place will be sold out,” she said. Bernace, she added, “should be applauded for going out of the box” and trying something new.

Bernace himself, though somewhat nervous about the upcoming fundraiser, maintained a sense of humor. He asserted that he is not a “sex fiend” and is the “most straight-laced character” one can meet, a claim his friend Khoury backs. Bernace did concede, however that he is “less puritanical than the “standard American Wonder bread.” Overall, he remains proud of his campaigns. He said, “Damn all these people who are too stuck up to laugh.”