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Miller could provide calming influence

He hopes to bring economic development to his district.

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TAMPA » Two days after winning a smashing victory in a Hillsborough County Commission election, Les Miller relaxed in a stuffed leather chair in a home a few blocks away from where he grew up. It's a gritty neighborhood known as College Hill, and the burglar bars over the



Miller

windows on Miller's tidy home testify to the challenges he will face as the District 3 commissioner.

Miller won a three-person race in the Democratic primary Tuesday night with 50 percent of the vote. Incumbent Kevin White finished third despite a nearly 2-to-1 advantage over Miller in campaign cash. Miller faces a write-in candidate in November.

"You never know what the voter is going to think when he goes in that booth," Miller said, looking tired but determined.

The margin of victory reflected constituents' disappointment in White, both for the ethical problems that dogged him for four years on the commission as well for his inability to dent the joblessness that grips poor District 3 neighborhoods such as Belmont Heights, Sulphur Springs and Progress Village.

See **CANDIDATE MILLER, Page 4** »

CANDIDATE MILLER

Continued From Page 1

"When other parts of the county hit a recession," Miller said, "the people in this district hit a depression."

Making a difference economically in the county's poorest district will take all the personal and management skills Miller employed to become Democratic leader in both the state House and Senate. But supporters have faith in the man they saw grow up as a sober, studious youngster.

"He never did like a lot of people did. They left the community and went out to the suburbs and never looked back," said Joanna Tokley, who taught Miller math and biology in 10th grade at the old Middleton High School. "He stayed right there where the problems were and tried to work on the problems."

Taught to do the best

Lesley James Miller Jr. was born April 21, 1951, in Tampa. His father, Les Miller Sr., worked for 40 years at a phosphate mill. His mother, Shaddie, brought in extra money cleaning people's houses. Les Sr. was a tenor in a renowned gospel quartet, and he raised Les and his sister, Annie Mae, to be devout Christians at New

Salem Primitive Baptist Church.

"He kind of grew up with ambition of doing things in the community and being into education," said Ann Porter, who knew Miller and his sister when they were teenagers. "They were taught to do the very best they could in terms of pulling themselves up by their boot straps."

After high school, Miller attended Bethune-Cookman, a historically black college in Daytona Beach, but he didn't have the money to continue and left after a year. In 1970, when young men were chosen for the military draft by a lottery, Miller enlisted in the Air Force, serving for four years in Illinois.

After discharge, Miller used the GI bill to attend the University of South Florida, where he majored in political science. He was elected student body president, the first black to attain that post.

After college, Miller worked a number of jobs, including customer relations representative and personnel recruiter for Tampa Electric Co. and manager of the minority business enterprise office for Tampa General Hospital.

He now works for the University of South Florida as director of the Office of Community Relations and the Office of the Stu-



Staff photo by **KATY KUEHNER**
 Les Miller, center, with his wife and campaign manager Gwen Miller, and city council candidate Seth Nelson, check voter results and celebrate Miller's primary victory.

dent Ombudsman.

Leader of losing team

Miller's real passion, however, was politics, something he picked up from his father, a union activist.

Miller's first electoral victory was in a special election held in 1991 to replace Tampa City Council member Perry Harvey, who had been indicted on charges he stole money from a union local. Miller gave up the seat one month later when Harvey was cleared.

A year later, Miller was elected to the state House and started on the leadership path that could have

taken him to speakership if Democrats hadn't lost their majority in 1996.

Miller's two years as minority leader were tough, as Republicans controlled the legislative agenda. He led a Democratic caucus that was divided over the ouster of Rep. Willie Logan, the first black House speaker-designate. The Democrats who ousted Logan said they were concerned about his leadership, but blacks cried racism.

Working to bring the fractious caucus together, Miller showed a talent for persuasion and deal-making that earned the members' respect, said Doug

Wiles, who served with Miller in the House.

"Les was a committed leader who worked long hours to further the causes that were really important to him," Wiles said, "and worked with every member of the caucus on the issues that were important to them in their districts."

During his term as leader, Miller enjoyed a few successes, including blocking an attempt by then-Speaker John Thrasher to eliminate the state Commerce Department. A year later, however, the department was gone.

"We went out every day and tried to get our bills

heard ... knowing we were going to get run over," Miller said.

Lois Frankel, who followed Miller as minority leader, said being the captain of the perpetually losing team, while unpleasant, is a valuable legislative experience that will serve Miller well.

"It helps to understand the importance of collegial relationships and the importance of picking your battles and not holding grudges," said Frankel, now mayor of West Palm Beach.

After leaving the House because of term limits, Miller was elected to the state Senate, where he again rose to minority leader. In 2006, he lost a primary race for Congress to Kathy Castor.

With his reputation for collegiality and integrity, Miller could be a calming influence on a commission roiled by controversy this decade.

Still, he said he won't be reserved in fighting for services and infrastructure in his district. Leaders in his community asked Miller to run, then supported him, he said, because they felt the district was short-changed and that economic development is lacking.

"I'm going to be the mouthpiece for the district," he said.

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