

## Plano leader dedicated to adopted town

Plano: City Council's only minority member says there's no place he'd rather be

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By JAKE BATSELL / The Dallas Morning News

An extrovert fond of pinstriped suits and brightly colored ties, Harry LaRosiliere moves comfortably within Plano's most powerful circles.

But this City Council newcomer didn't break into politics by way of a button-down background.

Born in Haiti and raised in Harlem, N.Y., by blue-collar parents, Mr. LaRosiliere grew up outside the realm of movers and shakers. And when he left Manhattan for the North Texas suburbs in 1994, he arrived in unfamiliar territory with few connections.

Nearly 12 years later, Mr. LaRosiliere is building momentum as a civic leader. He landed a seat on the Plano City Council in May, squeaking out a 76-vote victory, and he recently received a major community service award from a youth advocacy group.

The financial planning executive, who is the council's only minority member and its second-ever black person, speaks with the confidence of a man firmly in his element.

"I can't imagine raising a family anywhere other than Plano," said Mr. LaRosiliere, 43, who has two daughters with wife Tracy, a Frito-Lay vice president. "It's just so family-centric.

"The hardest part for me, though, really, was becoming a true minority. Coming to Plano, it was the first time in my life I could really say I felt like a minority ... I grew up in Harlem, so I was never a minority there."

### A Harlem upbringing

He was born in Haiti's capital city, Port-au-Prince, but recalls little about life there. At age 3, he moved with his family to New York City, where his grandmother was working as a housekeeper.

The family settled in a small apartment in Harlem, where Mr. LaRosiliere grew up with his sister, parents, and grandmother. His father held a factory job, and his mother cleaned office buildings.

He describes his upbringing as "lower-middle-class," but says he was no stranger to Harlem's rougher edges.

"I saw all the difficult living conditions," he said. "I had friends that I used to play with that went to prison for shooting people and committing heinous crimes."

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 Harry LaRosiliere (far right) is the only minority member of the Plano City Council and its second-ever black member.

His parents emphasized education, sending him and his sister to Catholic grammar and high schools. He later earned a bachelor's degree in geology from City College of New York.

A year into his master's studies, Mr. LaRosiliere caught the entrepreneurial bug and opened a photography studio for baby portraits. The first years were tenuous – he recalls dodging bill collectors' phone calls – but he later sold the studio to a larger firm.

He became intrigued with city politics when David Dinkins was elected New York's first black mayor in 1989. But he grew disenchanted by Mr. Dinkins' handling of racial tensions in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood.

### Adjusting to change

Mr. LaRosiliere met his wife, Tracy, at a Manhattan nightclub soon before she began working for Frito-Lay in Plano. A long-distance courtship blossomed. He followed her to Texas in early 1994 and began life as a suburbanite.

"I was never in a situation where I was one of the few black people in the room," he said. "I'm used to it now, and I don't have a problem with it ... but you know, it took a little adjusting. My interaction with people is that Plano's a very accepting culture, period."

He carved out a new career as a financial adviser and immersed himself in volunteer work, joining a youth mentorship program that met as a group on weekends.

"He tried to really get out in the community, meet people, make a contribution," said Tracy LaRosiliere. "I think it made it a much easier and smoother transition."

Jeff Moster, a fellow volunteer at the mentorship program and now one of Mr. LaRosiliere's closest friends, said the transplanted New Yorker frequently took the lead during group activities.

"He has a magnetism about him, just getting other people active, engaged and happy," said Mr. Moster, who has since moved to Chicago. "I think you could put him in China and he'd probably adapt real well."

The two friends often discussed Mr. LaRosiliere's desire to get involved in politics, a path that began through memberships with the Plano Chamber of Commerce and nonprofit boards and continued with a yearlong stint on the Planning and Zoning Commission.

"This is clearly a well-thought-out plan of his, to be at this point in life," Mr. Moster said.

At an October banquet, Mr. LaRosiliere received the Voice of Children Award for volunteering with Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Collin County, which assists abused and neglected children.

### 'Fresh insights'

In May, Mr. LaRosiliere defeated former council member Warner Richeson by 76 votes in a sharply contested race for Place 5, an at-large seat.

Now more than six months into his term, he says he feels comfortable but avoids speaking first at meetings out of respect to his more seasoned colleagues. Still, he asks frequent questions and often explains his position before casting a vote.

"We needed some fresh insights and perspectives, and he's certainly helping to provide that," said council member Sally Magnuson.

He's no political maverick, generally voting with the majority on a council known more for collegiality than for confrontation. But he did raise eyebrows at a recent council retreat when he floated an idea to recharge Plano's sluggish downtown retail district by giving the city a stronger role in controlling property. Mayor Pat Evans, who is forming a downtown task force with a more collaborative approach, gently dismissed the idea.

Dr. Karen Dubrow, who worked in a group led by Mr. LaRosiliere at a recent neighborhood roundtable, said he comes across as "young," "open" and "eager."

But Dr. Dubrow, who fought a proposed Wal-Mart store last year when Mr. LaRosiliere was a planning commissioner, said she hopes the new councilman develops a reputation for distinctive ideas rather than steadfast loyalty to the mayor-led council majority.

"I would have great hopes that he would be an independent thinker," she said. "Because there is a bloc."

Mr. LaRosiliere says he's not afraid to be the contrarian on issues he feels strongly about.

And while he wants his presence on the council to reflect the perspectives of Plano's increasingly diverse population, he says he resists being labeled as a "one-trick pony."

"What's good for the African-American community is good for the Hispanic, Latino, Asian, Alaskan, Anglo, all of them," he said.

His mother still lives in the Harlem apartment where he grew up, which he said is about one-fourth the size of his Plano home. Returning to New York, as he does several times a year, provides perspective about how far he's come.

"I think about it all the time," he said. "I walk into my house and I'll sit in my office, or just go out in the back yard and look at my pool, and I'll think, man, am I fortunate.

"Fortune is one thing, but I envisioned it when I was in those tough times. I always pictured the better things in life."

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## **HARRY LAROSILIERE**

**Born:** May 6, 1962, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

**Family:** Married to Tracy, vice president of marketing for Frito-Lay; two daughters

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in geology, City College of New York, 1985; master's studies, City College of New York

**Business career:** First vice president of investments for Morgan Stanley. Previously worked as a financial adviser for A.G. Edwards and Prudential Securities and once co-owned a New York photography studio.

**Political career:** Elected to Plano City Council in May; member of Planning and Zoning Commission

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