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NY Times, October 15, 2004

PUBLIC LIVES

For Nader Ally, Defeat Inspires Next Big Cause

By CHRIS HEDGES

PRINCETON, N.J.

UNDAUNTED by another defeat, the maverick lawyer Carl J. Mayer spent yesterday busily preparing for what is almost certainly his next one - the effort to elect his friend and mentor Ralph Nader to the presidency.

He had little time to reflect on his latest blow, as he fielded calls on his cellphone to arrange a press conference for Mr. Nader, organize a fund-raiser in a local pub and reserve seats in a Princeton University lecture hall for a speech given by Mr. Nader yesterday.

Mr. Mayer's effort to force a special election to select Gov. James E. McGreevey's successor, one he has led with another lawyer, Bruce Afran, was rejected on Wednesday by the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit in Philadelphia. The court, in a 20-page ruling, upheld a lower court's decision that said that the governor had not created a vacancy after he announced that he had had an extramarital relationship with a man and would resign on Nov. 15. Senate President Richard J. Codey will serve out Mr. McGreevey's term, which ends in January 2006.

"This is the most indicted, the most convicted and the most investigated administration in New Jersey history, and that is not an easy feat to accomplish," Mr. Mayer said. "This administration has stolen everything it can get its hands on. Now they want to steal the election. I am sorry the court has decided to allow Governor McGreevey to disenfranchise the people of New Jersey. We are reviewing whether to appeal."

But if Mr. Mayer was upset he was hiding it well. He is a man who has become intimate with failure, plugging along at a series of populist causes that usually seem to sputter out in the head wind of voter apathy and corporate lobbying. He often works with Mr. Afran, also a Nader supporter, and the two are gadflies in the machinery of New Jersey politics.

He has the affable demeanor of a professor, his tie, despite his best efforts, sliding up around his collar and his gray suit slightly ruffled. Ideas tumble out of him, especially historical parallels between the current political climate and other periods in American history. He has some unlikely heroes, like Teddy Roosevelt, "not for his imperialism but his antitrust work," he said.

He has run for state and local office, rarely getting percentages much

higher than his political guru, Mr. Nader, although, in his only election triumph, Mr. Mayer got himself elected as a Princeton Township committeeman, a position he no longer holds. It was as a committeeman that he went undercover in 1996 for the CBS program "60 Minutes" to uncover corruption and bribery among state officials. He later wrote a book called "Shakedown: The Fleecing of the Garden State," about how corporate interests had taken over the Republican and Democratic Parties.

Mr. Mayer is urging voters, following Wednesday's court ruling, to support Mr. Nader as a way to strike back at a state Democratic Party he says has deprived voters of the right to choose Mr. McGreevey's replacement. "Government is becoming more and more an appendage of corporations and lobbyists, " he said.

Mr. Mayer, 45, grew up in Princeton, the son of a professor of European history at Princeton University [Arno Mayer]. His mother was a magazine writer who, after being divorced, moved to New York City. He spent his weekends in Princeton and his weeks with his mother on the Upper East Side, attending private schools. It was a world of privilege that did not, he concedes, foster many political radicals.

BUT he admired another Princeton graduate, Ralph Nader, who was battling large corporations. After Mr. Nader gave a lecture at Princeton, Mr. Mayer knew what he wanted to do with his life. He graduated and went to Washington to work for Mr. Nader while Ronald Reagan was in the White House.

"My timing has never been very good," he said jokingly. "I entered adulthood as the country was becoming less democratic and more conservative. I have had to watch the wrong people take power at the wrong time."

He worked in Mr. Nader's office as part of a group trying to save public lands that were being given to large mining firms. He left Mr. Nader's Center for the Study of Responsive Law to get his law degree at the University of Chicago and then do graduate work in law at Harvard. He taught law at Hofstra, but he could not stay away from activism and started a law firm in Princeton and New York that works on quixotic causes, particularly issues that deal with the environment.

He began as a Democrat and first ran for State Assembly in 1993. He drifted away from the party and was elected to the Princeton Township Committee in 1994, his only election victory, as an independent. By 2000 he had soured on the Democrats and joined the Green Party.

He is divorced. His passion, beyond reading and law, is running. He enters local races and lists, with satisfaction, some respectable times.

"Despite what my electoral record suggests, I really am very competitive," he said. "I played high school football and tennis. I run hard. But Nader taught me that you can't give everything away. There are things worth fighting for, even if it looks in the short term as if you cannot win. Someone has to stand up for democratic values even if everyone else within the system does not."