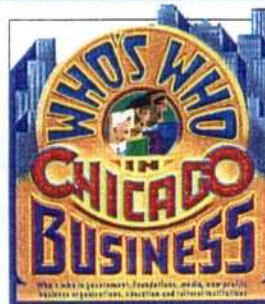


Chicago • Business CRAIN'S



Movers and shakers

In Extra: the area's most influential men and women

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He's the Cherry on the party's cake

By PAUL MERRION

As one of Chicago's biggest Clinton-Gore fund-raisers—a heavy-hitting \$175,000 since 1992—Myron “Mike” Cherry could go just about anywhere he wanted at last week's Democratic National Convention.

And did he ever.

From a private party in the Chicago Bulls locker room to a late-night impromptu dinner with Sen. Paul Simon to any cocktail reception, sky-box or hospitality suite he found interesting, the Chicago attorney had the party's coveted gold “major supporter” pass—and the connections—to get in almost any door.

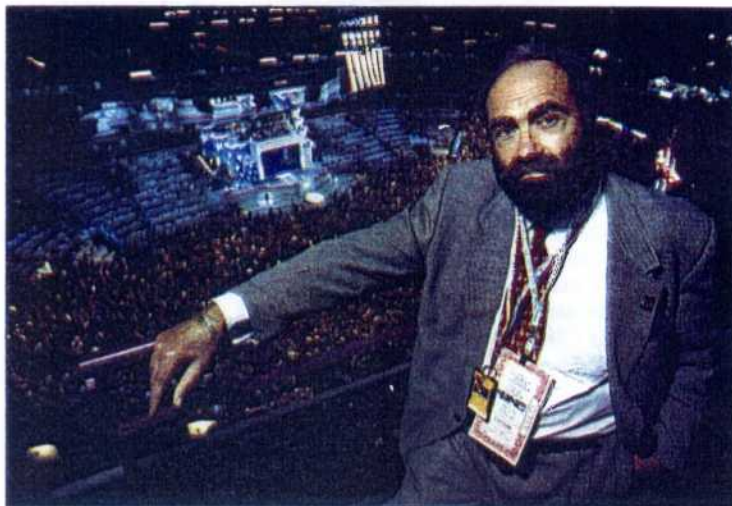
At a crowded invitation-only event at Michael Jordan's Restaurant, Mr. Cherry lifts the pass high above his head so a friend across the room—another major Democratic giver who'd razzed him because both were issued silver ones—can see that Mr. Cherry got his upgraded to a gold.

Such bragging rights, as well as the chance to see and be seen at the hottest events and to cultivate political and fund-raising networks, is what the convention was largely all about for the party's top donors.

“I would rate this in the top three or four weeks of my life,” says Mr. Cherry. “I got 95% of what I wanted.”

It's a perspective shared by only a fraction of the 20,000 delegates and other party faithful at the convention, a world of endless crab puffs and sushi, plenty of face time with Cabinet secretaries and senators and, in the United Center's plush Chicago Stadium Club, first-class leather airline seats (sponsored by Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines) from which to watch the proceedings on high-definition television (sponsored by Glenview-based Zenith Electronics Corp.).

It also was a week in which several people with a long-term eye on public office made pilgrimages to



STEVE LEONARD

What \$175,000 buys: Lawyer and fund-raiser Mike Cherry had the ultimate convention access—a gold credential that let him wander almost anywhere.

Mr. Cherry's six-person law firm, Cherry & Flynn, and his cluttered, 23rd-floor corner suite overlooking the Loop.

Political gallery

The place is something of a shrine to his legal practice and his relationship with the president and other politicians. It's filled with so many pictures and framed letters from President Clinton that some sit propped up on the floor because he hasn't had time to hang them all.

“I'd love your guidance and door-opening skills in Chicago,” New York City Public Advocate Mark Green, a longtime consumer activist who plans to take on Sen. Alphonse D'Amato in 1998, tells Mr. Cherry.

This is their first encounter, a “blind date” arranged by Sen. Simon, whose former chief of staff once worked for Mr. Green. But both men trace their careers back to the public interest path blazed by Ralph Nader in the 1960s.

Mr. Cherry, whose pioneering—and relentless—use of regulatory obstacles helped bring the nuclear power industry to a standstill in the 1970s, tells Mr. Green that if they had known each other back then, they probably would have promised to support each other if one of them ran for office someday.

“Implicitly, we made that pledge, and I would like to support you,” he tells a visibly grateful Mr. Green.

With all the schmooze sessions and A-list parties, Mr. Cherry seems happiest on the convention floor.

Amid endless hugs and handshakes from acquaintances, he drinks in the noise and chaos and political import of the moment.

“This is tons of energy bouncing off everybody,” says Mr. Cherry, who looks like a stern and rumpled rabbi but for his expensive suits and elegant ties.

The floor is the one place where he has to bargain for tickets, trading a lifetime of party loyalty—not to mention more than a few \$20 cigars—for access each day.

Not that it is too difficult. At a reception for Terence McAuliffe, Clinton-Gore national finance chairman, thrown by Chicago executive (and major party donor)

Rashid Chaudary in the Drake Hotel's presidential suite, Mr. Cherry presents the guest of honor with a box of President cigars. As Mr. Cherry leaves, an aide to Mr. McAuliffe hands him five guest passes from a thick envelope of them.

To put that into perspective, the Illinois Democratic Party had more than 300 people on a waiting list for the mere 10 guest passes per day it was allocated.

It's no wonder Mr. Cherry always wears a lapel pin reserved for the 172 people nationwide who pledged early last year to raise \$50,000 for the Clinton-Gore campaign—at a time when few would take bets on the president's re-election, let alone raise serious money.

"He's committed to the party rather than any specific agenda," says Thomas Hynes, Cook County assessor and chairman of Victory '96, the effort to coordinate state and local races here with the Clinton-Gore campaign. "Mike Cherry's a very dedicated guy."

Sources say he has raised considerably more for the president, plus even more for House and Senate candidates in the last two years.

'A very small cog'

"I'm a very small cog in a large wheel," the 57-year-old Chicago trial lawyer insists. But aside from his fervent support for President Clinton and progressive Democrats in general, he consciously decided last year "to be a player in the election because it was in my city. I wanted the highest access."

Although he's a practicing Jew, Israeli issues rank low as a motivating factor. Mr. Cherry insists that he's driven by his sincere respect for President Clinton, and to "foster views of America I'd like. . . . Politics has never generated any business for me."

Mr. Cherry is a commercial litigator who specializes in cases in which he takes a percentage of the damages or other performance-based fees. "We specialize in winning," he cracks. Currently, he's suing musical playwright Andrew Lloyd Webber for allegedly stealing the music to "Phantom of the Opera."

Yet he candidly admits that playing at a high level in politics means that "some people might think I'm an important lawyer. It helps indirectly."

Indeed, by Wednesday he has dug out two potential lawsuits to pursue.

"I just picked up a class-action lawsuit," he casually notes, 10 minutes after arriving at the crowded Sunday night bash thrown by local pooh-bahs David Wilhelm and David Axelrod for about a thousand of their closest political friends.

On Wednesday, he runs into Mr. Nader in the media pavilion while taking a tour to see the convention's other side. After Mr. Cherry mildly chastises him for running for president in California, where he could dilute the Democratic vote, the consumer activist says: "You got time for a lawsuit, Mike?"

'I got the bug'

While he's dabbled in politics since Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, Mr. Cherry's initial foray into serious fund-raising was Sen. Simon's first Senate primary in 1984. "I got the bug," he says.

"Secretly, we all want to be senators," says Mr. Cherry. He and other ideologically motivated donors "just don't have the time or opportunity to do it themselves."

But it's also something of a sport. Early in the week, at a crowded welcoming party for Illinois delegates held at the Chicago Historical Society, Mr. Cherry insists he's there to enjoy himself, not to recruit contributors.

(Unlike William Brandt Jr., CEO of Chicago-based Development Specialists Inc., another major player on the Democratic fund-raising circuit: "This is a target-rich environment." Likely prospects, Mr. Brandt jokes, usually "look lost and have the beginnings of gray hair.")

But a day later, Mr. Cherry is working the crowd at a reception that Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun threw at the Drake in honor of Sen. Simon, who is retiring.

A well-known Chicago real estate broker tells Mr. Cherry her son is in college and she's "looking for a hobby but I don't know whether I'm a Democrat or a Republican."

"You could raise \$50,000 like that," he exclaims, snapping his fingers. Out of her earshot, he later says the "key is to get her excited, follow up to make sure she's invited to events. Get her to meet the

president, and she'll be hooked."

Have cigar, will travel, and this self-described paladin of the legal world moves on from party to party, stuffing \$20 Monte Cristos in the breast pockets of presidential hopefuls, senators, mayors and top party officials.

At Michael Jordan's Restaurant for his second private party there during the week, a top-drawer affair for the 172 members of the Clinton-Gore National Finance Board, Mr. Cherry waits—despite a serious need for sleep—to see the first lady and the second couple make a late-night appearance.

Even Kevin Costner was impressed. "You guys are heavy-hitters," the movie star marvels as he elbows his way past Mr. Cherry.

Ties that bind

On the last night, Mr. Cherry finally gets to meet with the president. It's a small reception before the huge Sheraton gala that raised more than \$3 million for the party. As he's done 15 or 20 times before—since Election Night 1992 in Little Rock—he presents an elegant tie, this time a Hermes adorned with tea cups.

Spotting his benefactor, the president says: "That's Mike Cherry, my haberdasher."