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## Community activist Bristol Colon promises 'inclusive' administration, diverse spread of resources if elected mayor



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer May 11, 2017



Democratic Lancaster city mayoral candidate Norman Bristol Colon canvasses for votes in downtown Lancaster May 7, 2017.

TIM STUHLBREHER | Staff Writer

Norman Bristol Colon might be a candidate for elected office for the first time in his life, but he has been on the campaign trail since he was 5 years old.

And the trail begins on the southern shores of Puerto Rico.

More than three decades before he eventually would campaign and work for Gov. Ed Rendell, organize voters for U.S. Sen. Bob Casey and stump for dozens of local Democratic candidates, Bristol Colon was coming of age in the rural island province of Guayama.

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His mother, Raquel Colon, who spent long days laboring in the fields picking tomatoes, peppers and watermelons, would take him out canvassing during election season.

“The same thing that I am doing now as a candidate, I was doing then,” he said, gesturing toward a few campaign fliers that he brought to a recent interview at Cafe One Eight in downtown Lancaster.

The difference is that this time, nearly 25 years after arriving in Lancaster, it’s his face and his list of experience on the fliers.

For eight years, Bristol Colon served in the Rendell administration as head of Latino affairs, over a period when the Latino population nearly doubled in the commonwealth.

His resume lists time with national organizations and stints working at Millersville University and the School District of Lancaster.

Now, as a self-employed diversity and political consultant, he is bringing what friends describe as a tireless work ethic and an inborn sense of leadership to a campaign that aims to make him the city’s first Latino mayor.

His first challenge comes with next Tuesday’s Democratic primary. He’s facing Meals on Wheels Executive Director [Kevin Ressler](#), 32, and Lancaster City Council member Danene Sorace, 44, who secured endorsements from the city Democratic committee and three-term Mayor Rick Gray.

Bristol Colon, 41, considers the incumbent’s endorsement an act of “betrayal” after the years he spent supporting Gray and his campaigns.

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One of his mantras is: “As long as I know where I come from, I will always know where I’m going” — and loyalty is important to him.

So, Bristol Colon is moving forward, perhaps with one eye in the rearview mirror. And he’s confident about his chances May 16.

His message speaks to not only the 40 percent of the city that is Latino, he says, but to those in every quadrant of the city, of every skin color and background, who are ready for an “inclusive” administration.

## 'He knew what he wanted'

Life on the island had become increasingly difficult when Bristol Colon moved to Lancaster with his mother and two of his four older brothers in 1992.

One of his brothers had died a few years earlier, leaving his mother mentally unable to take care of Bristol Colon, the youngest of the bunch. His father, who was divorced from his mother when Bristol Colon was a toddler, was largely absent.

But his “barrio” in Guayama had made its imprint on the budding community activist. It was where neighbors would stop him on his walk home from school to ask about his grades, offering to buy him a soda or a snack at the local store when his marks were good.

The town’s longtime mayor could be found helping clean up the streets on the weekends.

It was that sense of community that he remembered when he arrived in Lancaster at age 16, speaking little to no English, living in a one-bedroom apartment on South Queen Street with his mother and two brothers.



Democratic Lancaster city mayoral candidate Norman Bristol Colon canvasses for votes in downtown Lancaster May 7, 2017.

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They didn't have much other than each other, "but we didn't need anything else," Bristol Colon said.

At J.P. McCaskey High School, he was placed in the English-learning class for the least proficient speakers.

Knowing he would need a more advanced vocabulary to get to college in a year, he pleaded with his mom to ask the school to bump him up a level or two. It worked — he got into the next level and was on his way to four years at Penn State.

"He knew what he wanted in life, and he was determined," Rosa Sollivan, a McCaskey classmate, said. "He would not let anything stop him."

Sollivan said Bristol Colon was an atypical high school student, never "worried about having a girlfriend or having a car or getting into trouble."

Instead, he joined the Latino student organization, got involved in church and helped create a voter-registration drive for the presidential election of 1992 when he couldn't even vote.

## 'Optimistic leader'

In State College, Bristol Colon found himself in a dorm room with a view of Beaver Stadium. Struggling to pay for school with his mom back in Puerto Rico, he held a job in Old Main as a research assistant to a provost.

"Norman is a dynamic and optimistic leader who always asks the (question), 'Why not?'" said Maria A. Sweet, a retired administrator and instructor who mentored him while he was in school and afterward.

As a Nittany Lion, that leadership helped start the school's first Latino fraternity, Phi Delta Psi Eta, and helped Bristol Colon become president of the Puerto Rican Student Association as a sophomore.

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"I thought I wanted to be a teacher or an engineer or a doctor," Bristol Colon said of his wavering before settling on political science with the help of the school's career services.

Still, money was tight, sometimes having enough for only one meal a day.

"That's part of growing up, I think. And that's why that made me even a stronger person," he said.

## Community advocate

Out of college, he returned to Lancaster, bouncing through a few jobs in about five years.

He worked with students like himself in the Migrant Education Program, from which he had benefited just a few years earlier.

He helped shape minority recruitment efforts at Lancaster University. He led a new Future Planning Center at the School District of Lancaster, addressing drop-out rates and establishing programs to help English-as-a-second-language and international students thrive.

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He also began community activism work. Congress of Puerto Rican Leaders, a group he founded, convened community dialogues at the Southern Market to discuss issues with the School District of Lancaster.

Lillian Escobar-Haskins, a longtime Hispanic community leader in Lancaster who is now semi-retired in San Diego, called him a “born leader” who was not divisive in his quests for social equity.

While he specifically addressed Latino issues including socioeconomic disparities and language issues, he always looks to “bring people together,” she said.

## Governor’s Commission

When Democrat Ed Rendell took over the governor’s mansion in 2003, Bristol Colon already was on his radar.

He had campaigned for Rendell, and his old friend Pedro Cortes was the head of the previous Governor’s Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs. When Rendell bumped Cortes up to secretary of state, it was Cortes who recommended Bristol Colon, “without hesitation,” to take the reigns of the commission.

“He presented himself with a level of class but determination,” said Cortes, who is about 10 years older than Bristol Colon and met him while recruiting at Penn State years earlier.

Bristol Colon’s time in the Rendell administration came during a transformative period for the state’s Latino community.





Between 2000 and 2010, Pennsylvania's Latino population jumped from 395,000 to 720,000, according to U.S. Census Bureau.

"We built a new Pennsylvania, because in every corner of the state, they knew that there was a vibrant Latino community, and that was my job — to make sure that we are integrating that (Latino) agenda" into executive agencies, Bristol Colon said. At 27, he was the youngest ever to assume that office in its now-46-year history.

Defining moments, according to Bristol Colon, were the establishment of a Health Equity Office within the Department of Health and securing \$24 million in state funds for "bilingual education." He also takes pride in helping place Latinos in leadership positions.

"He was very well-regarded among the members of the cabinet and Gov. Rendell," Cortes said.

## Suspended

A blemish to Bristol Colon's time at the commission came on a late December night in 2006. He and his girlfriend, Adriana Malpica, were driving in his state-owned white Chrysler Cirrus sedan and veered off Route 283 into a highway sign and a parked tractor-trailer.

Malpica was driving. She had been drinking earlier but was below the legal limit, according to news reports. Bristol Colon was suspended from his job pending an investigation.

At the time, Bristol Colon's statement blatantly contradicted the police report. He blamed foggy weather, a wet roadway, defective brakes and the truck that he said was parked illegally. Police said the weather was clear, the road dry, the brakes didn't fail, and the truck was parked legally.

He now says he paid the approximately \$8,000 for the damage to the car.

He also now blames the suspension on a "politically motivated" attack. The news of the crash, he said, was leaked to the media by someone who had disagreed with him in the commission. He declined to name who he believed that person was.

As far as the contradictions in the report, "I still feel that I said the truth, and the conditions were the conditions ... it was foggy, as I still remember."

## 'Inclusive'

Luz Colon (no relation) will never forget the first time she encountered Norman Bristol Colon. She was in her 20s, working in a secretary-type role for the Philadelphia City Council and just learning the ropes of politics.

When she attended a Latina women's symposium that Bristol Colon was hosting, she was amazed by his "phenomenal, impactful speech about empowering women and Latinas across the state."

“I said, I want that. I want that job. I want to be just like him,” said Colon, who is now the executive director of the governor’s commission.

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“The great thing about Norman is that while he's very proud about being Puerto Rican and Latino, he's a phenomenal leader when it comes to the greater good.”

Pedro Cortes

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Since leaving the governor’s office in 2011, Bristol Colon’s primary work has been as the founder and CEO of The Progreso Group, an organization that is described as a “multifaceted, results-oriented and visionary organization” on its Facebook page.

The “group” is made up of just himself and Malpica, whom he has been dating for more than a decade. She does catering and special-events coordination while he mainly offers diversity training consulting and motivational speaking.

It’s an effort to spread a “diverse, inclusive agenda” — like the one he’s campaigning on. It’s not just about equal representation for Latinos, but also for the young, the old, the refugees, the straight, the gay, the faith-based community, he says.

An “inclusive” administration means dishing out city contracts and various board appointments in a more diverse way, based on backgrounds and where people live in the city, he said.

Cortes puts it this way: “The great thing about Norman is that while he's very proud about being Puerto Rican and Latino, he's a phenomenal leader when it comes to the greater good.”

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An example of that in action, perhaps, was when he helped found First Thursday Latino in 2008, a tradition that is hailed today as a networking event.

For Escobar-Haskins, it was an example of how active he was and how he could “build bridges and bring people together.”

“Norman was all over the place, and every place,” she said.

His next stop, he hopes, will be City Hall.

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