



Vito J. Lopez, Ex-New York Assemblyman Tainted by Scandal, Dies at 74

By Paul Vitello

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Vito J. Lopez, a former community organizer and New York assemblyman who parlayed a small antipoverty center in Brooklyn into a political machine that made him a power broker in New York City and Albany until he was brought down by a sexual harassment scandal, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 74.

The cause was cancer, his lawyer, Gerald B. Lefcourt, said. Mr. Lopez learned he had leukemia in 1993 and had a recurrence in 2010.

In his heyday, Mr. Lopez, an emotional, sometimes bullying figure, exerted such political power — he was also the Democratic Party leader in Brooklyn — that he was courted by presidential candidates, governors and mayors, Republicans as well as Democrats.

Gripping the wheels of government and politics, he brought hundreds of jobs, thousands of rent-subsidized apartments and an array of social services to one of the borough's poorest areas. And for 30 years, his constituents rewarded him with their votes.

Even after the State Assembly censured Mr. Lopez for sexual harassment in August 2012, he won re-election to a 15th two-year term that November.

The accusations, though, were ultimately his undoing. A legislative ethics panel unanimously upheld the credibility of two accusers, women who said he had sexually harassed them on the job.

And in a subsequent inquiry by the State Joint Commission on Public Ethics, female legislative employees told investigators that Mr. Lopez had groped them, sought to stay in hotel rooms with them, demanded they massage him and urged them to dress provocatively.

Mr. Lopez denied ever harassing or inappropriately touching anyone.

Facing calls for his expulsion, he resigned in May 2013. He also resigned as the Brooklyn party leader, a post he had held since 2005. That September, he sought the Democratic nomination for a City Council seat from Brooklyn but was defeated.

A day after the Assembly censured Mr. Lopez, The New York Times disclosed that top state officials had signed off on cash payments to settle earlier claims brought against him by two other employees. The disclosure entangled a number of state officials in Mr. Lopez's troubles and set off a new round of investigations.

T Among other things, investigators examined the roles that Sheldon Silver, who was then the Assembly speaker, and Thomas P. DiNapoli, the state comptroller, played in reaching the settlements, which included \$103,000 in state money and a personal payment of \$30,000 by Mr. Lopez. Both Mr. Silver and Mr. DiNapoli, who are also Democrats, denied any wrongdoing.

This year, two of Mr. Lopez's former aides, Victoria Burhans and Chloë Rivera, settled harassment lawsuits in federal and state court. The women had accused him of making repeated sexual advances and leering comments about their looks and attire. The settlements involved a payment of \$580,000, almost all of which was paid by the state.

Mr. Lopez could be a formidable political leader. By all accounts, including his own, he demanded unwavering loyalty from almost everyone he helped, whether in getting a job, an apartment, legal assistance or a political appointment.

The engine of his largess was the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Council, a nonprofit organization he founded in 1973. Originally a center with a small staff, the council grew into a private agency that distributed \$25 million a year in federal and state money for housing, health care and educational services to struggling neighborhoods in eastern Brooklyn and western Queens.

By 1990, the organization directly employed nearly 1,000 people and financed programs employing about 1,000 more.

Despite never holding a paid or titled position with the Ridgewood Bushwick council, Mr. Lopez controlled it, by most accounts, from his perch as chairman of the Assembly Housing Committee. The post allowed him to steer government services contracts to the group and to have associates appointed as administrators.

Mr. Lopez's longtime girlfriend, Angela M. Battaglia, continues to be listed as the council's assistant executive director for housing and community relations, a job that paid her about \$210,000 a year as of 2013.

Mr. Lopez's campaign treasurer at the Brooklyn Democratic Party headquarters, Christiana M. Fisher, was the Ridgewood Bushwick council's executive director, with an annual salary of \$336,000. Ms. Fisher resigned in November 2012 amid a federal tax investigation.

Few party leaders in the city had as much influence as Mr. Lopez. Many who owed their jobs to the council and its subcontractors — tenant organizers, building superintendents, receptionists, social workers and home-care attendants — formed the core of one of the most effective campaign machines in the city.

Closing its doors every Election Day, the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Council sent hundreds of volunteers into the Brooklyn streets to get out the vote for Mr. Lopez, his Brooklyn Democratic slate or any others he deemed helpful to himself and the organization.

Party affiliation was rarely a barrier. Bill Clinton paid a visit to Mr. Lopez in a 15-car motorcade during New York's Democratic primary in 1992. Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and Gov. George E. Pataki, both Republicans, made pilgrimages to ask for Mr. Lopez's support during their re-election campaigns, in 1997 and 2002. (They got it.)

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Caroline Kennedy had lunch with him in 2008, when she was considering vying for an appointment to fill the Senate seat held by Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was expected to be confirmed as secretary of state. In 2009, aides to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg sought Mr. Lopez's help in persuading the City Council to allow him to seek a third term as mayor.

Mr. Lopez's power was such that he seemed baffled when someone crossed him. During a public squabble with Nydia M. Velázquez, a Democratic congresswoman from Brooklyn and a perennial insurgent, Mr. Lopez complained to a reporter about what he called her recalcitrance.

"I get a lot of agita as leader," he said. "Why not say to me, 'Hi Vito,' 'How are you, Vito?' 'Are you well, Mr. Democratic Leader?'" He added: "If there is a tiger, you wouldn't go around kicking it, would you? That wouldn't be very wise, would it?"

Vito Joseph Lopez was born on June 5, 1941, in Brooklyn. Raised in Bensonhurst, he told interviewers that his ethnic heritage and upbringing were predominantly Italian-American. (He spoke almost no Spanish; his surname came from a Spanish grandfather.)

After graduating from James Madison High School, he received a bachelor's degree from Long Island University in 1964 and a master's degree in social work from the Wurzweiler School of Social Work at Yeshiva University in 1970.

Survivors include Mr. Lopez's wife, Joan, from whom he was separated, and two daughters, Stacey Anne and Gina M. Lopez Summa. Ms. Lopez Summa was appointed a State Court of Claims judge by Mr. Pataki in 2006 to fill an unexpired term; Gov. David A. Paterson reappointed her to a full 10-year term in 2008.

Mr. Lopez began the Ridgewood Bushwick council in 1973, when, as a city employee, he was sent to convert an empty welfare office to a senior center, mainly to help people with their applications for government benefits.

Before long, he was organizing older adults to attend public hearings around the city to complain about shortages of affordable housing and nursing home care.

Nicole P. Marwell, an associate professor of sociology at the City University of New York who spent months as a doctoral student in the late 1990s studying community organizations in Brooklyn, said Mr. Lopez was one of many community organizers who started nonprofit groups to take advantage of a new government initiative to privatize social services.

His election to the Assembly in 1984 added to his influence in obtaining contracts for the delivery of services that governments no longer wished to dispense directly. The council and its affiliates remain the largest employer in the district.