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A Mayor Fit for a Mansion

Antonio Villaraigosa can't get enough of his job

by ROBERT GREENE

An exasperated-looking guy with a video camera and his equally frantic soundman push into the room full of neighborhood leaders, and from the podium, Antonio Villaraigosa looks over and flashes one of his famous grins.

"I want to apologize to you," the mayor of Los Angeles says, interrupting his own remarks to the Saturday-morning group at L.A. City College. "Nobody told me you guys were following me." He turns back to the 100 or so rapt members of his audience and explains that the camera crew was trying to keep pace with him for the day, from an early-morning pancake breakfast in Mount Washington, to an event in the West Valley, and now back here to LACC. And it's not yet even 11 a.m.

He's wearing a suit. Dark blue. Powder-blue shirt, silk tie. Was he wearing that while he flipped pancakes? It's actually an easier picture to hold in the mind's eye than Antonio Villaraigosa in anything other than a suit.

"I saw them waving to me" from the car, the mayor continues, so he had one of the members of his Saturday team call the video crew and tell them where he was headed next. This stop wasn't one of the several stops on the mayor's published daily list of media events, so they'd have no way of knowing about it. The smile flashes again, and Villaraigosa doesn't say it, because he doesn't have to. It's clear. When you're tracking this mayor, you'd better keep up.

This could have been a tough room. These are presidents and other board members from the city's 80-plus neighborhood councils, who get together every other month to compare notes about how their organizations are working, to ask questions of city officials and to, well, complain about the often-irksome process of working with City Hall.

And they know that neighborhood councils jelled under Mayor Jim Hahn, whom Villaraigosa walloped in the May 17 election. The new mayor didn't pander to these groups, and some of them didn't know what to think. But if there's one thing this guy with the flashing grin and the suit and tie knows, it's neighborhoods. He shows up at pretty much any event his office gets wind of. And this crowd appreciates that. As soon as he walked in the door, these once-ward activists stood up and offered a warmer round of applause than even Hahn ever got here.

From that point on, Villaraigosa knew he had this crowd with him. For the most part.

“In two and a half months, I’ve been to virtually every neighborhood in the city,” Villaraigosa tells them, and who’s to say it isn’t true? Well, in this case, one woman in the back.

“You haven’t been to Harbor Gateway,” she says.

“You’re right,” the mayor admits. “Not that one. I’ve been to Wilmington about five times already. No, about seven times. I’ve been to San Pedro about nine times. But I’ve not been to Harbor Gateway. But the point I was making —”

“Not ours,” someone adds. “Not Granada Hills.”

“Oh, I’ve been to Granada Hills,” Villaraigosa shoots back. “I went to the baseball game.”

He glances over at a member of his staff, who must be wondering whether to pull out a logbook to prove that the appearance took place. But the mayor is already moving on.

“The point was, I’ve been to virtually every community here,” he says, again to applause. “You know I love this city. I was born and raised here. You’ve heard me say that a thousand times.”

Oh, at least. I mean, please. In every campaign he’s ever run, dating back more than a decade. Maybe it’s a defense against the taunts that every young Latino with the lilt of the Eastside in his speech endures at one point or another. But it’s good to hear. “I love this city. I was born and raised here.” So it’s okay to love this city? Damn straight.

Now, I run into people around the city who say they were enthusiastic Antonio Villaraigosa voters, and they ask me, “So, how’s he doing?” The question often leaves me stumped. How do you think he’s doing?

“But really,” some ask, “when will we know? When will we know if he’s really going to be different?”

I’ve found myself saying things like “after the special election in November,” or “after the first of the year.” But as soon as those words are out, they sound just plain wrong. I guess what I really mean to say is this.

What were you expecting? This is Antonio Villaraigosa. The man loves being mayor. No, that's not quite right. The man loves being mayor of Los Angeles. He loves being everywhere, all the time. He loves the trappings of office, he loves the people, he loves the attention. He loves the city. He loves tweaking the press (he calls us "trolls," by the way). He loves crisis and he loves resolution.

You could tell that by the way he rushed over to LAX when that Jet Blue flight with the damaged landing gear was circling. I mean, does the mayor of Los Angeles really have to be there for the landing? But then, why not? The FAA and the airline made a point of not revealing the pilot's name, pending an investigation. Ah, but this is Villaraigosa's city. He got a word with the pilot and then told the world his name was Scott Burke, and that he was a cool customer.

Or how about moving his family into the Getty Mansion? He's the mayor. That's his house. For 12 years, L.A. was a city where the mayor didn't much care for the trappings. Now it's got someone who does, and this jaded town is, if not yet delighted, at least pleasantly amused.

Next week, Villaraigosa's going to be on *The George Lopez Show* (playing himself, of course). And, the *Korea Times* tells us, he's planning a trip to Asia. And now he's filling potholes like crazy. Smiling, shaking hands, getting an earful. It's as if he were county Supervisor Kenny Hahn!

Wait a minute.

Kenny Hahn, the ex-mayor's late father? That's who Antonio Villaraigosa whupped Jimmy Hahn to be? I can be your dad better than you can?

Well — okay. One of the mayor's jobs is to make the city feel good about itself, and if he fills a bunch of potholes along the way, great.

You expected more? More is possible. He's appointed the most environmentally oriented city commissions in L.A. history. Will we get cleaner air? Could be. We'll see. More rail? Don't hold your breath, but don't write it off either. What about the better schools he promised? What about the additional cops? A more livable city? More business?

Could happen. But he just took office this summer, and summer ended only, what? Two weeks ago?

Jim Hahn was an L.A. kind of mayor. He got things done without fanfare, and look what it got him. He loved the city but didn't make a big deal about it. Did the city embrace him? No way. Doesn't matter if it's fair. It's the way it is.

Antonio Villaraigosa, after not quite 100 days in office, may publish a list of accomplishments, such as a new ethics code, but, really, that's not something anyone cares much about. Villaraigosa's L.A. is a city with a mayor. A mayor whom everybody knows. One who wants to see us and meet us. Is it enough?

It's a start.