

‘Kalu has a chance in Castlebar’

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By Chinedu Onyejelem

LATE AFTERNOON on Sunday 17 May – just 18 days till the 5 June local elections – one would have expected Fine Gael’s Nigerian candidate in Mayo to be canvassing strongly for votes, or reflecting on his campaign strategies. But instead he is in Galway, studying.

“I am actually preparing for my final exams tomorrow, for a law degree in NUI Galway,” says Okey Williams Kalu, who has been driving between his home in Castlebar and the Galway campus every day for the last three years.

“I am happy with my ability to go back to college as a mature student to study law, which I always wanted to do – not withstanding the degrees I already have, and my responsibilities as a husband, father of four children, and a volunteer with seven different organisations in Mayo.”

Despite the challenge of his educational pursuits, Kalu took on the added challenge of running in the local elections during his final year. With a manifesto that includes working towards affordable childcare facilities, more affordable homes and good facilities for the elderly, he says he wants to be a strong voice for the people of Castlebar.

If elected, Kalu could become the first black councillor in the town. He will also be competing against another African, Eddie Kimpwene from DR Congo, who is contesting as an independent candidate.

And even ahead of the polls, Kalu has started working to fulfil his campaign promises. While in the local post office recently, he realised that the elderly were queuing for too long to access services.

“Some of them had difficulty standing for too long because of their age. Some of them wanted to buy only stamps or just to collect their entitlements,” he says. “I called on the post office to introduce a fast-track system for the elderly so that they would not have to be standing. I am glad that they have taken it on board. The post office has also brought in stamp vending machine as a result.”

When asked what kind of reaction he is getting when he is out canvassing, Kalu says he could not have been a candidate in any other constituency.

“People are very enthusiastic about my candidacy. The support I have received in Castlebar has been extremely tremendous. Myself and my family, on every door we knock at, they say they need new faces that will bring new ideas and also reflect the multicultural nature of Ireland.”

Even some apparently racist attitudes in the area – in some places, his face has been cut off Fine Gael’s group posters for the party’s six candidates – are not enough to get Kalu down.

Indeed, many in Castlebar – including Fine Gael’s leader Enda Kenny – are increasingly rating Kalu’s chances of getting in due of the contributions he is making in the community. The party’s heavyweights in the town, including Kenny’s wife Fionnuala, have all gone canvassing with him.

Speaking to *Metro Éireann* recently, Enda Kenny said he hoped Kalu would top the polls: “He is one of the six standing for the Town Council in Castlebar. He seems to be getting on pretty well with his campaign. He seems to be enjoying it and we’ll see how it’ll work out in the next few weeks.”

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