

'Polish candidates are standing tall'

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By Emilia Marchelewska

WHEN IRELAND'S borders were opened to the new EU accession states in 2004, it not only allowed immigrants from eastern and central Europe to fill gaps in the Irish labour market, but also brought in massive intellectual and skills potential.

People were slow to realise this at first, as new arrivals from Poland secured work mainly in low skilled jobs that belied their level of education. Since then, however, many have moved up the career and social ladders, contributing more and more to their local communities. And this year, some will even be standing in the local elections.

Katarzyna Gaborec is one of this new political breed, running for Fianna Fáil in Mullingar Town Council. And she already has some experience in politics. After graduating in law in Poland, she worked at a legal office and she was involved in the European parliamentary campaign of Polish senator Ryszard Matusiak. Subsequently she stood in the Polish local elections herself.

When first arrived in Ireland in 2007, Gaborec worked in a hotel and as a bartender before taking a position at a company that looks for investment opportunities in Poland. Today she not only takes care of its Irish office but also manages legal affairs in the Polish branch of the company.

Gaborec has since built strong links with the Polish community in Mullingar, setting up the local Polish association where she also provides a drop-in information service and legal advice.

“As a councillor I want new-comers to feel at home here, to be aware of their rights and entitlements and improve their access to information,” she says. “I also would like to facilitate integration of our community and work on further development of the town.”

Tomasz Askuntowicz is similarly settled into life in Ireland. He has been living in Tullamore for more than four years with his wife Barbara and their two children, Karolina (eight) and seven-year-old Kacper.

He is well known in the local community as a businessman, and for his engagement with the 600-strong local Polish community.

Askuntowicz came to Ireland with little English. But while working he improved his language skills, got involved with the Tullamore Parish Council, did courses in interpreting and community development, organised several sport and cultural integration events and never said 'no' when he was asked for help.

“There are many Polish people here without [good] English,” he says. “I go with them to Garda stations, hospitals, health centres. I always give my phone number in case somebody needs help.”

Askuntowicz is standing for Fine Gael in an electoral area populated mainly by Polish, Lithuanians and Irish. One of his main goals is to improve relations between the different communities.

While canvassing, he discovered that the recession and alienation are big concerns among the local community.

“When people lose their jobs they feel lost and useless, become depressed,” he says. “I want to drag them out of homes and engage in volunteer work, and after work have maybe a grill party with an open fire as we do it in Poland.

“I would like to see more social clubs, mothers and children groups and more activities for children and teenagers – while some are into sports and attend hurling or football training a few times per week, many do not.”

Both Gaborec and Askuntowicz believe that it is not only Polish votes or immigrant votes that might get them elected, but also the desire for change and new ideas among the Irish.

“There are some people who have been councillors here for 15 or 20 years and people are not happy with their work, so this is an opportunity,” says Askuntowicz. But Gaborec is more circumspect: “I have the same chance as anybody else to be elected.”

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