

SCACCIA

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into the chamber of the executioner prepares you to be the leader of a mid-size American city, but the gravity of it all must have a profound impact on a person.

"It's a ministry," Protogyrou said. "I have been given a responsibility and I take my responsibility seriously."

The cycle of life and death plays out every day in our sweet city on the water. Nowhere is that procession more acute than in our public housing projects, where children play in the streets and plagues like food insecurity, diabetes, joblessness, and the dimmed hope of failing schools leaves the thick black line between here and gone feeling perilously grey.

"We need to be working with children from when they leave the hospital," Protogyrou said as he drove us into Tidewater Gardens on a guided tour of his Norfolk. Clotheslines swayed between the buildings. Little girls pushed even smaller girls in strollers. "I don't believe (these people) have been a focus."

While he's been a city councilman for six years, Protogyrou has been a private lawyer for 29 years. He regularly defends indigent clients who have been assigned to him from the state. They are men and women accused of humanity's worst crimes, with nobody to help them but a theoretically just system, and this man behind the wheel.

"My grandpa sold peanuts to students here," Protogyrou said, pointing to where his Greek-born grandfather set up his push cart on St. Paul's Boulevard, in front of what is now The Hurrah Players. "That was 100 years ago."

We headed north through a very different city than a century before.

"All the Greeks, Jews and blacks were together



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Norfolk mayoral candidate Andy Protogyrou at the The New Pancake House and Grill on Granby Street in Wards Corner.

on Church Street," Protogyrou said as we passed through a now virtually all-black neighborhood. "That was just a generation ago."

We drove north to Protogyrou's turf, Wards Corner, where The New Pancake House and Grill on Granby Street was being opened for us. The owner, Nick Renesis, sat with us the entire interview, throwing two cents (and sometimes three) into stories about how Wards Corner used to be, complete with monkey in the window next door.

"He was at Hofheimer's in a big glass cage," Renesis said. "Kids would go up and bang on the windows."

"I was that little kid!" Protogyrou said with a boyish enthusiasm that comes out when he's at his best.

Just across the street is the Midtown Shopping Center that for years was borderline blighted, but has recently been revitalized in a pleasing, if bland, way. There is new public art. Apartments known for drugs and crime have been razed.

"I call this City Hall North," Protogyrou said, biting into a lobster roll. "It's part of the renaissance of Wards Corner. This is what they hired me to do."

I asked why there was movement on the property across the street after years of neglect.

"The owner did that because I threatened to put Little Creek through it," Protogyrou said, noting the city can condemn a property for a road project, such as straightening Little Creek Road.

This is why you want a lawyer on the city's side — and also why it kind of scares you. He is an expert at finding the seams in the fabric of laws and knowing just how to exploit them. If you took the City of Norfolk apart, he could put it back together blindfolded.

But just as much as he's a lawyer and judge, Protogyrou is a Greek who believes in freedom and dissent, an enthusiastic soccer player, and an effusively proud graduate of Virginia Military Institute who "can't fathom" lying, cheating, or stealing.

There is, of course, also a grace to be found in all the violence and death he deals with in his day job. Protogyrou told me he gives his cell phone number to death row inmates.

"They would call me at night, and I'd say I'm sorry, I'm reading to my kids," Protogyrou said. "The client would say, 'That's OK. Just put the phone on speaker so I can listen too.' I would lay in bed reading Harry Potter, and I would say, I'm ready for tomorrow."

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