

Archive

# From Juvenile Felon to Student President

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*Politicians have sometimes been convicted of crimes, criminals have sometimes gone into politics, and not just at the national level. In the small town of Shelby, North Carolina, high school students have elected a convicted felon to be their student council president this fall. The election of 17-year-old Curtis Preudhomme has divided the town. His supporters say he is an example of redemption and the value of a second chance. Critics say he shouldn't have been allowed to run.*

In many ways, Shelby, North Carolina is a typical Southern town, with stately Victorians and decrepit bungalows, shady streets and suburban sprawl. With 25,000 residents, Shelby is still small enough so that just about everybody knows each other. That's why many people remember when Curtis Preudhomme helped rob Cheng's Chinese Restaurant... twice. He was 13 years old.

"I was a young man and I had made a terrible mistake," he said. "And now I see that it wasn't worth making this mistake and now, I can just only move forward, and try to succeed and do the best that I can do now."

But for restaurant owner Michael Cheng, moving on has been difficult.

**Cheng:** "They point the gun to one of my female hostess."

**Reporter:** "Did they point the gun at you, too?"

**Cheng:** "Yeah, yes. Right in front of my face. And then they tell me that, 'give me the money, give me the money, give me the f-money,' you know."

Today Curtis Preudhomme is 17. A slightly built, serious young black man with braided hair and the beginnings of a beard. He has walked a painstaking road to rectify his life. He was tried as an adult, pleaded guilty to robbery and put on intensive parole. After he was caught smoking pot and violating his curfew, he

spent nine months at a youth reformatory. Then last summer, after his release, Curtis went to Shelby High School with his mother and asked if he could attend.

"Because I want an education. I want to be aware of things," he said. "There's so many things going on in society now. And I like to address different issues myself. So I want to be able to contain the knowledge just as much as every other student has the opportunity to."

Shelby High is a school of about 800 students, half African-American and half white. It's known for its rigorous academics. Curtis has held his own. He has a B average, is active in the school drama program, and plans to attend college. On Sundays, he directs the choir at a local church.

Merriman Nichols is the faculty advisor for Shelby High's Student Council. She says Curtis has motivated her to stay in teaching and has provided a positive role model for other students.

"It inspires them that, 'Hey, you know, Curtis did it, why can't I?," she said. "Curtis became student president, why can't I do good? Curtis made his grades come up, why can't I do that?"

Not all the students knew about Curtis' conviction but his campaign speech was persuasive. He got 54 percent of the vote, beating out three other candidates. Yet the decision to let him run was fraught with questions. Bill Anderson, Shelby High's principal, made the call.

"The decision was based on the content of his character as a student this year at Shelby High School," Mr. Anderson said. "It didn't go back to look at his record, to something that occurred three and a half years ago. It went more to the young man who's a student here now and has shown us that he can be quite a leader. I do regret that it has created such divisiveness."

The election has raised questions about the kind of standards set for young people, and about who has a say in the public schools. There's mixed opinion

among students.

**Student #1:** "We already have a lot of bad things going on at school and we don't need somebody who's had a criminal record to be helping students and showing them examples. Because it's just not a good he's not a good role model for the other students."

**Student #2:** "He earned his position; nobody handed it to him. And I think a lot of the grownups are just making a big deal about this. And it is a big deal, but they don't know him personally, they just know about his past, they don't know about him now. And they're just making snap judgments and going from fear."

Some parents, though, say the adults must set the standards.

At a recent School Board meeting, Larry Wilson said it was too early to tell whether Curtis Preudhomme had turned around for good. Mr. Wilson asked that Curtis be removed from office.

"Damage has been done to the reputation of the high school by this decision," he said. "And as a parent of four children who have been or still are in the school system and as a past graduate myself, I'm concerned about the message that you send to all of our children if you fail to act on this."

The School Board has decided to let this Student Council president serve out his term. But it has also directed the school administration to tighten up its policy, so this situation won't come up again.

That compromise hasn't pleased everyone. Crime victim and restaurant owner Michael Cheng is so unhappy he's taking his two children out of Shelby High School and sending them elsewhere. Meanwhile Margie Petty, who has four sons in the school system, is concerned that if the policy gets stricter, other at-risk kids may not be able to follow in Curtis' footsteps.

"I mean, what about the kids that have already made mistakes, and they are influenced by Curtis to change?," she asked. "So where do they go? Nowhere. So

that just discourages other kids. What's the use of trying?"

And lurking in the background are charges of racism from both sides. Some of Curtis' supporters say if he were a white student, he wouldn't have been criticized. Some opponents say that because he's black, school officials won't remove him and risk being called politically incorrect.

Meanwhile, Curtis Preudhomme knows the whole town of Shelby will be watching him over the next school year. And he knows what he wants them to say when his term as student council president is up.

"Wow. Like, 'Man, he really got in there, he stepped up to the leadership position, and Shelby High School has really been elevated to another level,'" he said.

How well he does may have an impact not just on other struggling kids but on how the community deals with them in the future.