



Will there be a new face in City Council and what would his famous father, Mike Royko, think of it all?

By Rick Kogan

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Sam Royko, son of former Chicago Tribune columnist Mike Royko, sits for a portrait at the Billy Goat Tavern on July 13, 2022, in Chicago. Royko is running for City Council in the 1st Ward. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

There are ghosts aplenty in the Billy Goat Tavern, that subterranean saloon, and none more notable than that of [bygone columnist Mike Royko](#). One late afternoon last week Mike's son, Sam, was sitting there talking.

“What do you think my dad would say?” he asked.

Specifically, he was asking what Mike might have to say about Sam's decision to run for alderman of the 1st Ward.

The formal announcement was to come in a few days, in front of supporters and members of his family and many members of the media.

Announcements of this running-for-alderman type are not uncommon but few could attract the kind of attention that this one did, since the name Royko still resonates with Chicagoans 25 years after his death.

“I hear that every time I mention my name, people ask, ‘Are you related to...?’ and that makes me nothing but proud,” said Sam, who is an attorney.

Sam was adopted shortly after his birth, as was his younger sister, Kate, now working in retail and pursuing a creative writing career. Mike's children from his first marriage are David, a clinical psychologist and writer, and Robert.

Sam was only 9 when his father died. His recent visit to the Billy Goat in advance of his formal announcement was something of a pilgrimage, for his father's face and name are plastered so liberally on the tavern's walls as to make it a shrine.

[No one knew Chicago like Mike Royko. And he offered lessons in journalism no teacher could pass on.]

As the two of us talked, it was impossible not to recall the nine-year-old Sam mingling with relatives, his father's friends and admirers a few nights after Mike died in 1997.

He does have strong memories of his father, and feels his shadow. In 2010, when he was a 23-year-old political science student at DePaul University, [he wrote this](#) for the Tribune's editorial pages, in a generally favorable commentary about Mayor Richard M. Daley's announcement that he would not seek reelection: “Yes, the mayor has made mistakes. Some residents resent him because of the tough economy, for privatizing the parking meters, the budget deficit and the failed 2016 Olympics bid. But we can't forget that

he has done much for this city. Just like his father, a man my dad often chastised, the young Boss loves Chicago.”

His next appearance in the paper came last year with [an editorial](#) written in the wake of his longtime girlfriend [Erin Groble, who works for Rotary International] being carjacked at 2 p.m. on a sunny Saturday in Wicker Park.



Mike Royko is seen at his desk at the Chicago Daily News in 1974. (Frank Hanes / Chicago Tribune)

He wrote, “Dialogue all across the city and from grassroots up to the top of the governmental food chain is key.

Perhaps then, collaboratively, we will be able to truly develop a comprehensive plan for crime prevention and community building.

The current system is broken. Chicagoans demand better. We deserve better.”

“That is the trigger that pushed me to get involved, to seek answers, to reach out to the community,” Sam told me. “If there has been a silver lining to this, it’s that Erin and I found so many good people in this community. The other thing is that this is the very neighborhood, this ward, where my father grew up.”

[Take a look back at Mike Royko’s Chicago Tribune columns on the 25th anniversary of his death]

Indeed, above his parents’ Milwaukee Avenue tavern called the Blue Sky Lounge was where Mike learned some early political lessons and grew up not to be particularly fond of aldermen, often taking out after individuals but offering such general assessments as:

A decent precinct captain used to be out there with a wad of bills big enough to choke his clout, handing a few dollars to every needy voter. And there was nothing wrong with that. With the kind of aldermen Chicago has had, people should be paid to vote for them.

Hasn’t it occurred to you that one reason there aren’t as many New York councilmen and judges in jail is that they aren’t as stupid as our aldermen and judges?

I wouldn’t call any alderman a loudmouth because it wouldn’t be accurate. Most of them have prudently learned to talk in a whisper. A whisper is harder for a listening device to pick up.

The reputation of the alderman has been shabby, for many have succumbed to the temptation to pocket-stuff. Many have wound up in prison as a result. The list of such characters and their crimes is a lengthy one. It was among the reasons Mike once suggested that the city’s motto be changed from “Urbs In Horto,” which means “City in a Garden,” to “Ubi Est Mea,” which means “Where’s mine?”

So, it was an obvious question: “What would Mike think?”

Sam’s mother, Mike’s widow, Judy Arndt, told me, “I do think I have the ability to slip into Mike’s shoes when it comes to Sam. He spent as much time as he possibly could with him and they shared a lot of important experiences. I can say confidently that he would be so proud of the man Sam has become and that he wants to get into politics for the right reasons, to help people.”

She is very politically savvy. Not only were her parents deeply involved, her sister, Connie, who died last week, was married for a time to former 43rd Ward alderman William Singer.

“Sam is actually following in my father’s footsteps,” Judy said.

Sam is named in honor of his late grandfather, Sam Arndt, a prominent Rock Island attorney who, with his lawyer wife Dorothy, was active in national, state and local politics.



Sam Royko, son of former Chicago Tribune columnist Mike Royko, sits for a portrait at the Billy Goat Tavern on July 13, 2022, in Chicago. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

The City Council is composed of 50 men and women who, to varying degrees of intelligence, power and effectiveness, run this city. They form the legislative body of Chicago, meeting at least once every month to debate and vote on all manner of things important to the way the city operates. They also oversee, on a more intimate level, the needs, concerns and complaints of the 55,000 people, on average, who live in their wards.

In 2006, I embarked on a series in the Tribune magazine profiling each one of the city's aldermen, spurred by the realization that very few Chicagoans could name more than a handful of aldermen and a great number of people did not even know the name of the alderman of the ward in which they lived.

It's not a bad job: the highest paid get \$130,000 a year, plus expenses for staff, office, envelopes and such. For some it's a full-time job; others have separate careers.

Historically, the 1st Ward was the city's most garishly corrupt, a comfy home to boodlers and bandits and assorted mobsters starting in the late 1800s with "Bathhouse John" Coughlin and his pal Michael "Hinky Dink" Kenna, colorfully captured in my father Herman Kogan's book, "Lords of the Levee," written with his newspaperman pal Lloyd Wendt.

That hanky-panky continued into the early 1990s when Ald. Fred Roti went to jail.

The current 1st Ward alderman is Daniel La Spata, who was elected in 2019 and is yet to announce his intentions about reelection. Certainly, candidate Sam Royko will have things to say about him as will the handful of others expected to jump in the race in the recently redrawn ward.

Royko's announcement took place Tuesday night at Phyllis' Musical Inn, a venerable tavern at 1800 W. Division St.

The next day the hard work started.

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