

# Cummings basking in glow of victory

## 7th District primary win 'hasn't sunk in yet,' he says

By JOHN RIVERA  
SUN STAFF

A day after his decisive primary victory, Elijah E. Cummings seemed a little awed by the prospect of being poised to assume the historic 7th District congressional seat.

In Annapolis yesterday morning, the self-described "son of sharecroppers" was greeted by an extended standing ovation from his colleagues in the House of Delegates. He got calls from national magazines — *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Time* and *Newsweek* among them. And, as he sat for an interview yesterday afternoon at a Mount Vernon restaurant, a stream of well-wishers approached him to offer congratulations and shook his hand.

"It really hasn't sunk in yet," a subdued Mr. Cummings said as he paused briefly during a schedule pursued at breakneck speed. "But I'm beginning to feel the magnitude of it."

Mr. Cummings, 45, the speaker pro tem of the House of Delegates from West Baltimore, is likely to become the next congressman from the 7th District, a stronghold of Baltimore black political power. He would follow in the footsteps of Parren J. Mitchell, Maryland's first black congressman, and Kweisi Mfume, who resigned the seat to lead the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

He faces Republican Kenneth Kondner next month but is virtually assured of election in a district that has an 80 percent Democratic registration.

Yesterday, Mr. Cummings reflected on his path from being the third of seven children growing up in South Baltimore in a two-story brick rowhouse on West Cross Street to becoming an attorney and a legislator. He recalled how at age 10 he first wanted to become a lawyer. He would walk to the courthouse, sit in the courtrooms and listen to cases. "I wanted to look like these guys. I wanted to say those big words and help people," he said.

His dream was almost quashed by a sixth-grade counselor who

discouraged Mr. Cummings from his aspiration. "He said 'Son, I think you should set your sights a little lower'" and concentrate on learning a trade instead.

Mr. Cummings went to his mother and recounted the conversation. "She said, 'You can be anything you want to be. You just have to be the best you can be,'" Mr. Cummings said.

He graduated from Howard University, where he briefly considered becoming a pharmacist. "I just could not convince myself that I wanted to fill bottles with pills," he said.

### 'A good litigator'

He went on to University of Maryland law school and passed the bar and began to practice in Baltimore, where he caught the attention of Circuit Judge Edgar Silver, now retired.

"He's a good litigator, which effectively means he's good on his feet, he can speak on his feet," Mr. Silver said. "He wasn't very adversarial. He fought hard for his clients, but he was just a gentleman in the courtroom."

His start in politics came when in 1982, Del. Lena K. Lee decided to retire and approached Mr. Cummings, who recalled that she wanted someone who was a woman and a lawyer to fill her seat. Mr. Cummings filled only one of the requirements. "But she said, 'You'll do,'" he said.

During his career in Annapolis, Mr. Cummings forged a reputation for his oratory skill, and has several times moved his fellow legislators with his impassioned speeches — delivered in the rhythmic cadence of a preacher — from the floor of the General Assembly.

Both of Mr. Cummings' parents, who earned 50 cents a day as sharecroppers in South Carolina before moving to Baltimore in the mid-1940s, are Pentecostal ministers. Mr. Cummings said he learned public speaking in prayer meetings his mother would lead on Monday nights.

Mr. Cummings' oratory is impressive, but there is light along with the heat, said state Sen. Clarence W. Blount, a Baltimore Democrat whom Mr. Cummings describes as one of his mentors.

"He can work at your heartstrings and your emotions when he decides to be on an issue. But it isn't just emotion and noise," Mr. Blount said. "If you listen to his argument, it's based on logic and it's based on reason and it's based on good reflective thought."

Mr. Cummings is also known in Annapolis as an effective legislator who can work with many constituencies to help pass bills he supports, a skill he said will serve him well in Washington.

Don't expect him to be a warrior against House Speaker Newt Gingrich, he said. Unlike some of the candidates in the 7th District race, who made opposing Mr. Gingrich and the Republican "Contract with America" a prominent theme, "I didn't mention his name," he said.

"A lot of people call me a bridge builder, but sometimes I feel like I'm the bridge itself," he said.

### Building partnerships

His focus as congressman would be on building partnerships with government, business and the community to solve the district's seemingly intractable problems, which include poverty, crime and joblessness.

Within the next month, he plans to form round tables to address children's issues, health care, economic development and culture and art.

"I do not believe that government should be the sole source for solving problems," he said. "And when I say that, people say, 'Well, you sound like you're becoming a Republican.'"

Absolutely not, he said. "As a matter of fact, I'm dealing with a very practical side of solving problems."

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BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR : SUN STAFF

## The winner

*Elijah E. Cummings speaks at a victory party at the Baltimore Urban League as his mother, Ruth, looks on. Mr. Cummings, who won the 7th District primary decisively Tuesday, said the reality "hasn't really sunk in." (Article, Page 9B)*