

Hopeful or hopeless, would-be candidates keep trying

By Kevin Modesti, Staff Writer

Her first campaign could have been doubly demoralizing, enough to make her never seek office again, let alone do it over and over.

In 2002, Armineh Chelebian got just 4 percent of the vote and finished 10th in a 13-person election for one seat on the San Fernando Valley City Council.

Then it turned out the seat didn't even exist, and Chelebian's effort was rendered academic when the referendum to make the Valley a city was defeated the same day. Discouraged? No, the Winnetka resident has gone on to make three more unsuccessful runs for local and state office, and she announced recently she will try, try again next year for a seat on the Los Angeles City Council.

Her persistence has made the 49-year-old accountant and Republican activist a member of the class of political hopefuls known in the trade as "perennial candidates."

She realizes the label has bright and dark sides. "If someone is going to do it over and over, either they've got to be passionate about it or they have to be crazy," Chelebian said.

This indefatigable bunch includes Nov. 2 candidates ranging from Ferial Masry, a Democrat from Newbury Park making her fourth bid for the 37th District Assembly seat, to Diane Beall Templin, an American Independent Party member whose bid to be California attorney general brings her career total to 14 campaigns for nine offices under six party banners.

It includes such dubious legends as the late Eileen Anderson, who raised funds for multiple L.A. mayoral campaigns by singing in a bikini outside a downtown courthouse. And the late Screaming Lord Sutch, who ran 39 times for the British House of Commons. And the still-ticking John C. Turmel, a Canadian who is on his 74th campaign.

And, of course, it includes Harold Stassen, the one-time Minnesota governor whose nine increasingly futile bids for the Republican presidential nomination from 1948 to 1992 made him synonymous with hapless handshakers.

While they hope voters see the virtue of determination, many end up regarded with - well, what's a word for it?

"Derision?" Ted Brown said with a chuckle, helping an interviewer who was trying to be diplomatic.

Brown, an insurance claims adjuster from Pasadena, made his political debut at age 20 by running for the Assembly while registering Libertarian Party voters on Santa Monica Beach.

Before he decided to sit out the 2010 election season, Brown upped his total to 14 Libertarian campaigns for the House of Representatives, Assembly, U.S. and state Senate, and state insurance commissioner.

His best result came in 2008 when he got 6.9 percent of the vote against Rep. David Dreier, R-San Dimas. But he made his biggest splash in 2000 when he was hauled away by security after protesting the exclusion of minor-party candidates from a congressional campaign debate.

"I got more publicity than I would have if I'd been in the debate," Brown said last week. Brown, 50, describes his reason for running - and running - simply enough: "If you don't run, you can't win."

The smaller parties often put forth retread candidates because nobody else is willing to represent them, and few of those candidates are gripped by either egomania or the delusion they will win, Brown said.

"Most of them don't want to be elected, really," said Brown, whose wife Laura has run for office three times. "They're just doing it to help the party (spread its message). Most of them are anti-government and don't want to serve with those people anyway."

November's statewide ballot includes eight candidates - all from the Libertarian, American Independent and Peace and Freedom parties - who have entered four or more previous elections and never won.

Then there's Merv Evans, a Los Angeles resident who has reached at least the primary round in 13 previous city, state and congressional races, and has declared himself a write-in candidate in the 33rd Congressional District.

Though Bill Clinton and both presidents Bush began their political careers with single defeats, perpetual losers never seem to make late-career surges to the White House.

But that didn't deter Lar Daly, who wore an Uncle Sam hat as he campaigned for Illinois offices from 1938 to 1978, or Ray "Spanky the Clown" Wardingley, who surprised many when he won the Republican nomination for Chicago mayor in 1995, or Shawn O'Hara, a Mississippian who sought eight offices at once in 2007.

There's nothing so eccentric about Masry, 62, a history and government teacher at Cleveland High School in Reseda who carries the Democratic flag in the race against Republican Jeff Gorell for the open 37th District Assembly seat. Masry came within 4.2 percentage points of defeating Assemblywoman Audra Strickland, R-Westlake Village, in 2008.

Masry says having grown up in Saudi Arabia makes her appreciate U.S. democracy even more. "I have to be an example to my students," she said.

Campaign manager David Atkins said it made sense for a candidate like Masry to build name recognition in three races against an incumbent before seeking the seat vacated by Assembly term limits.

"It's inspiring in many ways," Atkins said of candidates' persistence. "If they keep going even though they've never come close to winning, then you might call it vanity."

The Iranian-born Chelebian plans to run in 2011 to replace the retiring Greig Smith in the 12th District City Council seat.

After being routed by Bob Blumenfield, D-Van Nuys, in the 40th District Assembly race in 2008 - following losses for L.A. City Council in 2003 and Assembly in 2006 - Chelebian said she told herself: "OK, Armineh, time to take a break. Enough." Then she couldn't sit still.

"For me, it's a passion, it's a mission that I'm on," said Chelebian, a mother of two. "Running for office is not easy. It does take a big sacrifice. The time you spend doing things for the campaign is time you can't spend with your family or spend working."

She said she receives mixed reactions: "There are going to be people who look at me and say, 'Ah, Armineh - she's a loser,' and (people who say), 'Good for you, Armineh, don't give up ...'"

Chelebian said if she wins, she will try to serve as "the voice of the people" in City Hall. And if she loses, might she run again? "I can't say I won't," she said.