

by Kyle Wingfield

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A first-term South Florida congressman may seem an odd headliner for one of the year's biggest fund-raisers for Georgia Republicans. To understand, you have to know Allen West.

West grew up in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward and graduated from Grady High School before going on to college and a career in the Army. Last November, he was one of the first two black Republicans elected to Congress since 2000, and already he has become a crowd pleaser among conservatives and a lightning rod for the left.

His speech at Monday's GOP dinner in downtown Atlanta upheld both reputations. West compared America's journey to Homer's "The Odyssey," with the hero beset by the siren song of "hope and change," twin monsters of debt and the deficit, and the Calypso-like complacency and dependency of the social-welfare state.

But earlier, West's theme of "coming home" was personal as the 50-year-old played back-seat tour guide of his old stomping grounds.

He led a small party down Boulevard to his old elementary school at Our Lady of Lourds: "You grew up in the shadow of [Martin Luther King Jr.'s] gravesite." Then down Auburn Avenue: "Look at all the closed-up stores. Once upon a time, this was the center of the black community." And on to the Sweet Auburn Curb Market on Edgewood Avenue: "My dad was an

awesome cook, and this was where we'd come get our fresh fruit and also fresh fish."

But it was a bit farther north, past the Fort Street United Methodist Church that West's family attended, where he had the car stop and got out.

Rep. Allen West, R-Fla., stands in front of his boyhood home on Atlanta's Kennesaw Avenue, March 21, 2011. (Photo by West's staff)

Kennesaw Avenue runs one way from Ponce de Leon to North Avenue, a pretty street you hardly notice whizzing down either of those thoroughfares. In 1959, Herman and Elizabeth West bought the brick home (price: \$17,000) where young Allen lived until he left for the University of Tennessee.

He spoke fondly of the street where he played stickball for fun and mowed lawns for spending money. "This was a typical, nice, black lower-middle-class street," he said. "Everyone knew each other and looked out for each other."

West hasn't repressed negative memories from that time. He pointed to a rock house across the street — "We used to call it the Flintstone House" — where drugs were sold. And down on Ponce, "We used to have prostitutes that would hang out, and my mom would come and chase them out. People think I'm bold, they should have met my mom."

But he can explain why many people here aren't as well off as before. "They have fallen into a trap of policies that say, we will provide you enough subsistence to exist by, but really they erode the access to opportunities that [people] have. ...

"Conservatives believe that every child in America is born with a ladder. And that ladder is the one for the equal opportunity by which you can achieve whatever dreams or hopes you have. Conservatives believe you should have that safety net that will allow you not to crash, but we want you to climb back on that ladder."

Instead, he said, "Liberal social-welfare policies provide a hammock."

Back in the car, we were pulling away when West yelled "Stop!" and pointed to a home's window — and a symbol of how attitudes have changed in his old neighborhood.

"That's something you would have never seen when I was growing up: a freakin' Che Guevara flag, on Kennesaw Avenue! That's concerning. Aw, man."