



## Tony Norman: A Woodstock for the Democratic (and democratic) spirit



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Everyone needs their faith in democracy restored in regular intervals. I didn't realize how much I was starving for an infusion of democratic hope until I showed up for an open-air rally for Democratic candidates Sunday afternoon at Westinghouse Park in the East End.

Roughly 250 people turned out for the rally at the same time the Steelers were being humbled by the Bengals at a packed home game on the North Shore. Fortunately, all signs of defeatism were restricted to Heinz Field on that beautiful afternoon.

At Westinghouse Park, there were constant calls for the renewal of a democracy at the grassroots, knocking-on-doors level. Tents with banners, yard signs and candidate literature dotted the green. While there may have been a performance of the national anthem at Heinz Field that afternoon, there was no more patriotic space in Pittsburgh than Westinghouse Park during that rally.

There were lines for hot dogs, egg salad, cookies, bottled water — all the amenities needed for a successful rally. Flags waved amid cheers for candidates running for statewide elections for Pennsylvania's appellate courts.

It was also a multiracial, multigenerational crowd who set aside time for the necessary work of maintaining the experiment in democracy that has been a Pennsylvania tradition since the 1600s.

The opening acts at Sunday's rally were state Rep. Ed Gainey, the Democratic nominee for Pittsburgh mayor, and Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. Both warmed up the crowd with smart exhortations that managed to dig a little deeper than the usual Democratic boilerplate.

Both Gainey and Fitzgerald spoke with conviction about the importance of electing Democrats to office in November and every election after that. And while there was an obviously partisan vibe to every speech at that Democratic candidates rally, there was a consistent theme that ran through all of them: a call for a renewal of the lowercase D democratic spirit and increased engagement at the grassroots level, where all of the door-knocking and persuading of one's neighbors takes place.

That's a message that applies and appeals to adherents of every political party and movement, but it was one that the Democrats gathered under the

bright afternoon sun in that park under a clear blue sky took to heart.

Sunday's rally was a platform for four statewide judicial candidates to make their respective cases. They want Democrats to pay attention to their candidacies because Pennsylvania is only an election or two away from being Texas in terms of the dominant judicial philosophy.

What made the enthusiasm of the crowd so invigorating was that it was a rally for candidates who are traditionally the least-known names on a ballot because the seats they're running for aren't as interesting to voters who don't think much about the role judges play at every level of the commonwealth.

The candidates on the November ballot are Judge Maria McLaughlin, who is running for a spot on the state Supreme Court; Judge Timika Lane, a candidate for state Superior Court; and Judges Lori Dumas and David Spurgeon, who are both running for seats on Commonwealth Court.

In a stirring speech before introducing Judge McLaughlin, Kadida Kenner, the executive director of New Pennsylvania Project, carried a placard bearing the face of Bayard Rustin. She wanted to remind the crowd that a protest organizer from West Chester, Pa., was one of the chief architects of the 1963 March on Washington for jobs and freedom.

Ms. Kenner's New Pennsylvania Project is modeled on the New Georgia Project created by former Georgia Rep. Stacey Abrams to turn out the Black and Democratic vote in Georgia to turn two Senate seats once thought impossible for Democrats to win. Kenner's fiery intro was a much-needed statement about the importance of grassroots organizing, especially when it comes to electing judges who both reflect the values of a multiracial community and respect for the role courts have played in being the honest broker when the rights of minorities are threatened.

"We must protect our courts and the independence of our courts," she said to enthusiastic applause. "I'm a Black woman. I go to the courts for justice."

Before Judge McLaughlin took the stage, I initially felt bad for her because I thought Ms. Kenner would be a hard act to follow. I was wrong. In many ways, Judge McLaughlin was even more pointed in her denunciation of the drift toward a Texas-style judiciary throughout Pennsylvania's appellate divisions.

It occurred to me while listening to the petite but fiery judge making a speech that played well with the crowd that whatever we typically think of black-robed judges and the enforced quiet of their chambers, these are some very passionate people who sit on those benches. They also have the same stake in a properly functioning democracy.

These judges see the creeping authoritarianism that would come from a right-wing judiciary running the show in Pennsylvania like it does in Texas, which is why they're motivated to run. They're not frightened — they're angry.

Judge McLaughlin was followed by Judge Lane, a candidate for Superior Court out of the First Judicial District in Philadelphia. Judge Lane impressed the crowd as yet another dynamic speaker and highly experienced judge who was able to touch upon her Black working-class background as a school for empathy.

It was an impressive lineup of Democrats punctuated by local organizers who will one day be candidates for various high offices themselves.

Morgan Overton, the president of Young Democrats of Allegheny County, is clearly headed for a career in politics. The charismatic young organizer from Penn Hills quoted the venerable Fannie Lou Hamer while denouncing "the Donald Trumps in our own backyard" when she took the stage after Judge Lane.

Murrysville activist Michelle McFall introduced Judge David Spurgeon with an admonition to “vote for every Democrat.” She told the audience about the challenge of being a Democrat in a “sea of red” in Westmoreland County where she has mounted runs for office in the past.

It was a subtle reminder that despite the overwhelming voter registration advantage of Democrats in Allegheny County, it doesn’t make sense to take anything for granted in this corner of Appalachia where Donald Trump easily won the surrounding counties.

Judge Spurgeon, of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, is better known in these parts and is appreciated for his empathetic and compassionate work in Family Court. He’s the kind of judge Pennsylvania needs on the bench of our Commonwealth Court.

Judge Spurgeon’s fellow Democratic candidate for Commonwealth Court, Judge Dumas, is a nearly two-decade veteran trial court judge out of Philadelphia, where she presides over juvenile human-trafficking cases.

Judge Dumas understands trauma in both families and societies when she sees them. She didn’t equivocate during her speech. She rejected the criticism that she is an alarmist because of her concerns about creeping judicial and political authoritarianism. “I’m realistic,” she said.

Like all of the candidates, Judge Dumas is concerned about the susceptibility of elected officials and judges to political pressure. Like her colleagues, she raised the alarm of a hard-right shift in the state’s judicial philosophy if Democrats don’t prevail in November.

There were plenty of other candidates milling about in the crowd on Sunday. Chelsa Wagner and Lisa Middleman, both candidates for Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, were there, as well as Allegheny County Sheriff Kevin Kraus and state Rep. Summer Lee. I also spotted several members of Pittsburgh City Council, as well as activists from the various regional pro-Democratic groups.

I was heartened by the general mood of optimism that permeated the park. There was no doom and gloom. Instead, there was a steely determination to knock on every door in Pittsburgh between now and Election Day. These Democrats are not going to tolerate complacency when the stakes are so high.

The mantra, as noted by several candidates and the activists that introduced them, was that the idea of an “off-year election” is to be permanently banished from the Democratic vocabulary. They want folks to know the truth. There may be two elections per year that citizens will have to vote in to maintain their freedom. There’s no sugarcoating it. We’re only as free as the frequency of our voting.

Driving home, I had only one regret: I hadn’t grabbed any yard signs.

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