

LOCAL

'I figured there were people before me': Transgender candidate a first in New Bedford

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NEW BEDFORD — For five years Arya Witner worked at the downtown New Bedford bus terminal next door to City Hall "and witnessed the worst of both."

Witner said she saw multiple overdoses in the terminal's restroom from that vantage point. And, she claims, City Hall failed to address the issue.

"These are our neighbors who are so down in life, and begging for a lifeline that they would go sit on a dirty bathroom floor and shoot themselves up," she said.

Witner, 38, said her focus in seeking an at-large seat on the New Bedford City Council is to help those with drug problems, as well as those who are unhoused or homeless.

Witner is also the city's first openly transgender candidate to seek election to the council, she said, and most likely the first ever to seek any elective post in the city.

"I was a little surprised," she said. "I figured there were people before me. There really weren't."

Support from the LGBTQ community

Her candidacy has received support from the local LGBTQ+ community, Witner said.

The Rev. Donnie Anderson, pastor at Pilgrim United Church of Christ in New Bedford, is a transgender woman. Anderson ran an unsuccessful campaign for state senate in Rhode Island a year ago. She lives in Providence.

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While she doesn't know Witner personally, she said, "I think it is absolutely wonderful when anyone in our community steps forward to put themselves in a place to be a leader, and also puts themselves forward to perhaps subject themselves to some criticism and some deep difficulty."

She said transgender people are like everybody else, with their own strengths, and weaknesses.

She said being transgender doesn't make a candidate automatically good or bad. It depends on the candidate's qualities and the needs of the office.

Added insight on issues

But a candidate that is qualified and transgender can bring added insight on issues that other officials may not have.

There are potential pitfalls, Anderson added.

Anderson is executive committee chair of the Rhode Island Democratic Women's Caucus, which recently hosted a forum for candidates for Rhode Island's 1st Congressional District.

Donnie Anderson: Rhode Island Democratic Women's Caucus makes history with new group chair

One candidate responded immediately to an emailed invitation with a refusal, and sent copies to the media that they would never participate in a forum hosted by a transgender woman.

Anderson said Witner should be aware that there are those who won't appreciate her candidacy.

But, Anderson added, New Bedford is a very welcoming community.

"New Bedford is a good place. I would be shocked and disappointed and I really wouldn't expect that this candidate would have difficulty simply because they're transgender," Anderson said.

Andrew Pollack, president of the South Coast LGBTQ+ Network, was strongly supportive of Witner's candidacy when asked for comment.

Pollack cannot speak in behalf of the South Coast LGBTQ+ Network because it's a non-profit and prohibited from endorsing political candidates.

'Diversity brings strength'

But speaking for himself, Pollack said, "I feel it's a great, wonderful thing. Diversity brings strength. Different points of view lead to better decisions. Involving the entire community with different points of view is really key. I'm thrilled."

Getting her name out there

This is her first campaign, and to win she will need to get name recognition, Witner said.

Her face is well known, she said, through her work at the terminal, her work as a tax preparer prior to that, and her current job with the Hawthorn Medical Call Center.

"Most people have seen my face and go, 'Hey, I know that person. She did my taxes. She worked at the bus terminal.' But the issue is getting my name out there," Witner said.

She added, "If I do a decent enough job getting my name out there, and really hammer it home, I think I'll have a greater chance."

Feeling at home in New Bedford

Witner moved to New Bedford from her native Pennsylvania in 2009. "While I loved Pennsylvania, I have never felt more at home than here in New Bedford. New Bedford embraced me and gave me the courage to truly be myself without fear of repercussion."

But there are things she doesn't like about New Bedford beyond the problems with drug addiction and homelessness.

And one of those is infrastructure, including city roads. Litter is also a problem.

"Things need to be done with our streets, both in a literal and figurative sense. We need to help people get off the streets and we need to help clean up the streets - clean up litter and fix the roads themselves," Witner said.

Witner graduated from Hazleton Area High School in Pennsylvania and tried college twice but found it wasn't for her, she said.

Her background in customer service work and helping people, will be an asset as a city councilor if she gets on the board, she said.