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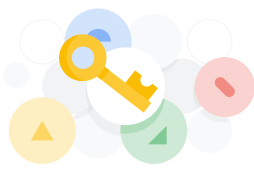
1st transgender woman to run for Alabama House says cultural divide hurts all

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Sylvia Swayne of Birmingham is a candidate in the special election in Alabama House District 55 in Jefferson County. (Photo by Kelsey Weeks)

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By **Mike Cason | mcason@al.com**

Running for the legislature was not in Sylvia Swayne's plans for this year, but the 26-year-old Birmingham resident said she felt the pull of civic duty after trying to call her representative in the Alabama House.

Swayne wanted to talk to her lawmaker about bills that she opposed. But that was not possible because the Alabama House seat for her district was vacant. Swayne learned there would be a special election to fill the slot for District 55, which is in central Jefferson County and includes part of Birmingham.

"I consider myself an everyday Alabamian," Swayne said. "I never saw myself running for office. What I've been telling folks is that it's not a dream, it's a calling."

"I think it's time where younger people get activated. I just thought that this is the right time for me to do something different and to give it a shot."

District 55 came open when Fred Plump resigned and pleaded guilty to federal charges in a kickback scheme. Swayne, who lives in Highland Park, is one of seven Democrats running to fill the vacancy. No Republicans are running in the Democrat-leaning district. The primary is Sept. 26.

The other Democratic candidates are Kenneth Coachman, Travis Hendrix, Ves Marable, Cara McClure, Phyllis E. Oden-Jones, Antwon Bernard Womack

Swayne will be the first transgender woman to run for state office in Alabama. She embraces that history but said it will not define her campaign.

“I don’t want to consider myself the trans candidate,” Swayne said. “But I do recognize the historical element of my campaign and my candidacy. It certainly informs my perspective. It’s not something I’m afraid to talk about. It’s who I am.”

“But the reason I’m running is because there’s a culture of political division that is not only in this state but across the country,” Swayne said. “And it’s not just affecting trans people, it’s affecting all sorts of people.”

Former state Rep. Patricia Todd of Birmingham is helping Swayne with her campaign. Todd was the first openly gay candidate for the Legislature when she ran in 2006 in House District 54. She was elected and served three terms.

“This is groundbreaking,” Todd said. “It’s sort of like when I ran in ‘06. It’s an uphill battle, no doubt about it. But she’s a great candidate. She’s smart, she gets it, she’s got a great message. She really does want to help the neighborhoods in her district.”

Swayne’s slogan is “Opportunity through Unity” and she cited what she said are consequences of the cultural divide, including bills aimed at the LGBTQ+ community and other legislation that she said stokes controversy and fear and diverts attention from real problems.

One example, Swayne said, was a bill to make it a felony to help voters obtain an absentee ballot application. Republicans who supported it said it would prevent voter fraud. Swayne said there is no evidence of large-scale voter fraud in Alabama and that the real purpose was to suppress the vote. The bill did not pass.

Another example Swayne mentioned was a bill to take state funding the Alabama Department of Archives and History because the agency hosted a one-hour lecture on LGBTQ history. The bill did not pass but Republican lawmakers said it will be back next year.

“These bills are not just about harming one group or disenfranchising one group. It’s to distract the state and the people and even the legislators themselves from what really matters,” Swayne said.

Swayne said people should not dismiss that kind of legislation as business as usual.

“There’s so many things that we should be focusing on,” Swayne said. “And I as a young person want to empower others, especially young people, the young voters, to stop shrugging their shoulders when anything bad happens in Alabama. They’re saying, ‘That’s just how it goes. That’s just Alabama.’

“But I don’t think that’s Alabama. Alabama is made up of all sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds. And yes, that includes LGBTQ+ citizens. But it also includes all sorts of other peoples of all different backgrounds. And that’s the big reason I oppose those bills. It’s not just about protecting myself and my community. It’s about what really matters in this state.”

Swayne was born in Montgomery into an Air Force family. They lived in Texas and Ohio before returning to Alabama.

Swayne’s father, a master sergeant, died when she was 8. Swayne said her mother persevered as a single parent with a strength that is one of her strongest influences.

Swayne has a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Alabama. She manages customer service quality analysts for a Birmingham company where she has worked for about five years.

“I’m running because I think that there is an Alabama that’s missing from the conversation in the Capitol, in the State House,” Swayne said. “And it’s not just about who I am. But it’s more about what I value.”

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