

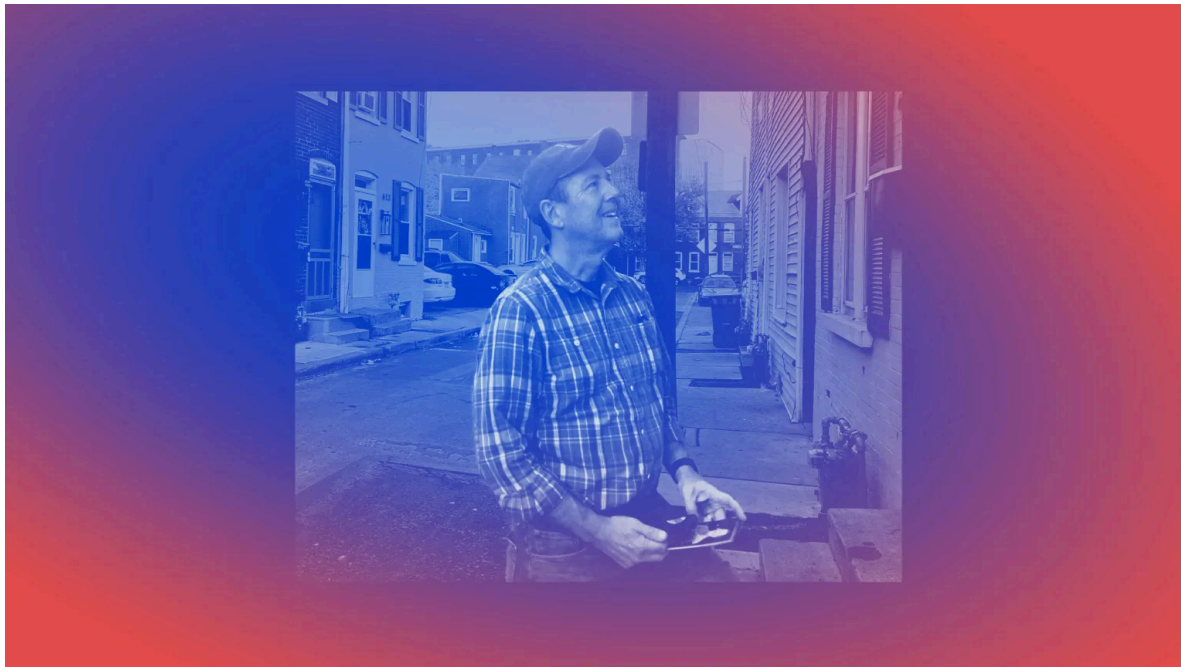
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In a Red Pennsylvania District, a Grieving Father Runs on Transgender Rights

After his son died, Trex Proffitt wanted to do more in his community. This year, he is running for office to protect LGBTQ rights.

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Trex Proffitt canvasses in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. **Mother Jones; Handout Trex Proffitt**

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In early April, Trex Proffitt opened his mail-in primary ballot and saw that no Democrats were running for state senate in Pennsylvania's 13th district.

It made sense: The district, which covers the city of Lancaster and its surrounding suburbs, has been represented by Republicans for over a century. The incumbent, Scott Martin, is vocally anti-abortion and the sponsor of a bill banning instruction around gender identity and sexual orientation in elementary schools. Martin won a decisive eleven-point victory against a well-funded challenger in 2020. The odds for Democrats have likely gotten slimmer after the district was redrawn in 2022 to include more rural areas.

But Proffitt, a 56-year-old history teacher at a small Quaker school, still felt something could be done. He decided to run against Martin, winning a write-in campaign to become the Democratic nominee for state senate. After a personal tragedy, Proffitt wanted to center LGBTQ rights in his campaign—even in a reliably Republican district.

In 2019, Proffitt's son George, who was transgender, died at the age of 20 from a drug overdose. George loved folk punk music and was active in the local LGBTQ community. He had struggled for years with depression and suicidality, but he seemed to be doing better before his death.

In the years since, Proffitt has watched anti-transgender rhetoric become increasingly visible in his community, as a national backlash towards trans people amplified and enabled sentiment that was already "endemic" to Lancaster, he said. As my colleague Kiera Butler has reported, Lancaster County is home to a burgeoning Christian nationalist movement.

In his free time, Proffitt had been walking for long stretches around Lancaster as part of a fundraiser for the Trevor Project, a nonprofit that supports LGBTQ rights. Though he had raised a good chunk of money, he said, "it didn't feel like I had done enough."

It was in the wake of the suicide of another trans young person in the area, that he saw no one running against Martin. At the time, he told me, the death left him "looking for something more to do in my life."

Since then, he has campaigned fiercely on transgender rights, an unusual pitch against a conservative incumbent. But, Proffitt hopes, it will show Democrats they do not have to back away from talking about people like his son.

Transgender rights remain a "third rail" in politics, he told me. "Don't talk about it. Everybody just—*wink wink*—somehow knows you're pro-LGBT+," Proffitt said. "I don't think that's working."

When I drove out to Lancaster in late October, Pennsylvania was the center of the political universe and campaign signs dotted every intersection. Proffitt met me at a Whole Foods, having just come from a union event. Soft-spoken and a bit world-weary, he described his campaign as a "scrappy grassroots effort." His wife, Beth, who works as an administrator at Franklin & Marshall College, was Proffitt's campaign manager in the early days. Now, they have a small staff and "try really hard to get the word out with frugal means."

Campaign finance reports show that Proffitt has around \$100,000 on hand while Martin has \$790,000. There has been only marginal support from the state Democratic party, which has focused its resources on closer races. "This area has gone through periods of neglect from Democrats," Proffitt told me. "People aren't used to coming out because there is a tradition of always losing this race."

Though the 13th district includes the city of Lancaster, its population of 58,000 is outweighed by the suburban and rural areas. Proffitt's team is the only Democratic presence in some of the deep-red portions of the county, going where the Harris campaign doesn't seem to send volunteers. He told me that it can lead to outright hostility, particularly because some campaign memorabilia prominently features queer and trans pride flags.

In Lancaster, as in many other places, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric has become commonplace in local politics and public life. This March, bomb threats led to the cancellation of a drag queen story hour at the library. Several school districts in Lancaster County have signed contracts with Independence Law Center, a conservative Christian law firm associated with the Family Research Council. One district, Penn Manor, just passed two policies written with the help of the law firm: one mandates that students play sports aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth and the second says parents must approve changes to students' names and pronouns.

"The actions that are happening in many school districts and county governments have really created a sense of trauma amongst transgender people and, in particular, transgender youth," Corinne Goodwin, the executive director of the Eastern PA Trans Equity Project, told me.

Advocates say that, over the course of the last year, a handful of transgender young people have died of suicide in Lancaster County.

While some Democrats have decided that transgender rights are too complicated and controversial to focus on, Proffitt has decided to talk about them for precisely that reason. As a teacher, coach, and parent of a trans child, Proffitt says he is in a "good position" to tackle the misinformation and panic around transgender issues.

That misinformation is increasing. Former president Donald Trump and other national Republicans have honed in on anti-transgender rhetoric in the final weeks of the election. Between August and early October, Republicans spent over \$65 million on anti-transgender ads in more than a dozen states according to a *New York Times* analysis. Though surveys have shown that transgender issues are not top-of-

mind for many voters, Republican strategists say that it is a potent wedge issue, particularly among women—a group that the party has lost traction with over abortion. The messaging has even trickled down to the congressional race in Pennsylvania's 10th district.

Brandon Wolf, press secretary for the Human Rights Campaign, told me that “this is a tired playbook,” and one that hasn't worked in previous races.

Still, with some notable exceptions—vice presidential nominee and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz recently gave a full-throated defense of trans rights on Glennon Doyle's podcast—Democrats have been reluctant to address anti-transgender rhetoric head-on.

This has been visible in the closely-watched senate races in Texas and Ohio, where Republicans are accusing Democrats of allowing boys to play girls' sports. Texas Rep. Colin Allred and Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown have both responded by insisting that they don't support doing so, to the dismay of some advocates. The trans writer Erin Reed argued in her Substack that Allred and Brown's messaging “risks reinforcing Republican framing” around the validity of transgender identity.

Proffitt told me that he's not particularly disappointed in how national Democrats have dealt with the issue—“you have to pick which thing you're going to seize upon in the short run”—even though he's made a markedly different decision.

Despite the narrow odds, Proffitt said that he's hopeful they can close the gap and show that Martin's stances are the extreme ones. He told me that he's had productive conversations about LGBTQ issues while door-knocking, “because we don't shy away from that.”

People might be taken aback initially, but Proffitt says they tend to appreciate the opportunity to ask questions. (A 2023 survey found that only 30 percent of likely voters personally know someone who is trans.) He said that he often tries to appeal to people's “fundamental values”—framing transgender rights as a matter of civil liberties and privacy.

When I followed along while Proffitt canvassed in Lancaster's West End, a dense neighborhood of townhouses and alleyways, the opportunity didn't always present itself. Except for some stray cats and kids on bikes, it was quiet around dusk on a Saturday. Our handful of conversations with voters were mostly in line with national surveys: most were worried about affordability and none brought up LGBT issues unless asked. Still, I could see that anti-trans rhetoric had filtered through.

Latisha Butcher, a 36-year-old home health aide, told me that, despite the dire shortage of workers in her industry, her pay and benefits were “not great.” After I asked, she told me that she had heard anti-transgender rhetoric, particularly around trans youth. “Let them live their life—whatever makes them happy,” Butcher told me.

Afterward, Proffitt went to a team dinner with the campaign, and I started on my drive home. I was struck by the enormity of the task that Proffitt had given himself: not just to win the race, but also to change the conversation around transgender rights. It meant that, day in and day out, he had to rehash a difficult and deeply personal issue, often with complete strangers. When I spoke to Proffitt on the phone a few weeks after my visit, he told me that “it's been tough every day since” George's death in 2019.

“But I don't mind talking about it,” Proffitt said, “because people need to know that trans kids experience adversity at higher rates, and adding to their existing difficulties is simply inhumane and unfair.”

The family dedicated a bench to George's memory in 2022. He was a big fan of *Les Misérables*, and the plaque quotes Victor Hugo: “What more could one want? A little garden to wander, and infinite space to dream.”

After Proffitt told me about George, he seemed worried that he hadn't painted a full picture of his son. “Is that enough to work with?” he asked.

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