

POLITICS

## Transgender trailblazer Sarah McBride heads to her debut in Congress, hoping for a touch of grace

1 of 23 | U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride will be sworn in as the first openly transgender member of Congress on Jan. 3. The Democrat's political victory comes during a reckoning for transgender rights, and after an election filled with campaign ads and politicians demeaning trans people. (AP Video: Jessie Wardarski)



BY **TIFFANY STANLEY**

Updated 3:28 AM PST, December 31, 2024

DOVER, Del. (AP) — It was her last day in session as a Delaware state senator, and Sarah McBride sat in her tiny office at the state Capitol, preparing farewell remarks.

She had made history here, as the first openly transgender state senator in the country. Now she was making history again, recently elected as the first openly [transgender member of Congress](#).

Her political promotion has come during a reckoning for [transgender rights](#), when [legislation](#) in Republican-governed states around the country aims to curb their advance. During an election where a deluge of

[campaign ads](#) and [politicians](#) demeaned trans people, McBride still easily won her blue state's only seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

But even before she is sworn in on Friday, her reception from congressional Republicans has been tumultuous. Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina targeted her by proposing to ban transgender people from U.S. Capitol restrooms that correspond to their gender identity — a ban that House Speaker [Mike Johnson](#), R-La., enacted.



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., celebrates with Assistant Secretary of the Senate Daniel Yngstrom, left, on the Senate floor during a special session, her last day as a Delaware state senator, at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

For her part, McBride tried to defuse the situation, saying she would follow the rules. “I’m not here to fight about bathrooms,” the 34-year-old [wrote](#) in a statement.

While some activists want her to fight harder, to those who know her, the move was classic Sarah — a pragmatist with a reputation of bipartisanship, a person who values diplomacy over pugilism.

“There is so much joy and so much awe in having this opportunity, and I will not let anyone take that away from me,” McBride told The Associated Press. “I am simply there to do the job just like anyone else.”

Her political home of the last four years, the Delaware Senate, is small — just 21 members — much like the state itself, not even 100 miles (155 kilometers) from north to south. That proximity creates the kind of collegiality that, while not constant, is often lacking these days in Washington.



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., gives her farewell speech on the Senate floor during a special session, her last day as a Delaware state senator, at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., lower right corner, at her desk on the Senate floor during a special session, her last day as a Delaware state senator, at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

“We’re a family,” said state Sen. Brian Pettyjohn, a Republican colleague who walked over to hug McBride.



“We’re going to disagree on a lot of things, but we don’t have the vitriol.”

In the Delaware chamber, there were last-minute nominees to confirm, and mundane business to finish during the Dec. 16 special session.

In between votes, McBride sat on her office’s burgundy couch, typing on her laptop. A staffer went through papers on her desk. The next day they would remove art from the walls and pack up prized mementos: a wedding photo with McBride’s late husband; a letter from former President Barack Obama; a photograph with the most famous Delaware politician, President Joe Biden.



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., laughs with fellow lawmakers after her farewell speech on the Senate floor during a special session, her last day as a Delaware state senator, at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

Back down the hall, on the state Senate floor, McBride’s colleagues in the general assembly sent her off like the popular classmate at graduation. She opened the day with a prayer about “new beginnings and bittersweet endings.”

She ended with a speech of gratitude for her fellow state lawmakers.

“I take with me the hope that I have found here that despite the rancor and the toxicity that we too often see in our politics, that we do genuinely have more in common than what divides us,” McBride said.

She continued, “We can have a politics of grace and not of grandstanding, a politics of progress, not pettiness.”



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., right, is greeted by Alexis Wrease, Delaware Senate majority deputy communications director, center, and Jenna Greenlee, Delaware Senate majority digital communications specialist, left, as she arrives for her last day as a Delaware state senator at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

## Early promise and a meteoric rise

Growing up in Wilmington, McBride was the type of child who practiced Democratic political speeches in her bedroom at a makeshift podium.

By high school, she had worked on multiple campaigns, including that of Beau Biden, the president's late son and former Delaware attorney general.

"She combines a passion for public service with a great intellect, with extraordinary political judgment and messaging ability," said Jack Markell, the U.S. ambassador to Italy, a former Delaware governor and McBride's mentor.



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., center, talks with Delaware Senate Republican Minority Whip Brian Pettyjohn from the 19th district on the Senate floor on McBride's last day as a Delaware state senator at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

Though she seemed destined to work in politics, McBride once felt revealing her gender identity would derail those ambitions.

She was 21 and the president of American University's student government when she came out as transgender, first to her friends and family and later in a public post that went viral.



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., walks from the Senate floor on her last day as a Delaware state senator at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

Sitting in her Wilmington condo, McBride said, “Coming out was without question the hardest thing that I had ever done up until that point. And yet it was still relatively easy compared to the experiences of so many people.”

Her parents have been her biggest supporters, but they worried for her. One of their first calls after McBride came out was to their pastor, the Rev. Gregory Knox Jones of Westminster Presbyterian, a progressive church where Sarah was a youth elder and Jill Biden is a member.

“We talked about the fact that this was your child. You love your child,” Jones recalled. “You can’t think of losing a son. You’ve gained a daughter.”

David McBride, Sarah’s father, said that kind of support has made all the difference for their family. “Our life and Sarah’s life have been made by the response that we and she got first from our friends, our church, our community.”





U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., right, poses for a photo with Delaware State Democrat Senator Marie Pinkney from District 13 on McBride's last day as a Delaware state senator at Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

McBride would go on to forge a trail through a rapid series of firsts. During college, she became the first openly transgender woman to intern at the White House. At a reception there, she met and later fell in love with a young lawyer, Andrew Cray, a trans man and LGBTQ+ health policy advocate.

As an activist at 22, McBride was instrumental in helping pass a transgender nondiscrimination law in Delaware. She worked as the spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign, a leading LGBTQ-rights group. In 2016, she became the first openly trans person to speak at the Democratic National Convention.

To be a first, a historic first, is a privilege and a burden. McBride is quick to point out that she's more than just the headlines about her gender identity.



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., works in her office on her last day as a Delaware state senator at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)



The Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones pauses during an interview with the Associated Press at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Del., Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

“The reality is that I didn’t run to be a first. I didn’t run to make history with an election,” she said.

Her focus is to be the best member of Congress she can be for all of Delaware and the country.

It's the "only way that I can guarantee that while I may be a first, I'm not the last."



A photo of U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., with her husband Andy Cray is seen on a shelf in her Wilmington, Del., home, Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2024. Cray died from cancer in 2014. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

## A show pony and a work horse

Before working with McBride, Democratic state Sen. Elizabeth Lockman thought "she was probably a bit of a show pony, so good at presenting herself, public speaking," and already destined for a larger stage.

"Ok, she is the show pony, but can she be a work horse?" Lockman recalled thinking. "What I like to tell her is that she proved to us that she's both. She's probably one of the hardest-working people."

McBride rarely stops to eat on busy days, instead subsisting on a steady diet of coffee, heavy on the cream and sweetener.





David and Sally McBride, parents of U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., talk during a television interview with the Associated Press at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)



Dave McBride looks to his daughter, U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., on her last day as a Delaware state senator at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)





U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., signs her desk drawer on the Senate floor on her last day as a Delaware state senator at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., photographs her desk nameplate on the Senate floor on her last day as a Delaware state senator at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

And nowhere is her boundless energy more evident than when she talks about the minutiae of policymaking.

She likes kitchen table issues: health care, paid family leave, childcare and affordable housing. In the state Senate, she chaired the health committee and helped expand access to Medicaid and dental care for underserved communities. Most of her bills got bipartisan support.

Pettyjohn, her Republican colleague, appreciated that McBride would often seek conservative members' input on legislation. "She's always one to come over, to make that effort to get outside that echo chamber and say, 'What can we do to polish it up some, to make it better?'"

Her signature accomplishment was helping pass paid family and medical leave in Delaware. It was personal for McBride.



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., gives her farewell speech on the Senate floor during a special session, her last day as a Delaware state senator, at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

Her partner Cray was 27 when he was diagnosed with oral cancer. Within a year, the prognosis was terminal. They moved up their wedding plans. They asked the Rev. Gene Robinson, a friend and the first openly gay Episcopal bishop, to officiate.

They married on the rooftop of their apartment building in August 2014. Cray died four days later at the hospital.

"The experience serving as a caregiver to him left me profoundly changed," McBride said.

"I think about all of the people who have to deal with what we dealt with or worse, without health insurance, without family support, without paid leave, without jobs that allowed them to continue to pay their rent," she said. "I just cannot imagine getting through even a fraction of what we went through without the support we had. It is a moral failing of our society and our country."

**AP**[‘Winter Arc’](#) [\\$13 million heist](#) [WVU basketball](#) [Angelina Jolie-Brad Pitt](#) [Puerto Rico power outage](#)AP SETS THE STANDARD FOR POLITICAL REPORTING.  
SUPPORT INDEPENDENT, FACT-BASED JOURNALISM.[DONATE](#)

U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., acknowledges applause after her farewell speech on the Senate floor during a special session, her last day as a Delaware state senator, at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

## A politics of grace

The word “grace” comes up a lot with McBride.

She does everything “with a lot of grace and patience,” Lockman said.

“She handled that with far more grace than I would have shown,” said Mat Marshall, a friend since high school, referencing McBride’s reaction to the congressional bathroom bill.





U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., left, and her incoming Deputy Chief of Staff & Communications Director, Michaela Kurinsky-Malos, move out of McBride's Delaware State Senate office at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

In her [2018 memoir](#), McBride wrote a chapter titled “Amazing grace,” about “beautiful acts of kindness” she witnessed during the last weeks of Cray’s life.

“A lot of times when people go through loss, it can be either faith-crushing or faith-affirming. And for me, it was faith-affirming,” she said.

In the room where Cray died, McBride felt God’s presence in a tangible way, like a hand on her shoulder — a comforting manifestation of God’s love that has never left her.





U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., center, incoming Deputy Chief of Staff and Communications Director, Michaela Kurinsky-Malos, left, and former field organizer for McBride's campaign, Sophie Douglas, move out of McBride's Delaware State Senate office at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

In the decade since, she often asks herself, “What would Andy do?” And she seeks to follow his example of compassion and “principled grace” toward anti-LGBTQ politicians. “His kindness, his decency has provided for me a North Star.”

Some activists have criticized McBride for not fighting back more forcefully against the Capitol bathroom ban. She agrees it’s important for transgender people to access public facilities.

“But the people who are talking about bathrooms aren’t trans people,” she said. “The people who are obsessing about bathrooms are right-wing Republicans who are seeking to stoke division and to distract.”



Michaela Kurinsky-Malos, incoming Deputy Chief of Staff and Communications Director for U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., looks through letters for McBride as they pack her office on her last day as a Delaware state senator, at the Delaware Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., Monday, Dec. 16, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

She said she will continue to respond with grace.

"At the end of the day, our ability to have a pluralistic, diverse democracy requires some foundation of kindness and grace," McBride said. "And I believe in that so strongly that even when it's difficult, I will seek to summon it."



U.S.-Rep.-elect Sarah McBride, D-Del., speeds her incoming Deputy Chief of Staff and Communications Director, Michaela Kurinsky-Malos, through the halls of Delaware Legislative Hall on a moving cart as they move out of McBride's Delaware state senate office in Dover, Del., Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2024. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

[Read More](#)

---

Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP's [collaboration](#) with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

---

The Associated Press' women in the workforce and state government coverage receives financial support from Pivotal Ventures. AP is solely responsible for all content. Find AP's [standards](#) for working with philanthropies, a list of supporters and funded coverage areas at [AP.org](#).



**TIFFANY STANLEY**

Stanley is a reporter and editor on The Associated Press' Global Religion team. She is based in Washington, D.C.

