

PUBLIC POLICY IN ACTION: HEARING VIEWPOINTS OF THREE WOMEN CANDIDATES IN 2018
Cora Dietrich Koller, Public Policy Chair, AAUW North Hills Pittsburgh Branch

Politically speaking, 2018-2019 is described as the “Year of Women”. More women across the country are running for elected office than ever before. Common campaign threads include empowering women and advocating effectively for their causes while restoring civility to legislative debates and building collaborative approaches to solving social problems. On October 10, 2018, AAUW’ North Hills Pittsburgh Branch heard from three impressive women candidates who are seeking election to Pennsylvania’s General Assembly. Summer Lee seeks to represent the 34th District. Sara Innamorato seeks to represent the 21st District. Emily Skopov seeks to represent the 28th District. Program Vice President, Kelly Clouser, worked with the candidates to plan the event. Branch Finance Officer, Betty Kroniser, moderated the lively, interesting and informative panel discussion.

Summer Lee grew up in Braddock, Pennsylvania. She graduated from Forest Hills High School, the Pennsylvania State University and Howard University School of Law. She describes herself as a dedicated organizer, activist and advocate for social justice. She has represented and assisted clients with civil rights complaints, served as a Field Organizer for the Pa. Democratic Party during the 2016 presidential election, worked in community and labor organizing, was a leader in bringing justice to the Woodland Hills School District following instances of violence against students by police officers and school administrators, and zealously pushed the district to increase the teaching staff’s cultural competency and to decrease disproportionate punishment of minority students and those with disabilities. These experiences showed her that people living in predominantly poor, minority communities can achieve real change when they understand how to be their own advocates who reach out and reach back to lift each other up. As a state legislator, she will support progressive policies regarding criminal justice reform, free and high-quality public education, healthcare for all, economy and labor, a “millionaire’s tax”, environmental justice, women’s rights, seniors’ needs, and LGBTQ rights.

Sara Innamorato grew up in Ross Township, a Pittsburgh suburb. She graduated from North Hills High School and the University of Pittsburgh; despite the devastating impact her father’s addiction to prescribed opiates had on their family. Today, she describes herself as someone who won’t back down from hard work, isn’t afraid to take risks to get things done, is strong willed and resistant to corruption. She has a vision for Pennsylvania’s future, and will put people not corporations first when making decisions in Harrisburg. Professionally, she has worked for an international tech business, a small non-profit that focused on environmental justice, job creation and community development, and her own business. She co-founded an initiative called She Runs SWPA, which aims to empower more women in this region to run for elected office. As a state legislator, her priorities will be health care for all, addressing tax and housing inequalities, excellent public education for all, building stronger communities, reforming Pennsylvania politics, protecting small businesses and workers, fighting for women’s rights and safeguarding our environment and community health.

Emily Skopov grew up in New York and earned her degrees from Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles. She learned to think on her feet, look out for friends and neighbors, work hard, persevere and stand up for her beliefs while always giving 100%. Her first career was in television writing, and her second is in non-profit work. She sees the job of state representative as one that is about service, not the gathering of power for oneself. She believes it is about listening and being an agent of the people for positive change. She believes we can improve the future for our kids through

caring, passion, pragmatism and action. As a state legislator, she will be accessible to constituents, accountable and transparent. Her priorities will be jobs and the economy, healthcare, addressing the opioid epidemic, quality education, energy, taxation, environmental protection, equal rights for all and women's issues.

The three women have different backgrounds and life experiences but also have much in common. They do not see themselves as politicians; and did not set out to run for public office until some event or experience provided the catalyst for doing so. For Ms. Lee, it was "Seeing a need for women, especially women of color to step up after the school board and the court failed our kids. Women need to uplift each other in the community, state and nation. We need to insist on being in all the spaces and places of power." For Ms. Innamorato, it was "knowing smart, passionate people working on huge community problems despite being understaffed, overworked and underpaid while elected officials who could make needed changes just were not there to help." For Ms. Skopov, it was "hearing my kids' reactions to the tone of conversations, the nastiness, hatefulness and toxicity of the 2016 election. They're too young to be cynical and disillusioned about Democracy. I want them to see the power of communities working together to solve problems."

When asked what they have learned from the experience of running for office, Ms. Lee said "To raise gender equity, women have to be intentional about creating the structure and systems to help each other... to capitalize on our experiences, donate, knock on doors, help each other, and cut out the old boy network noise that we can't be there." Ms. Innamorato said "To do that, we have to get elected and then face down the misogyny, the prejudice, the belief that women don't belong. So, we have to educate women about running for, winning, holding and keeping elected offices." Ms. Skopov said "You've got to show you care. Be honest. Be real. Be who you are. Show people they can trust you. Create the world we want... a world that looks like all of us."

The candidates agreed that "the goal" of winning their elections motivates them to stay on the all-consuming campaign trail. That said, they also value the journey, commitment and camaraderie of helping each other overcome the great challenges of money and fundraising to achieve their goals.

They continued the discussion by exploring the concept of leading as stewards of the public trust. To Ms. Lee, that means "you must represent the people and create pathways to disseminate power to them. You cannot be careless with their trust." To Ms. Innamorato, it means "you must be intentional about hearing and understanding all the stories so you can boldly and unapologetically lead from the front." To Ms. Skopov, it means "you must lead by example, by representing others, speaking on their behalf and seeking compromise appropriately." All three candidates recognized that the people give power to legislators, that it is temporary and can be withdrawn.

On a more personal note, we were interested in learning who inspires them. For Ms. Lee, it is "the unsung heroes... the people behind the scenes... the idea people...the organizers." For Ms. Innamorato, it is "Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman in Congress." For Ms. Skopov, it is "the kids. They force me to do my best every day. I've got to be able to say why I do what I do, make the world better for them and help them be the best they can be."

Asked for their final words to us, all three candidates replied: "VOTE...VOTE...VOTE!"