

# **An Independent Voice: Providence activist, educator running grassroots campaign for Ward 15**



The city of Providence is set to see another special election this summer. With Dan McKee's elevation to governor, the lieutenant governor position became vacant. McKee nominated then-Providence City Council President Sabina Matos as his number two, creating a rare opening in the 15-member body that oversees the capital city. The winner will finish out the

rest of Matos' term, which ends January 2023.

Matos represented Ward 15, a triangle of the city's southwest side, comprising the Olneyville and Valley neighborhoods and a portion of Silver Lake. The party primary date is June 8, and the general election date is July 6. With no Republicans or Independents on the ballot (Republicans are unofficially classified as an endangered species in Providence), the primary is, in essence, the special election.

Five candidates have announced that they're running for the Ward 15 council race. One newcomer to the campaign trail is Mount Pleasant High School teacher and local artist **Casandra Inez**, who has launched a door-to-door grassroots campaign that seeks to prioritize face-to-face politicking.

I caught up with Inez at a recent campaign event hosted by the Olneyville Neighborhood Association, in the second-floor space within the Atlantic Mills complex. Arriving with her partner, local artist **Spocka Summa**, with their napping child in tow, Inez listened to a group of ward residents speak of the issues facing the neighborhood: housing, environmental and criminal justice reform, pollution and education.

Inez advocates for greater city investment toward tackling these problems, such as an expansion of affordable housing programs and regulatory pushback against private equity pumping the rental market skyward. Participants also mused over the fate of the Atlantic Mills building. A former mill complex, emblematic of the city's industrial past, it's been rumored to be for sale for years and is now listed online for \$4.1 million. Some participants felt that the only improvements being made in the city benefit the political and economic elite.

Inez said she has witnessed first-hand the slow burn of economic inequality, the deteriorating public school system and the spread of real estate speculation driving gentrification. These social factors were exacerbated by the pandemic, something she has also experienced. Her Manton Avenue arts studio, the Public Shop and Gallery, shuttered its brick and-mortar space during the height of the pandemic, though it is still active in the creative community.

A bona fide progressive, Inez opposes charter school expansion and placing police officers (known more commonly as Student Resource Officers or SROs) in public schools. The campaign boasts 50 volunteer canvassers. Inez said her strategy is to keep their ears to the street and listen to residents in person rather than relying on flooding yards with campaign posters and engaging their message through traditional media filters.

When speaking with residents, Inez said voters continue to be particularly outspoken about the environmental impacts of new and redevelopment infrastructure, such as the 6-10 connector highway project that received large-scale pushback last year for allegations of improper dumping of hazardous material.

"[Ward 15 varies] street to street, never mind the neighborhoods. I'm getting great feedback on the things that weren't as urgent to me at first but are to other people," she said, describing the ward. "But [having neighborhoods] that are clean and healthy are two of the top issues. It's the things immediately next to them that they care about."

Inez' unique background as an educator influences her campaign. She sees the on-the-ground inadequacies in the city's public schools every day, an attribute she feels is necessary for anyone seeking to help guide City Hall policy. Her students are freshmen, a vital year for city pupils that can set their path for a lifetime. But the system is broken.

“About 70% of my students don’t show up [for class],” she said. “And there is nothing being done about that. They have completely slipped through the cracks. These students have decided they are done with the system, and I think COVID intensified that. They feel very isolated.”

Inez doesn’t plan to take a break from teaching if elected. “That’s my career,” she said. “It’s my bread and butter. I see the council position as being that community advocate who is supposed to be representing your neighborhood at the table.”

A few of her opponents have established Smith Hill connections. Doris De Los Santos was a former aide and interim chief of staff to Matos. Oscar Vargas is a state senate legislative aide.

But the people are hungry for a representative they can relate to. “[They] want [a councilor] who is living in a similar situation to them,” she said. “A person who understands their problems.”

Inez was diplomatic when asked how she felt Ward 15 has been represented in the past. “Things were slowly getting better,” she said. “Just not as quickly as they could have. I think we’re moving in the right direction, but have yet to achieve what is possible.”

Local politics can be notoriously cutthroat, but Inez said she sees an opening created by rising disillusionment among many Ward 15 voters regarding politics as usual. Her campaign may be shaking the political establishment, as evidenced by a recent phone call she received.

“I had a state senator call me to say that I wasn’t going to win because nobody knows my name,” said Inez.

But as the primary approaches, many disagree with that sentiment. Inez recently received the endorsement of both the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 328 as well as Reclaim RI, a progressive policy organization.

“It’s about mobilizing the community,” said Inez. “That’s more of the direction we need to go in.”