

Ready for Reform — The Progressives Challenging State House Leadership: An interview with Representative Brianna Henries



“The pandemic had some crippling consequences; one of those consequences was that people were forced to see the shortcomings of their local and national government,” says State Representative Brianna Henries, describing the wave of progressive victories in the State House last year. Henries represents District 64 out of East Providence, an area that includes the city’s core and parts of

Riverside. She was one of four Democratic representatives who abstained from the House leadership vote at the start of the new legislative session rather than support Joe Shekarchi or the Republican option Blake Filippi.

The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Alex Kithes (Motif): You ran for the first time this year. What inspired you to run?

Brianna Henries: And what a time it was! I was first recruited by the RI Political Cooperative over the summer. My good friends Senator Tiara Mack and Senator Cynthia Mendes put my name into the gauntlet. I was admittedly surprised when the opportunity was presented to me, but after some thought and many conversations I thought, “Why not?” I’ve always held positions in leadership, whether it was in my community or my professional life.

When you combine that with the enduring ache of watching lives being lost to both COVID-19 and police brutality — Arbery, Floyd, Taylor, McClain — you wake up and say, “Enough!”

AK: Despite getting into the race pretty late, you won by a landslide with almost 62% of the vote against the incumbent. What do you believe are the reasons people came out and supported your campaign?

BH: What made the campaign successful was the incredible power behind our messaging and my campaign manager, Ana. For so many communities the truth of the matter is that they don’t often get to connect with their representative, or know what they do. We saw that as an opportunity to get out and start talking to the community.

The challenge of the pandemic meant that we did so with great caution, and with serious social distancing requirements. We knocked often and with the same message through and through. I got lots of feedback at the polls telling our team that it was refreshing to hear from candidates and take part in the conversation toward change.

AK: More broadly, last year saw a lot of progressive General Assembly wins around the state. What factors do you think were responsible for that? Do you see it as a sign of a changing political climate in Rhode Island?

BH: The pandemic has some crippling consequences, one of those consequences was that people were forced to see the shortcomings of their local and national government. I think this unified pause allowed for people to stop and assess what was happening in these governing spaces. For some people, this would be the first time they’d be facing job, food and/or housing insecurity. Our healthcare system was entirely exposed as many faced difficulties trying to access coverage during the pandemic — a true healthcare crisis.

I think the progressive ideologies of livable wages, affordable housing and Medicare for All felt a lot less radical and more desirable than ever. We also witnessed further environmental decline as California sat in a horrifying cloud from non-stop wildfires.

AK: Speaker Shekarchi recently made some critical remarks about you in an interview with Gene Valicenti, something about you being “very young” and about the State House “moderating” you. What are your thoughts on this? Do you believe this outlook makes for a good speaker?

BH: Yeah, that was hard to watch. I usually don't find anything wrong with being called "young" and "passionate," I'm in fact both of those things. With the context it felt like these words were ways to discount my offerings to the State House.

My youth and my passion are my unique offerings to the General Assembly. In the grand scheme of things, I wish the Speaker chose to defend me as a future colleague. More than anything I didn't take kindly to the comment about moderation. My main goal in being elected was to step up as a voice for my community.

To moderate, by definition, means "to make or become less extreme, intense, rigorous, or violent." It just made me sound like the opposition when in actuality, my hope is to take my passion and widen the lens through which we govern, to allow the people to take part in the democracy we uphold.

AK: You did not attend the caucus, which, if I'm not mistaken, was a way that you and several other representatives showed support for Representative Liana Cassar, who challenged Representative Shekarchi for the speakership. You abstained in the leadership vote at the start of the session. What motivated this decision? Where do you see existing leadership has failed, and where would Representative Cassar do better?

BH: I'd much rather talk about why I was willing to vote for his only challenger, Liana Cassar. What people don't see after election day is the whirlwind of phone calls and text messages that occur after results roll in. Once it was certain that Mattiello was on his way out, there were whispers and suggestions of his successor. Only Liana was brave enough to stick her neck out to challenge for the speakership before the final election results. She believed that we as a body deserved an option, an actual shot at a democratic process.

Liana made a point to reach out to me and she made her case. After several conversations she demonstrated great capability and leadership qualities. Being able to have [those qualities] while also supporting a woman of color was a win-win situation.

Never once did she speak poorly of her colleagues, even in the face of backlash. She also was quick to share her priorities if elected and opened up the conversation around rules reform. How could I not want to support her? I stuck to my guns because I did not want to continue to celebrate the hand-off politics we're all used to seeing.

AK: What are you planning on working on this term in the House?

BH: We are facing a serious healthcare and housing crisis as a result of the pandemic, so you can expect to see my bills reflect that. Healthcare and housing are human rights. I'd also like to forge a solid path toward a \$15 minimum wage. You'll just have to stay tuned to see what else is coming down the pipeline.

AK: Is there anything that you want to say that we haven't covered?

BH: I want to encourage the readers to stay civically engaged and to seek out their representatives with their concerns and questions. Get involved, ask questions, run for office! Our government needs to better reflect the people.