

Former Schenectady Mayor Candidate Thearse McCalmon Running for State Senate, Seeks to Spark Change

By:Sam DiGiovanni

The creed New York State Senate candidate Thearse McCalmon (D) practices is all about being authentic and personable.

When asked what her elevator pitch would be to an undecided voter, the Queens, NY-born Schenectady resident said she refuses to give them “because they’re practiced and they’re fake.” In fact, McCalmon flat out rejects the notion of approaching people based on how they plan to vote.

“I don’t approach people as a decided voter, undecided voter, Republican or Democrat,” McCalmon said. “I think that’s what sets me apart from a lot of other candidates and other politicians because I take it as ‘I’m speaking to myself’ and ‘these people are me’, so why would I go and just do some practiced speech to them?”

McCalmon is challenging Senator Jim Tedisco (R), a four-year incumbent, for the District 49 seat in the New York State Senate. The core tenets of her campaign are implementing the New York Health Act to provide statewide healthcare, protecting the environment, improving education and taking care of small, local farmers. “All those issues affect us at every single point of our life. Every single point,” she said.

Part of her plans for the environment includes working towards establishing renewable energy by 2025 and reducing the use of fossil fuels. McCalmon is also pushing for a monthly, Wall Street-funded universal basic income deposit for New Yorkers.

The battle for District 49 is not McCalmon's first political rodeo. She ran for Mayor of Schenectady in 2018, losing by just 65 votes to the incumbent, Gary McCarthy. Despite the outcome, McCalmon told Michael Shure on [The Young Turks' The Conversation](#) that she came out of that defeat with pride, noting "I only lost by 3.9% of the vote against an eight-year incumbent that's really entrenched in the establishment and in the political machine."

One of McCalmon's takeaways from the closely fought defeat in 2018 was the importance of a good online presence. "When I realized how well our campaign was run virtually – so, on social media – that set us up lovely for this run," she said.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone into a state of quarantine, McCalmon and her campaign staffers stewed over how to adjust their tactics. "We all had to pivot, and we had to figure out exactly how we were going to reach voters if we couldn't knock on doors," McCalmon said.

After a few disheartening weeks of working and planning, McCalmon and her team devised ways to campaign around the pandemic. One solution was making calls to check in with people's well-being. "We asked, 'What do you need?' And if we had people in their neck of the woods, we sent people out to do grocery shopping," she said.

“And that’s exactly what we did,” McCalmon recalled. “For three whole weeks, that’s all we did: call and check in and make sure that whatever updates were happening in New York state, especially when the governor started doing his updates, that they understood in layman’s terms exactly what was happening.” They also set up a COVID-19 resources page on McCalmon’s website manned by Paul Paterakis, the press secretary for both of her campaigns.

Frequent online meetings in March with other female Democratic candidates set up by Eleanor’s Legacy, an advocacy group for Democratic women running for public office in New York, helped inspire McCalmon’s plan. The group’s president, Brette McSweeney, said that Eleanor’s Legacy first started working with McCalmon around 2019. “We invested in her because we believe she would be the best representative for her district,” she said.

Along with being busy on the phones, McCalmon hosted a slew of Facebook Live events, such as her Tea w/ Thearse discussions on Wednesday nights from 6:30 to 7:00 in the evening. She said the goal with it was “to put a face to those calls. Being that we were all in quarantine, I said to my team, ‘People need to see us. They need to feel like they’re at least communicating on some normal level.’”

McCalmon believes that attendees felt comfortable adjusting to the change that quarantining forced. During a week where she took a break from the event, she recalls someone seeing her at Walmart and asking where the digital teatime went. “It was really heartwarming to see that people were actually watching,” she said.

The inspiration for the event was McCalmon's typical routine of drinking tea during that time of the day if she wasn't virtually teaching. She continued enjoying hot Earl Grey, mint or lemon and ginger tea as she connected with viewers at home.

Many grassroots organizations and Democratic politicians endorse McCalmon, including Andrew Yang, a former 2020 presidential candidate. McCalmon said that Yang, who [tweeted his support](#) for her in July, is really supportive and accessible. They have tentative plans for a virtual get-together closer to Election Day.

The Yang-led Humanity Forward organization endorses McCalmon on its [website](#), writing "As someone who has experienced homelessness in her life, Thearse understands the importance of creating a human-centered society."

Paterakis, who has a handful of years of experience working with Republican and Green Party candidates, realizes how McCalmon's affability stands out. "She's very personable," he said. "She connects well with everybody. She's approachable, which is a big thing...I find [that] people come up to her and they can talk to her with ease."

McCalmon's desire to run for public office stems from the hardships she has faced in her life, including homelessness. In 1996, McCalmon protested against changes to social service programs and the welfare system that affected unemployed women and children. "I couldn't understand why no one ever came to people who are actually in that situation and say, 'Will this work for you?'" she said. "So, that's when I started asking questions like 'What's going on?'"

and ‘Why would anyone want to make a person’s situation like I was in – homeless with [a child] – worse than it already is?’”

Now, over 20 years later, McCalmon is devising solutions to these problems. She prides herself on connecting at the most basic level with people and not viewing them as just a vote to win over. The same compassion and approachability that helped her closely contest an incumbent Mayor in 2018 is being utilized in this race, which culminates on November 3rd.