

# Leadership Profile: Helen Gym, Philadelphia City Councilmember At-Large

Judith Bernstein-Baker, MSW, Esq. 13 September 2017

In November 2015, on her first run for public office, Helen Gym won her City Council At Large seat with the most votes of all council candidates. As national Vice-Chair of Local Progress and the 2017 EMILY's List Rising Star Award winner, she has become a leading voice for social justice. Councilwoman Gym was interviewed for this profile on July 5, 2017.

## What led you into politics?

I'm a longtime community organizer. I've been a newspaper reporter, a public school teacher with a specialty in English as a Second Language (ESL), a board member of Asian Americans United, founder of Parents United for Public Education, and the editor of the *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. All these experiences shaped for me a large vision of racial justice and multiracial coalition building. I'm deeply committed to an anti-poverty agenda and believe in the power of communities to make change.

I did not take a typical path into politics. For a long time,

many of the communities I represent -- immigrant communities, public school parents, and others -- did not see politics as a path to power. I never thought of my activism and work as political initially. My interest was always in how communities build power by strengthening our capacity to tackle major issues like education, housing, and healthcare to lead a morally compelling agenda. It turns out that both this strategy and message were political after all.

## **What was your biggest challenge?**

My biggest challenge was running a campaign that inspired an easily jaded electorate to come out and vote -- for me! I needed to talk about the big issues facing marginalized communities such as underfunded public schools, poverty, discrimination, and racism. But I also needed to frame it within the vision of a hopeful future -- one that built off the work community organizations and groups were already doing. We had already built up a broad base of support for public education over the years -- one that threw out a one-term governor who had cut funding to public education. My campaign was able to build on this base and give voice to the community's desires for a bigger vision which included quality and equality in public education.

## **What experiences have you had with immigrants and the immigrant community?**

I grew up in an immigrant family which relied heavily on public services and institutions such as public schools. This had an enormous influence in shaping my views about the importance and value of public institutions and public spaces. I also lived in West Philadelphia during a period of resettlement of Vietnamese and other refugees from Asia and Africa. I saw firsthand how new immigrant populations struggled to access services and achieve stability for their families. Additionally, I spent 20 years with Asian Americans United (AAU) where we engaged in many immigrant rights struggles, particularly against negative development efforts in Chinatown such as the proposed building of a stadium. These plans were not inclusive of the voices of this significant immigrant community. We made sure we had a loud voice and say in a public process.

## **Most immigration policy is made on a national level; what role do you see local leaders playing in immigrant issues?**

There's a lot municipal leaders can do. For example, Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez and I have championed language access and we have sponsored a bill to create a municipal ID card so immigrants and many people in our city who don't otherwise have access to a driver's license or state ID can access services. I helped organize protests at the airport when the first Muslim ban came down. A month later, I helped convene a national

Sanctuary Cities gathering in New York City. And I'll continue to uplift the voices of our immigrant communities in Council and in the public sphere.

In a time of tremendous hostility to immigrants and people of color, local leaders must provide a counter message to the national anti-immigrant rhetoric. I am proud that on my first day of office, I stood by Mayor Kenney as he re-established Philadelphia as a "Sanctuary City." We're standing by our right to determine how residents will be treated within our own municipal borders. That means we'll require ICE to obtain a judicial warrant, and it means I'll be loudly defending our communities and our city when it comes to anti-immigrant rhetoric, inhumane deportation and detention practices, and scapegoating aspiring citizens who deserve a roadmap for citizenship. This is not a time for silence or meekness. This is a time for local leaders to step up when our state and federal elected officials do not.

## **What advice would you give about building leadership for social justice?**

In immigrant communities, our youth are likely to be at the forefront of many struggles to improve the community. We should invest more in immigrant youth leadership and help them build bridges to multiracial partnerships, mentorships, and political action and engagement opportunities.

We have to teach young people to commit to social change over a period of time, which is hard to do. It is important to find ways to sustain the work and not burn out. Young people need to find spaces where they can grow and learn. For me, Asian Americans United was one of those spaces. We engaged in many campaigns and built relationships beyond the Asian community. The work with AAU showed me the importance of working with other networks and justice-minded activists.

## **Is there anything you wish to add?**

In this moment, America is at a moral crossroads, and local leadership really matters. Local leaders are closest to our communities and can partner with local movements. Immigrant communities in particular are strongest at the local level, and there are real opportunities for political engagement and action that has the power to diversify, change, and inspire our electorate. I see it in new immigrant community leaders who are mobilizing across the country -- Greg Casar, the first Mexican American councilmember in Austin, TX, for example, or Stephanie Chang, a state representative in Michigan. We need to recognize that power, value it, and go out and exercise it.