

Hispanic Impact

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Ohio

Latino Affairs
Commission

Volume 1, Issue 2

June 2018

Interview with Cleveland City Councilwoman Jasmin Santana: Putting Service Into Action

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When doing good and serving is not enough, it becomes time to begin impacting policy – this is the realization that Jasmin Santana was confronted with late last year. Through her years working in the social service arena, Jasmin has provided much needed support to the growing Latino community. With her ability to interpret the needs of Hispanics and Latinos, Jasmin is unafraid of using her platform to communicate to a greater audience. She asks the hard questions about inclusion, equality and opportunity that often resonate with the leaders in our community yet are not heard enough in the government leadership circle Today, Jasmin is serving as the first Latina councilwoman in Ward 14, City Council in Cleveland, becoming the voice of the ward with the highest concentration of Latino voters. We spoke with Jasmin to learn about her experience.



“At the end of the day if you can lay in bed and feel that your sacrifices have impacted the lives or changed the narrow mindset that exists out there in the world, then it is all worth it.”

- Councilwoman Jasmin Santana.

We are eager to learn about your upbringing, could you tell us a bit about yourself?

I was born and raised on Bridge Ave in Cleveland, OH, which is on the border of Ohio City and Gordon Square, a diverse neighborhood that is currently thriving and undergoing a lot of development. It is very different now compared to when I was growing up with my single mother and two siblings. While it was a diverse community, and continues to be one, it had limited resources available. My mother was brought here from Puerto Rico as a child in the fourth grade, so her education was limited, but we survived. She would sell Latino food and save the money to buy us birthday and Christmas gifts, also supplies that we needed. We never went to sleep without anything to eat, we just relied on social services that were available in our area like community centers, public transportation. I would always serve as her interpreter because she did not speak English.

What inspired you to run for city council?

The community I grew up in and where I currently have lived for 26 years with my two teenage children and husband inspired me. My mother, sister and a lot of friends, also live there. It is the place I do my shopping, see my primary doctor, and the location where I worship. I have worked as a community outreach and engagement coordinator for ten years. At that level of involvement, I realized that the community was rapidly declining. While other communities around us were undergoing development and improving, we were ignored. I felt a sense of hopelessness from the residents, and also witnessed social problems that affected our families and children. Bottom line, the resources were not coming and there was a lack of community engagement and opportunity offered to families.

What were some of the reactions from friends and family when they found out you were running for public office?

Many of my friends and family members were not surprised. It was a topic that was often discussed within our conversations, and they knew how passionate I was to serve the community and make a difference. They also knew my frustration of not seeing our community moving forward and seeing no progress at all in our ward. It was a conversation I've had back and forth for four years of 'no way I could do this'. But a lot of those I talked with were very supportive and became my team members early on to help me campaign. On the other hand, my Mom was very much against it. Growing up in

Puerto Rico she knew politics were very important and a very big deal there. She was aware how dirty politics can get, was worried about others hurting my family, and what running would do to me mentally. But, she also understood that my aspirations were big and that I wanted to bring change to our community—and that my faith would subdue any evil that would come my way. I believe that made her feel a little bit more at ease.

What can you tell us about your mentors and how they have inspired you in this new stage of your career?

I've had several mentors along the way, some for weeks, some for a few months. Some have been around since I've started my career and beyond. One mentor I would like to focus on is my brother. When I first told him I was going to run he was a little shocked but was very supportive from the start. He would, and still does, call me every day to check up on me; to share words of wisdom and to remind me of my vision and to stay focused on my journey and helps me navigate through this political world. He makes sure to let me know that he is proud of me and the difference I am making. What he doesn't know is that I am also proud of him, being my brother and I am thankful to have him in my life. I would like to also mention that a lot of my mentors have been Latino males who have grown up and have seen and understand the same struggles in the community and overcame them. Like my brother, they bring a male's perspective.



What are some of the things you have learned from your first few months on the Cleveland City Council?

It is a very different world - I do not think any candidate is prepared enough for what this political world entails in Cleveland City Hall. I have learned to really listen to colleagues and have accepted that I do not have all the answers and I need to give myself time to learn.

What issues are you most excited to address?

I am excited about everything! I get excited thinking about all the issues affecting our community that I will be addressing during my time on City Council. To narrow it all down, community engagement around health and safety is critical, and we all need to be a part of this change. So, making sure that we educate the constituents so that they are empowered. Getting social and physically involved is very important to me. There is so much disconnect in our community that I want to be sure that all the resources we have at City Hall are available to the families. And learning how to engage them so that they are aware of these resources. All of that is important to me because it is about improving the quality of life for our community. A personal passion of mine is women's development and health, especially because our ward has a high level of family trauma, infant mortality being one of the main causes of that trauma in the community. I am hopeful that the partnership with MetroHealth, which is a huge health care engine within our ward, we will be able to fill gaps and connect the resources to the families around our community. This gets me very excited, I've always said that if we can make a woman healthy, and empower her, the whole landscape of the community will change. Right now the most immediate issue I am addressing is toxic environments affecting our families. Right now, I am working on a campaign that focuses on littering, illegal dumping, and beautifying our neighborhoods so that we have healthier clean spaces and a cleaner environment which is very important to one's mental state.



Now that you are a part of the council, what are the biggest challenges you will be facing and how do you plan to overcome them?

The biggest challenge I've had so far has been bringing the partners together. Restoring trust and making them aware that we are all in this together and that we want to see a thriving community with healthy families. Engaging the partners maybe one of the more challenging parts of working on the council but we are making head-ways. You must come from the heart in a real authentic way to say, 'I need your help, and I need your support to make this happen.' This is not a one person show, its doing it together for families.

“If we can make a woman healthy, and empower her, the whole landscape of the community will change.”

- Councilwoman Jasmin Santana on the issue of women's health.

What would you like to tell other Latina women who are thinking about running for office?

You know, running for Cleveland City Council has been one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life. I think back now and think 'Wow, the things that you went through to be in this position.' Women wear a lot of hats and are constantly doing things for others – church, kids, husband and to run for office you are going to have to sacrifice a lot of your time and important moments with family and friends. Even now I can say I do not have a personal life right now, but at the end of the day if you can lay in the bed and feel that your sacrifices have impacted the lives or changed the narrow mindset that exists out there in the world, then it is all worth it. Running for office is something you must be passionate about - you must be passionate to serve others and to really make a difference.

How much has your life changed since becoming a public official?

One of the biggest changes has been that I do not have much of a private life anymore. Although my schedule is much more packed, my life has changed so much that I can see much more through the eyes of others than I could before. Before I did a lot of work from the community's perspective but now to be on the government's side, I see things through a different lens and can see why things take longer to get done. Now I see that it is not as easy for things such as advocacy, or people just to listen to you. You need to be consistent, repeat yourself and be clear on the things you want to accomplish and keep on them because these tasks take time. Politics takes time, and this was all very new to me. In a good way, my mind-set has changed so that I am



more aware of influences that people have and the opportunities to make differences. I am more cautious, and mindful about tasks and issues, of making sure that I educate my constituents and make them aware of how city government works. In these short five months, honestly, I feel I have already received my associate degree in politics.

What message would you like to leave for our readers and the constituents of Ward 14?

First, I would like to say that it is an honor to be elected and that I am working very hard to make sure that in these four years, we see the change that we have been asking for many years. I want to see thriving families and confirm that the time my family sacrificed has not been wasted. I will be working very hard to build hope in our community - we are all in this together.

