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NEWS

Not Your Average Freshman

El Paso Rep. Mary Gonzalez is no Tea Partier

BY JORDAN GASS-POORÉ AND KATE X MESSER, FRI., FEB. 15, 2013



Mary Gonzalez (Courtesy of Gonzalez Campaign Website)

The dominant image of the 83rd Legislature's freshman class is that of the white male Tea Party rep armed with a budget-slashing agenda to keep chiseling away at women's access to health care, "reforming" education, and making campaign hay out of a bevy of other social issues. El Paso state Rep. **Mary Gonzalez**, on the other hand, is not your garden-variety House newcomer. Only the second openly gay rep to serve in the Legislature (former Austin Rep. **Glen Maxey** was the first), she describes herself as "pansexual" – no doubt mystifying her conservative colleagues in the House. No stranger to the Capitol, or to the Austin area, she served as an aide to Laredo Rep. **Richard Raymond** and former longtime El Paso Rep. **Paul Moreno**. Most recently, she was a visiting instructor at **Southwestern University** in Georgetown, and she's currently working on her doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction at UT-Austin. We spoke with Gonzalez on a wide range of topics during the recent Leadership Institute at **Texas State University** in San Marcos.

Austin Chronicle: *Education seems to be very important, not only in your personal life, but in your platform. What are some of the other big issues facing your district?*

Mary Gonzalez: Education will be a primary focus, but there are over 250 colonias in my district – unincorporated communities that usually have a high immigrant or high Latino population. A lot of these communities still don't have roads or water or sewer. There are colonias in my district that don't even have electricity. So, we're talking about communities without basic infrastructure. Providing basic infrastructure is something that I really am passionate about, want to really work on, and make sure that we address.

AC: *How involved do you plan to be in some of the LBGT initiatives? For example, the public school non-discrimination bill or striking language like "unacceptable lifestyle" out of the state's health and safety code? Are you, or will you be, involved in any of those things?*

MG: Obviously, I've been very open about my identity – not only because I want to be transparent, but also because I want to be considered a leader for the community. So, any issue that does impact the LGBTQ community, I will actively take a role in, or try to at least be aware of. I'm joint-authoring a bill with Rep. [Rafael] Anchia regarding adoption, and how to make sure that same-sex parents who adopt children are able to be part of birth certificates. Also, LGBT youth struggle to feel accepted in schools. I haven't seen that bill language, but I can pretty much guarantee that that would be something that I would be extremely passionate and concerned about. At this point we don't yet have anything like that filed on our legislative agenda, but it's something that we are looking into.

AC: *What were some of the biggest issues you faced during your campaign, and how did you overcome these challenges?*

MG: The campaign was pretty interesting. Gosh, it seems like a lifetime ago. There were a lot of questions regarding a lot of my identities: my gender, my sexuality, my age – at the time when I was campaigning I was 28, I'm 29 now – my class – I quit my job to campaign, so just the fact that I didn't necessarily have a "profession" when I was running – all these identities played a central role to my race, because I live on the margins of so many different identities. What they don't tell people when they run for office is how much finances play into it, whether it's campaign finances and raising money, which was really difficult in the beginning, or personal finances and the fact that you have to not only quit your job in order to campaign effectively, but then quit your job if you win the position. I used to be a professor for a state agency, and I can't do that anymore.

Towards the end, a whisper campaign started regarding my sexuality and that was difficult. It's hard to realize that something I'm really proud of was viewed as a negative. The whisper campaign affected not for me but also my family.

AC: *How did the whisper campaign manifest? Clearly, you have been out for a while?*

MG: Yes, I have been out, clearly, but there's a difference between what's happening in larger conversations, and what's happening in my district – a district that is predominately Spanish speaking, that maybe doesn't read the Huffington Post or *Dallas Voice*. My sexuality, that's open and honest and wasn't something that was getting a lot of press in El Paso during the time. The press in El Paso had already dealt with this. The press in El Paso didn't really touch it. In my district there's two conversations happening: a national conversation and a district conversation. The district really wasn't considering my sexuality until my opponents made it an issue by developing the whisper campaign.

AC: *Was that the case on both sides of the political fence?*

MG: Well, I didn't have a Republican opponent. That's what made it even more frustrating. The Democrats, the party of inclusivity and equality. To have this come up in a Democratic primary was frustrating, but also demonstrated the strengths of the Democratic party in its ability to promote equality and inclusivity, because you would think I wouldn't have won after the whisper campaign. But we did.

I don't know how much you know about my race, but I jumped in, running against four men. All had been elected officials; all are part of the traditional political mold: There was a school board member, a community-college board member, a county commissioner, another community-college board member and then there was me, this non-political – I mean "political" in the sense that I'm an activist, but not "political" in the sense that I was in an established position – a non-political, younger person who was a woman, who was queer-identified, who significantly had less money. I remember I got in trouble one time because I told a reporter, "People like me shouldn't get elected." I didn't mean that "people like me shouldn't get elected," I meant that people who have access to win elections, usually isn't someone who looks and identifies like me.

AC: *You have experience at the Capitol prior to your campaign. What have you learned on the campaign trail and in the first few weeks of office regarding... Let's just call it the "Texas good ol' boy network"?*

MG: Sometimes my chief of staff has to remind me that I'm no longer a staffer – that I've actually won the election. My prior experience at the Capitol provided me with the ability to hit the ground running.

This weekend, after only being in office 18 days, officially, we held our first Town Hall meeting, and we were able to present to our community a strong legislative agenda, as well as non-legislative initiatives we're working on, – like grants for libraries in my district or for SOAR, or for solar street lights. So in 20 days, I actually have a full legislative agenda, non-legislative initiatives, and a strong communication effort to my district to help them understand what's going on. If I hadn't previously worked at the Capitol, I would still be looking for committee rooms. So, just to be able to come in and know exactly what needs to be done has been beneficial for my district. My staff and I were talking about this this morning: My district really is a high-needs district. The fact that there are over 250 colonias – that in itself is a huge deal. We're taking it really seriously, and my past experience is really coming into play.

AC: *Other than having to be reminded that you're actually the one in charge, and besides the whisper campaign, have there been any other surprises?*

MG: I don't know if there were any surprises, but I think what I had already felt as a staffer is definitely more magnified as a legislator. For example, as a staffer, there are very few other women staffers. I was a female intern in a male dominated space, and I always struggled with the idea of sexism at the Capitol. And now to be the female legislator – and it's still a male dominated space – those differences have only been magnified.

There are only 31 female state reps. I've been talking to male state reps about leadership; if you look at some of our caucuses, we hardly have any women in leadership. Where are our women in committees?

And then, there's my age and my gender – to be taken seriously as a young woman, to be 29, having to work above and beyond to make sure that I am knowledgeable about issues. So, again, not necessarily a surprise, but definitely the impact is a little bit different.

AC: *Do you have any anecdotes about feeling dismissed because of your age or your gender or identity?*

MG: I've been trying to position myself early as a leader, as someone who's knowledgeable, so when the time does come it'll be harder to dismiss me – taking a lead in the freshman Democratic class, or taking a lead by having the right conversations with the right people. When I meet state reps –there are 150 of us, there's a lot of us, it's hard to keep us all straight – sometimes they'll meet me, and they'll say, "Oh, you're *Mary Gonzalez*," and then there's a pause. "*The one from El Paso*." And you know they're thinking, "The one who has the ambiguous sexual identity that I don't understand." I talked to another state rep, he's a Republican, and he told me, "They talk about you sometimes, and they're really confused." I'm glad to be bringing some awareness. And I think what's really powerful about what's happened in my race – I'm not gonna lie – it's been very difficult to be this honest and transparent, but something that's really personal: My sexuality, while it's identity, is still a personal identity – you're putting very personal details about your life out there. We haven't really talked about third-gender identity or the gender spectrum in the public political sphere. All of the ways in which we have talked about gender or sex in politics is very binary. So at least my presence allows for a conversation to potentially open up what we think about gender, to lead that conversation, to kind of disrupt people's world view regarding gender. Obviously it's going to be really difficult, and when people get frustrated, a lot of that frustration can be aimed toward me, because I'm that face.

AC: *What was it like growing up in Clint, Texas? How and why did you become involved with politics?*

MG: I grew up in Clint, Texas; it's a little town outside of El Paso. It's ironic because if you look at me I don't look real country. So, I went to the agriculture meeting at the Ag Council where there were representatives from all the different Ag industries. They're usually Republican – I think they're all Republican – and I go in and start talking about my background and why I love the agricultural community and they just looked shocked. You could see their faces, like, "What is going on?" This five-foot-tall Latina with long hair who walks in with her hoop earrings and starts talking about crop rotation! I'm definitely an interesting phenomena happening at the Capitol and in Clint's farming community.

I came to Austin to better understand politics. But if you would have told me a year ago that I would be running for office or sitting in the Capitol, I would have told you, "No way!" This was never part of my plan in life.

I used to always tell my students that if we want to see any change we have to be the catalyst. We had to sometimes personally sacrifice in order to make sure that we were being responsible in giving back to our communities. So, even though I had this plan to finish my Ph.D. and be the leading academic or leading scholar in intersectionality pedagogy ...

to find a state rep who understands the unique dynamics of my district, as well as how to navigate the Texas Capitol effectively. I had to run.

AC: *Did I read somewhere that your father is a Republican?*

MG: Funny story: The first day my dad comes to [Austin], I bring him on the house floor with me. I'm responding to the governor on questions like women's right to choose, and how he wants to ban abortions, etc., etc., and I was really angry. My dad, he tells my staff, "We shouldn't hate all the Republicans." I had my interview with the *El Paso Times*. At the end of it she wants to go interview my dad, and I went somewhere else, I don't know where I was, and she said, "Mr. Gonzalez, there's a rumor around El Paso that you're a Republican." And he's like, "That's not a rumor. I'm a proud Republican." And she's like, "Are you still proud of Mary?" And he's like, "Yeah, I'm still proud, but every day I wake up and I ask God, 'Why is she a Democrat?'"

He really struggles with me being a Democrat and how public I am about my progressive ideas. But what's good about my dad being a Republican is that it allows me to learn how to communicate in some difficult conversations with other Republicans. I can use my dad as a test. I can learn what works with him in order to facilitate those conversations in the Capitol. The second thing is that my dad is highly respected in my district, so he can then be the ambassador for Republicans in my district to say, "You know, Mary does care about us, she's not some crazy liberal."

The ironic part about being out in politics is that you're out because you want to be authentic and transparent, and when people come out in general they come out because they want to be liberated and be their own person. But in politics being out, it's suffocating because it becomes the only thing you are. The thing that's supposed to liberate you is suffocating you. And I don't want that to be viewed as a negative – I'm proud to be who I am, I'm proud to be open and honest, but to be only one thing, of course it's gonna have an impact.

AC: *From your perspective, when's Texas going turn blue?*

MG: Obviously, if I had my say, it's 2014 – sooner rather than later. I'm excited about Texas turning blue soon. The Obama money coming in with some new infrastructure, **Robert Jones**, the executive director of Annie's List is now the executive director for Be One Texas, all these things that are changing, as far as Democratic infrastructure, as well as investment going in to actually developing a Democratic infrastructure. We're finally going to see a large investment in the Democratic party that can create hope in maybe winning this. I think we have some great shining stars coming up in the trenches: [Sen.] **Wendy Davis** is absolutely amazing; Sen. **[Kirk] Watson**, of course, has always played a big role politically statewide; obviously **Joaquin** and **Julian [Castro]** – Joaquin is a good friend of mine, and I can't wait until he runs for U.S. Senate. I think when all of our stars start to come up, we'll see a lot of changes. I think no later than 2018.

AC: Why do you think you won?

MG: I think there are three things that contributed to my win: My campaign – we worked really hard. People can start a whisper campaign, but we worked really hard to have a lot of one-on-one contact, meaning I knocked on thousands of doors. I made thousands of phone calls. I knew I had to let them know I'm not this awful person. I think directly talking to voters is one of the primary reasons I won, but what gave me the space to do that was **Annie's List**. Annie's List donated at least \$80,000 to my race. That means I didn't have to go out and try to fundraise \$80,000 from random people, but I got to focus on talking to voters. That's probably why I won: working hard, talking to voters, and Annie's List. And then there was a coalition, a team that did bilingual phone banks. When the race started getting difficult the community kind of just started sending me words of encouragement to help me get through it. And then it doesn't hurt that I'm the oldest of 11, I had 10 block walkers on demand.

Rep. Mary Gonzalez will join Sen. Wendy Davis as keynote speakers at the Texas Observer's annual Rabble Rouser fundraiser, Thursday, Feb. 21, 6-9pm at The White Horse, 500 Comal St.

Correction *The original version of this article gave the wrong name for Mary Gonzalez. We regret the error.*

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