

Leader Profile: Alessandra Ocasio-Cortez

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Introduction

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is an American Democratic Socialist born in October, 1989. She is currently serving as the United States Representative for the 14th congress district of New York. She heads the regions of Rikers Island, sections of Queens, and eastern sides of the Bronx. Alexandria drew national popularity after winning the Democrat's primary elections in June 2018 and unsettling Joe Crowley, who had ruled for ten years. She also defeated Anthony Papas, who was her Republican opponent¹. Therefore, Alexandria is the youngest woman to ever serve as a United States Representative at the age of twenty-nine years. The majority of United States citizens have also recognized her for her substantial presence on social media compared to her counterparts.

Early life

Alexandria was born and raised in a catholic family in Bronx. She is the daughter of Sergio Ocasio and Blanca Ocasio-Cortez. While growing up, her father operated his own business while her mother, Puerto Rican, cleaned houses. Even though far from where they grew up, in pursuit of a better education for their daughter, Alexandria's parents registered her to Yorktown High School until her graduation in 2007. It was a very different lifestyle, community, and demographics. Alexandria couldn't help but notice how much of an outsider she felt in high school. Nevertheless, she loved participating in legislative debates and sessions and discussions like the Lorenzo de Zavala session, where she became its secretary while at University.

In 2007, she joined Boston University to pursue a degree in International Relations and Economics. However, in 2008, her father died of cancer when she was in the second year. Alexandria was exposed to very complicated and bureaucratic issues when trying to settle her father's estate. She states that the experience helped her gain firsthand information on how advocates selected by the court to oversee a property can take advantage of the situation by

¹ Leigh, Anna. *Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: Political Headliner*. Lerner Publications (Tm), 2020.

accumulating wealth at the expense of the struggling families. As a college intern, Alexandria worked for the late Ted Kennedy, who was a United States senator on immigration and issues dealing with foreign affairs. She graduated in 2011 with a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Economics.

After graduating, Alexandria returned to the Bronx and revolved to help her mother, who was a school driver and house cleaner, by working as a waitress and a bartender. Later, Alexandria established Brook Avenue Press, currently a non-operational printing firm for literature that described the Bronx on a bright side. She also worked for the National Hispanic Institute, a non-profit organization that help students expand their abilities and skills in social enterprise and community leadership. According to Alexandria, the financial and healthcare crisis she experienced made her understand how policy strategies and decisions made by the top-ranking government officials affect the lives of families and people living from pay to pay.

Experiences towards realizing career path

Alexandra's experience on how the judicial system works and the economic difficulties her and her family encountered made her volunteer as one of the organizers during Bernie Sander's campaign in 2016². After the election, Alexandria traveled across the United States, visiting places like Michigan, Flint, and the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Dakota. During her visit, Alexandria got the opportunity to talk to individuals affected by the Flint water crisis and the Dakota Pipeline. Alexandria remembers her December 2016 tour to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation as a turning point. In an interview, he stated that before the visit, she had assumed that the only way one can run for an electoral office or position had to do with power, social influence, and wealth. However, her visit to Dakota made her change her perception after

² Uetrict, Micah, and Meagan Day. *Bigger Than Bernie: How We Go from the Sanders Campaign to Democratic Socialism*. Verso, 2020.

seeing people putting their lives on the forefront and everything to a standstill in order to safeguard their community. The experience in Dakota inspired Alexandria to do the same for her community.

A moment that revolutionized Alexandria's career

Days after visiting Dakota, Alexandria received a call from the Brand New Congress. They were enrolling liberal candidates for the elections and she was being nominated by her brother. The request was the first step towards Alexandria materializing something that was percolating all along. In April 2018, Alexandria started her election campaigns while still tending bar and waiting tables at Flats Fix, a taqueria in New York City. She was the first candidate since 2004 to contest against Joe Crowley, the Democratic Caucus Chair, in the primary election. However, Alexandria acknowledged that her campaigns faced a financial challenges from the start. She stated that one cannot defeat "big money" with more money. Therefore, a different strategy was employed and Alexandria's campaign assumed a grassroots posture and never took donations from corporations. It was completely funded by the people.

Alexandria's vision

Currently, Alexandria is a member of Democratic Socialists of America and recognizes the democratic socialist tag as part of her identity. Alexandria backs liberal policies like a federal job guarantee, free college education, the abolishment of United States Custom enforcement and immigration, policies on gun control, and single-performer Medicare for all. Alexandria also validated Bernie Sanders for the 2020 elections and followed him at communication appointments. The majority of campaign rallies that Alexandria attends alongside Bernie Sanders tend to attract a lot more supporters than any campaign in the history of American

politics. Alexandria has championed more environmental disciplinarians in Congress in matters dealing with the environment, citing climate change as one of the significant threats to the industrialization of a civilized world. Alexandria’s environmental strategy, known as the Green New Deal, campaigns for the United States to shift to an electric grid functioning on renewable energy and stop the usage of fossil energy.

Additionally, Alexandria has communicated support for abolishing and defunding the United States Customs Enforcements and immigration agency in several instances. In 2018, she called the practice as the product of the Bush-period Partisan Act set of legislation and an implementation organization that takes more of a revolutionary tone every day. In terms of healthcare provision, Alexandria views it as a human right that should be accessible to all citizens. She believes that a single health care insurer by the government should cover for every American citizen, reducing the overall cost³. Through Alexandria’s healthcare campaigns, the majority of the 2020 presidential candidates have adopted the proposal. Alexandria also supports and calls for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender community's equality, arguing that the civil rights of the LGBTQ are also human rights. She has also asked for solidarity with Puerto Rico by giving Puerto Ricans civil rights, irrespective of the Puerto Rico legal grouping. Alexandria advocates for disaster relief and voting rights for Puerto Ricans.

Attributes learned

Alexandria shows us the importance of being true one’s life background and activities despite the circumstances. She also reminds us of the false narratives the majority of us were lead to believe through history and politics; things such as the need to have money and influence to be a representative of everyday people. Her trajectory should inspire all of us to stand up for the communities we are a part of—the communities we serve, even without any specific title.

³ Hundal, Henna, and Sai Shanthanand Rajagopal. “Through the Lens of Justice: Healthcare Messaging for 2020.”

Alexandria's transparency and integrity are also commendable. She has openly shared with the public about the cost of medical insurance as a Representative, how members of Congress pay interns per hour, and how people choose office spaces through the lottery. The majority of the public is unaware of such type of information. Transparency is essential since it builds trust in relationship and in this case, with the public. For instance, Alexandria, being the youngest person in Congress, has received a commendation for honesty on social media.

Yet, I believe the most encouraging lesson to learn from Alexandria's life is to not allow ourselves nor our circumstances to be content with the status quo. Everything changes all the time and it is important, through all the shifts and turns in our world, to always pursuit the common good for all. Either through politics, or through any typical daily labor, we all have a responsibility to one another. And even when systems tell us a different story, we can, and should, always challenge it. Especially, as followers of Jesus who live (and know) a better narrative to to the story we are all a part of.

Bibliography

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