

Texas upbringing launched this progressiveâ??s volunteer political career

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Susan Pfeifer spends most of her time working to register voters.

Susan Pfeifer has volunteered for political causes and elected officials since she was a teenager. Her first political action was wearing a John F. Kennedy button to high school in 1960 â?? once.

â??It didnâ??t raise my popularity profile, letâ??s just say that.â?•

Pfeifer grew up in Dallas, a conservative bastion in the 1950â??s and 60â??s, in which it was difficult to express liberal leanings. Today, sheâ??s a leader in the San Francisco FDR Club, an organization that promotes the interests of seniors and the disabled. In 2014, the club worked with the Disability Caucus in the state senate to block a vote on a bill that would have allowed a municipalityâ??San Francisco â??to charge disabled people for parking at meters. One municipalityâ??s ability to do so would have opened the doors for all other cities in the state to do the same.

Now, her focus, and that of the FDR Club, is turning out the vote across California in the upcoming mid-term elections.

â??The June election ensured that a Democrat will run against a Republican in almost every district in November,â??â?? she said. â??Next strategy is to increase voter turnout, to give the Democrats a better chance of winning.â?•

Susanâ??s parents were political junkies and she says she inherited the gene from them.

In the early â??60s, before midterm elections, she recalls her mother dropping her and her sister off at a Halloween party before going on to do errands. Two hours later, she returned to pick them up and the girls hopped into the front seat of the familyâ??s 57 Chevy (pre-bucket seats, as many people as could fit rode in the front seat).

A lesson from Mom

Her mother was â??acting funnyâ?• and sounded excited about something, Pfeifer said. The girls turned around and found the back seat stacked with yard signs for the Republican candidate for Congress. Their mom had spent the time furtively snatching signs from front lawns in conservative neighborhoods.

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When they got home, they realized they couldnâ??t throw the signs in the trash because everyone would then know whoâ??d taken themâ??so the signs spent the next 20 years in the familyâ??s garage.

Dallas remained conservative through the following years, but â??the Kennedy assassination brought the liberals out of the woodwork,â?• Pfeifer said.

Her motherâ??s North Dallas Womenâ??s Democratic Club held a fundraiser, with Ann Richards as chief lyricist in a satirical skit called â??Political Paranoia.â?• â??Itâ??s the first time I realized how funny she was,â?• Pfeifer said of the stateâ??s eventual governor.

By 1964, the political climate felt comfortable enough for Pfeifer, then a teenager, to knock on doors for Lyndon Johnson.

After college graduation, her early career was in the entertainment industry, first in public and broadcast television in Texas, then as promotions director for San Francisco Bay Area radio stations, where she handled everything from outdoor billboards to media buying. From 1998 to 2013, she served as ad manager for Cal Performances.

Her political interests sharpened in 2003, during George Bushâ??s second term, with the appearance of Howard Dean on the political landscape. â??I heard Larry King ask Ann Richards who she would vote for in 2004, and she said â??Howard Dean, if he runs.â??â?• Her interest was solidified after seeing him speak on TV â??I went to the first Bay Area meet up, in a bar,â?• she said, â??and committed to working for him.â?•

After the Dean campaign flamed out, Pfeifer decided to take her time about getting so involved again. Yet in 2007, when she heard Barack Obama announce his candidacy for president in Springfield, Ill., she was, in her words, â??a goner.â?•



Susan Pfeiffer got a surprise seat at the Democratic National Convention, where she was a delegate.

In the thick of the Democratic Convention

And it was the 2008 Democratic Convention, where Obama accepted his partyâ??s nomination, that provided Pfeifer with her most rewarding political experience so far. â??Somehow I got elected as a delegate to the national convention in Denver,â?• she said. Sheâ??d been upgraded to a mid-field seat, but she got lost in the bowels of Denverâ??s Mile High Stadium, packed with 80,000 true believers.

A security guard guided her back up onto the field and as she searched for her section, she saw Jesse Jackson.â??That must be a VIP section,â?• On she walked, past the African-American caucus, the Asian-American caucus, and other VIP sections, getting closer and closer to the front. A check with another guard confirmed she was on the right track. Finally, she came to three rows of folding chairs in a semi-circle around the stage, each attached with a piece of paper. â??Go find your nameâ?• another security guard said.

Her chair was right in the middle of the first row, about four feet from the stage. â??I think they heard my scream back in San Francisco.â?•

Her luck was due to a random lottery rewarding members of the rank and file with front row seats. â??We had better seats than Michelle and the girls,â?• she said, still awestruck 10 years later. â??When I got home I looked online for two days to find a photo taken from behind Obama that showed him on stage and me in the front row. Granted, it was a very small image! But I knew it was me.â?•

Watch for the woman with the ironing board

Pfeifer lives in the Outer Sunset, and turned 70 this year. These days, sheâ??s busy with voter registration efforts. Once a month she and a crew of about 30 volunteers attend naturalization ceremonies for new citizens in Oakland. They set up an ironing board at each of two exits, waiting with clipboards and forms to register new citizensâ??while theyâ??re feeling especially patrioticâ??to vote. Last month they added 296 to the voter rolls.

The experience also serves as a training ground for new volunteers who will next go out to register voters in the Bay Area and other districts which need help getting out the vote.

â??Iâ??m also doing phone calling and texting to get out the vote with local political groups like Democracy Action, Swing Left and Indivisible.â?•

These groups are taking advantage of the summer weather to register voters at farmersâ?? markets, Sunday Streets events and neighborhood street fairs.

So if you should see a petite woman with dark hair and clipboard standing behind an ironing board at your favorite farmers market this summer, stop by to say hello to Susan Pfeifer.

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And if youâ??re not already registered to vote, seize the opportunity.

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