

â??Dean Screamâ?? did little to deter first-time campaigner from a life of political activism for social justice and now elder issues

Description

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In 2004, when political hopefuls were lining up to challenge incumbent President George W. Bush, Maxine Anderson yearned for someone to really push a progressive agenda. But sheâ??s not a Democrat.

> â??Iâ??m a long, long time registered â??declined to state,â?? â?• she said. â??I donâ??t believe either of the two parties serve the interests of regular folk well. I also try to not label myself, so Iâ??d have said that to me, as an informed citizen, Bush the youngerâ??s policies were abhorrent to me. As a person I found him vacuous.â?•



She found what she was looking for when a friend brought up Howard Dean, then governor of Vermont. Here was a strong progressive. Unlike many Democrats, he had opposed the war in Iraq. And although many Democratic presidential nominees favored expanding healthcare access, including John Kerry, who won the nomination but lost the election, Deanâ??s plan was the most comprehensive. Universal health care was â?? and still is â?? a goal of Andersonâ??s.

â??He oversaw the expansion of universal health care for children and pregnant women in his state, which made me feel we could get to universal health care in this country,â?• she said.

So, she volunteered with his campaign, her first â?? and short but not last â?? foray into politics.

Dean was a frontrunner until Iowa, a battleground state. Despite coming in third, Dean vowed to keep on campaigning â?? in every state. But what may be most remembered is the loud, impassioned â??Yeahâ?• that punctuated his rallying cry. It was widely mocked in the media as the â??Dean Scream.â?• After placing third in the Wisconsin primary, he withdrew from the race.

Yet Anderson stuck with him â?? and his vision. Afterward, she said, she and other supporters â??were able to push the Democratic party enough to appoint Dean to head the national committee.â?• Dean then enacted what she felt were important changes.

One of them, ironically, may have made a difference in his quest. Rather than just campaigning in battleground states, the party began encouraging candidates to campaign in all 50 states. Itâ??s believed that helped Obama get elected, along with his social media fundraising, another strategy picked up from Dean.

Those first tastes of political activism were the launchpad for years of organizing in San Francisco.

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In the grassroots

Anderson has helped form or worked with three grassroots political organizations, including the now-defunct San Francisco for Democracy, the League of Women Voters, and the San Francisco chapter of the Older Womenâ??s League, commonly known as OWL. Now 72, the longtime Western Addition resident is still organizing.

Sheâ??s working with OWL to stave off the threatened closure of Laguna Honda Hospital, the 157-year-old city institution housing more than 500 medically fragile, mostly low-income residents covered by Medicare or Medical. The federal agency terminated payments a year ago due to various deficiencies. Some residents were moved out.

The discharges were paused under agreements with the city and state. The hospital now has until Sept. 19 to meet federal remedies. â??Without Laguna Honda, patients will be moved to areas away from their homes and even outside the city,â?• Anderson said. â??They need to stay close to their loved ones for support while rehabbing.â?•

Andersonâ??s background is solidly blue-collar. She grew up on the west side of Chicago. Her mother worked as a domestic, her father as a janitor.

â??My parents taught me the importance of voting, but I learned that wasnâ??t enough to change policy,â?• she said. â??We the people have to define what matters to us.â?•

Social media had not yet become a force when Anderson entered politics. Policy not personality has always been her priority, she said. â??We saw when that shiny little, glittery candidate goes away, you are left with their policy, and I knew thatâ??s what we needed to focus on,â?• Anderson said.

She focused on broad social issues, such as health care, criminal justice reform, and local government accountability. As she aged, she directed her energies toward issues important to older women, such as healthcare, aging at home, and the preservation of Social Security and Medicare.

â??With aging, our ability to live fuller lives, even if weâ??re not wealthy, is like pushing a boulder up the hill. But we keep pushing,â?• she said.

College then SF

Her life isnâ??t all organizing. Retired after a long career in the insurance industry, Anderson is a history buff who travels widely. She likes to tell the story of a misadventure while on safari in Africa. â??I breathed a sigh of relief when a trumpeting elephant who was chasing our vehicle finally broke off and rejoined the herd,â?• she said, â??because the driver knew to maintain a slow speed.â?•

She takes long walks in the city and sings gospel, jazz and popular music with the CMC Western Addition Choir.



Anderson, center, at a Western Addition Choir rehearsal. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Anderson moved to California in the late 1970s. Prudential Insurance, which hired her after she graduated from the University of Illinois as a history major, offered her a spot in their San Mateo office. She chose to live in San Francisco. â?•Iâ??m a city girl, so I lived here and commuted until I found another job in San Francisco.â?• She settled in the Western Addition and eventually bought a home.

Her first venture into local politics was modeled after the progressive political action committee, Democracy for America, that Dean later formed. â??We took his action to heart, and in 2004, we founded our own local group.â?• It was called San Francisco for Democracy.

â??SF for D,â?• as it was affectionately nicknamed, was a non-partisan, grassroots organization dedicated to civic engagement, volunteerism, voter education, and progressive, hands-on activism. It attracted young and old, and people from different political parties, ethnic groups, and socio-economic classes.

â??Backroom workâ??

Monthly Wednesday night meetings in the backroom of Schroederâ??s Restaurant in the Financial District, Anderson said, â??gave San Francisco citizens the opportunity to interact with elected officials as well as discussing and brainstorming ways to make change.

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â??We hosted all kinds of speakers from the police chief to the mayor and the district attorney. Politicians participated. Professors from the local universities debated the pros and cons of local issues including the Occupy SF Movement. But we also expanded our focus and spent a lot of time on the Iraq War.â?•

But as with many grassroots organizations, enthusiasm eventually waned. â??The people who helped form SF for D were getting older, and the newer generations were reluctant to commit to the backroom work,â?• Anderson said**.**

Not at a loss for ways to direct her energy, Anderson became active with the League of Women Voters. Initially known as the San Francisco Center in California, it was established in 1911 when women in California were first allowed to vote. Early successful campaigns included support for child labor laws, minimum wage, and compulsory education.

Anderson and the league are also involved in keeping the city in compliance with open meeting laws and public access to records under San Franciscoâ??s Sunshine Ordinance. The league was instrumental in getting it passed in 1999 and has a permanent seat on the ordinance task force. â??To keep it relevant, we are actively working to ensure the ordinance is updated to reflect technological changes and judicial decisions,â?• Anderson said.



Among her larger concerns is the threat to democracy in the United States with the open embrace of racism and the rise of fascist attitudes. Civil rights still need champions. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

â??I keep talking to my nephews and nieces, and I encourage everyone to talk with young people about standing up for what is right,â?• she said.

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