

Nicole LeFavour:

Idaho's First Lesbian Elected Official

by Holly Pruett
Views editor

An out lesbian elected to the legislature in Idaho? “A lot of people probably shook their heads, figuring this candidacy was a lost cause,” says Sam Blair, a long-time community organizer.

Nicole LeFavour was running in Boise, the more liberal population center in a state with only one statewide Democratic office holder. She nevertheless faced a tough challenge: a three-way primary against two white men who were, according to United Vision for Idaho’s Jim Hansen, “well liked, well financed, and well known.”

Prepared for homophobia to surface, LeFavour was ready when the opposition tried to characterize her as a “single issue candidate.” Her answer was simple: “Which issue?”

Which issue, indeed? LeFavour’s tag line, “proven experience,” reflected deep expertise in business and tax policy, education, water quality and the environment, labor and working families, and human rights. Says Blair, who knocked on doors for LeFavour, “These were the things people wanted to hear about. People were looking for dedication, experience, a proven record of service to the community — and they found all of these in Nicole.”

Of two major lessons from LeFavour’s winning campaign, this is the first: the issues she worked on for years through staff and board roles with United Vision for Idaho, Snake River Alliance, Your Family Friends and Neighbors, Idaho Community Action Network, and Western States Center — issues some would brand as bona fide liberal — were winning issues, even in a “red” state.

LeFavour rejects the shift to the right seen as necessary by much of the Democratic Party. “As leaders,” she says, “we have to find ways to move people to where we are.”

The second major lesson is (no surprise): the power of organizing. LeFavour’s 15 years of service in Idaho’s progressive community paid off. Observes environmental activist Lauren McLean, “People who’ve worked for years to make Boise the place that it is, banded together to elect her.” Nearly 300 volunteers participated — “I’ve worked on statewide campaigns with fewer volunteers,” says LeFavour — and knocked on 8,000 doors.

“If people know you and know you’ll work on the issues, they will come help you,” she says. “Those who can’t help will give money.”

The combination of a clearly articulated vision, impeccable qualifications, smart targeting, and a well-run field operation yielded a decisive 53% victory in the three-way primary, and a glorious 67% win in the general.

Ever the organizer, LeFavour used the campaign to build infrastructure meant to outlast Election Day. Says Blair: “Even with the primary battle behind, Nicole continued to set the pace for the team and for all the races in the district, getting out in the community, identifying voters, shifting volunteers to help other tight races, and building a list of supporters far and wide that will serve her — and the whole progressive community — as we look to the challenges ahead.”

Even before the session began, LeFavour engaged in some early organizing for the next campaign — and not even her own. She has her eye on at least three key campaign volunteers whom she’s “working on to run.” In Idaho, legislators designate “stand ins” in case of illness or death.

All three women, two of whom are women of color, are on LeFavour’s list. Should her top choice sit in for her this year, LeFavour says, “She would be the first Latina to serve in the Idaho legislature.” 🐾



Western States Center board member Nicole LeFavour: “Everywhere I go, people want to shake my hand, give me a hug, thank me for running. They say I’m the one bright spot in the election.”

“This campaign leaves us with a fundamental question: what are we waiting for? With Nicole’s model out there, ‘I can’t win...’ isn’t a credible excuse for potential progressive candidates anymore.”

— Sam Blair,
campaign volunteer

OTHER WESTERN STATES CENTER LEADERS IN THE NEWS

Congratulations to...

Mary Caferro, a long-time advocate with WEEL (Working for Equality and Economic Liberation), won election to the Montana state legislature.

Cecilia Lira, an 18 year-old volunteer with Idaho Latino Vote, will be recognized with a Ms. Foundation Young Women of Vision Award in New York City on May 26th, along with 5 other national award winners.

Jen Ray, a former member of Western States’ board of directors and former director of Idaho Women’s Network, was named Chief Operating Officer of NARAL Pro-Choice America.