

It's Election Season

Eugene, Ore. November 2022

Celine Swenson Harris was 13 years old when she signed up to volunteer for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. "I remember my very first canvas. My mom went with me because she was terrified I was gonna be out knockin' on doors," Harris said in an interview on Zoom.

Harris was raised in a progressive, anti-war household in South Eugene and was interested in policy as a kid. She grew up during the Bush administration and felt like the federal government at the time didn't represent her values. "When Obama ran with that message that we as individual people can get involved and make a difference, I signed up, I went out and knocked on doors, and was really excited because we won in 2008," Harris said.

When Barack Obama was elected president of the United States in 2008, Harris was convinced she had helped save the world. "At the time I really felt like, ok we did this, we saved our country, we're done," she said.

In 2010 Harris began to see the backlash to Obama and the Affordable Care Act. She realized it wasn't enough to just show up for one presidential election. "You gotta show up for every single election and keep pushing for progress because the other side will continue to show up. And I've been here ever since," she said.

After her senior year of high school, Harris's friends were elected delegates for the 2012 Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. They painted an American flag on a Honda Civic and drove from Eugene to Charlotte, and knocked on doors to do some campaign volunteering along the way. "It was really cool to get to be part of a convention," Harris said. "It was a great car to get people excited about political events. I think people really enjoyed that," she said.

Harris was secretary for the Democratic Party of Lane County for nine years, from 2013 to this year. In August the DPLC elected 28-year-old Harris Chair of the party.

Emily Keizer, the DPLC Treasurer, said Harris has been at the DPLC since she can remember. Keizer met Harris in 2014 and said she was always struck by how young Harris is. Keizer said Harris is passionate and a great strategist. "She started at 13 and never stopped. When you grow up and see things from the ground up, you kind of live and breathe it," Keizer said in an interview over the phone. "I think she learned the hard way. Nobody telling her, just doing it," she said.

With midterm elections around the corner, Harris feels more nervous than usual. "This year stuff is looking close. I am nervous about it," she said. "But I am also feeling like I trust our plans. I trust what we're doing and I'm feeling like I'm able to do something, which is get out there and remind Democrats to turn in a ballot this midterm." In the time Harris has been doing this work, she said she's felt it become increasingly more important that she stands up and does what she can for what she feels is right. "There's something about when you knock on someone's door and you talk to them and they feel heard and they feel like they're doing something important by getting their ballot in," Harris said. "That to me feels like a tangible, recordable, you know you are actually making a positive change. And I found that I really love it," she said.