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## Meet Jess King: A progressive Mennonite running to represent Lancaster County in Congress



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Oct 21, 2018



Congressional candidate Jess King gives out the campaign signs along the route from Lancaster Township Fire Community parade in Millersville on Saturday, October 13, 2018.

ANDY BLACKBURN | Staff Photographer

STEWARTSTOWN, YORK COUNTY — There's a chill in the air at the Stewartstown Fall Festival as Jess King stands near a children's bounce-house and hands out the vibrant blue campaign yard signs that have seemingly spread like wildfire across Lancaster and York counties.

A local resident, Patricia Moore, approaches the Democratic candidate for Congress. She recognizes King from her television commercials — and the ones from the incumbent Republican she’s trying to unseat, U.S. Rep. Lloyd Smucker.

“It’s upsetting,” Moore, a retired internal auditor, says referring to an ad from Smucker that depicts King as a monarch who would “rule us like a king” through her policies. “So many of the commercials are so negative. That’s what upsets me.”

When King asks what issues she cares about, Moore says it “probably sounds kind of silly,” but says she’s disturbed that politicians aren’t taking global warming seriously enough.

“I’m with you completely,” King replies, and, without skipping a beat, mentions the topic she returns to in nearly every discussion of federal policy — “special interests” perpetuating gridlock through campaign donations that influence decision-making.

Two miles from the Maryland border in southern York County, this is some of the most overwhelmingly Republican territory of the solidly red 11th Congressional District.

But King, a Lancaster nonprofit director and arguably the most progressive Democrat to ever run for the Lancaster County-based seat, has campaigned here multiple times in the last year. She’s built what is being widely considered the most comprehensive grassroots field campaign Democrats have ever seen in Lancaster County or southern York County.

Her message is focused intensely on her beliefs that the Republican-passed tax cuts are a form of failed trickle-down economics, that the country inevitably needs to move toward a national health care system and that Washington politicians are bought and paid for by wealthy corporations.

And as Democrats across the country hit their anti-Trump talking points, King’s message is nearly devoid of the controversial commander-in-chief while she rails against both “political party establishments.”

She knows she needs Trump voters to win in a district where Republicans outnumber Democrats by 100,000. The president won in what is now the 11th district by 26 points in 2016 — and “shaming people for their vote” isn’t something King believes in or sees as a winning strategy.

“We try to talk to people who voted for Trump. We talk about their values,” she says in an interview. “We were watching some of (Trump’s) videos the other day. He said the same things we’re saying! He just lied about it. So there’s a lot around speaking to the challenges people have, the economic realities and the ways that Washington and the establishment politics sold out to corporate interests.”

## The progressive Mennonite

In facing Smucker on Nov. 6, King is a first-time candidate looking to unseat a conservative incumbent in an area known to re-elect its Republican congressmen for decades on end.

Smucker is the first-ever Amish-born congressman, and King is a 12th-generation Lancastrian who is aiming to “blow up some paradigms as a progressive Mennonite running for Congress.”



POLITICS

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King’s priorities echo many of the policies made popular by U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont independent and self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist, during his run for president in 2016:

- A national single-payer health care system in the form of Medicare-for-all.
- Tougher consumer protection laws like the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act that was repealed earlier this year.
- Campaign finance reform by overturning the U.S. Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision that allowed unlimited campaign spending.
- Debt-free public college, potentially by taxing Wall Street financial transactions.

Sanders hit on all these topics when he gave King a coveted endorsement and **campaign rally** with 2,000 of their supporters in Lancaster’s Musser Park last May.

“We need Jess because her vision of America is a very different vision than the Republican leadership and Donald Trump who now control our government,” Sanders said to the roaring crowd.

As a congresswoman — and the first woman ever to represent Lancaster in Washington, D.C. — King says she'd like to sit on the Subcommittee on Regulatory Reform, Commercial and Antitrust Law within the Judiciary Committee.

Antitrust laws specifically have gone unexamined and unenforced, King says. She believes corporate giants like Amazon and Walmart have hindered small businesses and growth from the bottom up.

She saw it first-hand early when she was a kid and her family owned a paint shop in Leola and they started being able to get cheaper primer from the new Home Depot than their local distributor. And she's seen it through her two-decade career in economic development trying to get small businesses off the ground.

“(Congress should be) looking at the laws that we have and thinking about being more holistic,” she says. “Because Amazon is doing these tactics where they're flooding the market at a loss to get market share and that's not reflected in current antitrust laws that I think if we re-examine it, we'd see it's problematic.”

She says she'd also have her sights on the Small Business Committee as well as the Education and Workforce Committee — the latter being one of three committees that Smucker sits on as a freshman member of Congress.

## Leola roots

It's the end of a busy weekend of stump speeches and voter outreach in mid-August, and King is wiping away tears while [talking to the crowd gathered at Garden Spot Fire Rescue](#) in New Holland.



Jess King and Senator Bernie Sanders wave to the crowd of supporters at Musser Park in Lancaster City Saturday morning, May 5, 2018.

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ROBERT DEVONSHIRE JR | LNP Correspondent

“I don’t usually get choked up but my mom is here,” she says, turning away from her mother in the front row and trying to laugh off the emotional moment. “She’s kind of a rock star in my book.”

King had just started her typical speech about her upbringing and beliefs — an “important narrative,” she says, that started when her father died in a plane crash when she was almost 2 years old.

Her mother, Rebecca, didn’t have a job or a college degree and was now widowed with three young kids. Social Security survivor’s benefits became vital, and they instilled in King the importance of a social safety net.

King’s mother remarried a few years later and the new couple with their blended family opened the paint shop in Leola. King worked stocking shelves, checking inventory and taking deposits to Fulton Bank.

Jess King

Age: 44

Party: Democrat

Residence: Lancaster

Family: husband Chad Martin, daughters Esmé and Eleni

Education: Bachelor’s degree in liberal arts, Eastern Mennonite University; master of business administration; Bard College.

Occupation: Executive director of economic development nonprofit Assets since 2010. Took leave of absence in August 2017 to campaign full-time for Congress.

Previous experience: Spent 11 years in Pittsburgh with groups such as Pittsburgh Urban Leadership Service Experience and the Union Project; served on former Lancaster Mayor Rick Gray’s Commission to Combat Poverty.

She attended Conestoga Valley School District and Lancaster Mennonite High School before getting a liberal arts degree from Eastern Mennonite University and later an MBA from Bard College.

Post-college, her faith tradition took her to Pittsburgh for a year of service but she ended up staying for 11 years — working with the Pittsburgh Urban Leadership Service Experience and then co-founding the Union Project, a \$3 million effort that turned an abandoned church built in 1904 into a community space for entrepreneurs, artists and nonprofits.

She and her husband Chad Martin, a Goshen, Indiana, native whom she married in 2000, returned to her home county in 2007 when he got a job as a Mennonite pastor in Lancaster. In 2010, she became the executive director of Assets, the city-based nonprofit whose mission is to mentor budding entrepreneurs with a focus on increasing business ownership among women and minorities.

Under her lead, Assets went from starting 22 businesses per year to 93, according to her campaign. Its public tax returns reveal its growth from \$220,000 in net assets when she started to \$803,000 by the end of 2016, the last full year before she left to run for Congress.

## **Trump everywhere, except in King's rhetoric**

King launched her congressional effort in June 2017 without ever having participated in a political campaign.

Many of her fellow Democratic candidates this year are running primarily as a check against Trump and the Republican-controlled Congress. Their campaign speeches are anchored with harsh criticisms of the president's political agenda and personal behavior, from his threats to the Justice Department to his treatment of women.

But King rarely talks about the controversial commander in chief. His name didn't come up once in her Oct. 8 debate with Smucker, something she calls "amazing" in an interview.

Trump is not the reason she's running, she says, even if he was "a catalyst in some ways" to her getting involved. She wants to give people something to vote for, not against, she said.

There's also a strategic element in the decision to abstain from Trump talk.

The newly drawn 11th district is rated as a "solid Republican" seat by every national and local political scientist. It was created in February when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court redrew the state's congressional boundaries.

Democrats benefited statewide — in the suburban Philadelphia counties to the east and in the Harrisburg area to the west. But that left the Lancaster-based district to go from Republican-heavy to overwhelmingly red.

It's now 53 percent Republican, 31 percent Democratic and 16 percent Independent or other. It had 239,571 Republicans, 140,347 Democrats and 72,087 Independents or others as of June, according to the latest statistics from the Pennsylvania Department of State.

“In a district like this where Trump won by 26 points, we need Trump voters,” she says. And “shaming people for their vote” by criticizing their choice for president just doesn't work, she adds.

When asked specifically about the controversies surrounding Trump, King says she's not in favor of “perpetual investigations” but believes special prosecutor Robert Mueller should finish his “really important” look into Russian election meddling.

She'd also support Congress moving to subpoena Trump's tax returns — which has become a real possibility if Democrats win control of the House. The precedent of presidents releasing their tax returns to show their financial interests shouldn't end with Trump, she says.

## **An aggressive campaign**

Connie Greer has lived for 53 years in the cozy, one-story home that she and her husband built on North Kinzer Avenue in New Holland. The 81-year-old is a lifelong Republican, and her late husband John Greer served as the borough's GOP mayor from 1990-2000.

But on an early October night in 2018, she's opening up her home to King's campaign for the fifth time in recent months.

“I would love to be a conservative Republican. I like conservative qualities, but it's no longer the Republican Party,” Greer says from the kitchen while her living room fills with 35 campaign volunteers with varied political histories.

Christian Taylor, a 45-year-old Octorara High School English teacher and cross country coach, worked on the 2004 John Kerry and 2008 Barack Obama campaigns. Phyllis Strickland, a 71-year-old retiree from Goodville, is a former Independent who recently became a Democrat and is now canvassing for the first time in her life.

And Winson King, a 61-year-old who voted for Ronald Reagan and every Republican since, says he voted Smucker into office “and I’m going to vote to take him out of office.” He says Trump “had a lot to do with” his flip, but so did corporate campaign finance contributions and Russian meddling.

King, the candidate, will need voters like Winson King if she wants a shot at even getting close to pulling off the upset — and it’s a necessity reflected in her ambitious voter-outreach efforts.

The campaign says it’s made more than 550,000 phone calls to voters, knocked on 65,000 doors, hosted 52 town halls — with four more on the schedule — and developed 25 volunteer-led regional teams. Two offices are rented and active in the York County portion, and every day is busy for the unionized staff of 13 campaign workers.

Greg Paulson, a veteran Lancaster Democratic strategist, campaign manager and 2016 state Senate candidate, says King is operating “totally different from any other congressional candidate” he’s seen.

“In terms of the emotional appeal that Jess has, there’s none like her,” says Paulson, who is also state Rep. Mike Sturla’s chief of staff.





A large crowd of supporters showed up Saturday morning for the Jess King for Congress rally at Musser Park in Lancaster City. May 5, 2018.

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## First-time candidate and the Democratic divide

The first eight months of King's campaign — led by two young community organizers who she had known since they were 16-year-olds attending Community Mennonite Church, where King's husband was a pastor — were crowded.

Four other Democrats had announced their intention to run against Smucker, and they included his well-funded 2016 challenger Christina Hartman.

Hartman later dropped out when the district became more heavily Republican, but the matchup had been gearing up to be the most competitive Democratic primary ever held in Lancaster County, and one that was in many ways a microcosm of a larger debate within the party.

King refused to take any money from corporations' political action committees from the beginning and has said she won't vote for Nancy Pelosi for speaker. Hartman collected donations from corporate PACs during her two campaigns and, just last

weekend, moderated a panel in Philadelphia with Pelosi, whom she called “amazing” in a tweet.

Smucker has lately taken aim at King’s more progressive tendencies.

“She’s not a Blue Dog Democrat. She’s not even a centrist Democrat,” he says in an interview. “She is part of the Democrat-Socialist part of the Democrat Party. It’s a very different candidate. She makes Christina Hartman look like a conservative.”

King, for her part, has not claimed to be running as a Democratic-Socialist, as Sanders has done.

She’s also getting no support from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which offered financial and organizing backing to Hartman when the district had a much smaller GOP edge.

Becca Rast, King’s campaign manager, says she’s had conversations with the DCCC — the pre-eminent D.C.-based organization supporting the party’s candidates — and ignored their advice, possibly at the risk of getting support down the road.

That advice included spending more on television ads, rather than on a large staff.

“They told me that I’m doing it wrong and I don’t care,” Rast says. “I’m proud of how we’re running our campaign and I think we’re doing it really well. And I think it means we’re doing something right if the Democratic establishment thinks we’re doing something wrong.”

On Nov. 6, they’ll find out for sure.



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