

Protecting Democracy – An Interview with Sen. Nina Turner

By Terri L. Crawford, JD

“Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you ...” – Exodus 4:16

As the voice of the people, the Nebraska Democratic Party Black Caucus’ mission is to promote the involvement of Blacks in the political process and the activities of the party at the local, state, and national level. The Caucus advocates for public policies which promote the needs of the Black community and the state at large. It recognizes the need for inclusive representation throughout the Democratic Party and seeks to advance political participation among Blacks throughout the state.

On the evening of October 25 at Omaha’s downtown Hilton Hotel, the Caucus held its annual fundraiser and presented the prestigious Danner Awards to Senator Justin Wayne and Schmeeka Grayer-Simpson, two well-deserving community leaders. The guest speaker for the event was Ohio Senator Nina Turner, national co-chair of Senator Bernie Sanders’ 2020 presidential campaign and CNN contributor. It was a spectacular event! The Omaha Star was honored with an exclusive interview with Senator Turner. The following is our conversation about what’s at stake in the 2020 election cycle.

OS: Senator Turner, thank you so much for taking time from your busy schedule to interview with the Omaha Star. North Omaha and North East Omaha are the parts of the city where our predominantly black population resides. According to polls, North Omaha, similar to other black communities, statistically has low voter turnout for local elections and larger voter turnout for presidential elections. We have some challenges with the rhetoric from Washington that has disillusioned voters. As the “Political Awareness and Involvement Chair” of my sorority and policy director for the League of Women Voters Greater Omaha, I am always looking for innovative ways to get people reignited about voting. What has been your personal experience in getting people excited about the vote and translating that excitement into large number at the polls?

NT: People are tired and have become apathetic with political candidates who continuously fail to deliver on campaign promises that directly address the unique issues of the Black community and marginalized citizens. Another part of the issue is that we are in a generation that is several generations removed from the Civil Rights struggle in the trenches. So, many of today’s voters did not experience the overt racist tactics, the marches, lunch counters, and Supreme Court decisions, it is not in the forefront of their psyche and they have become detached in some ways from the original Civil Rights struggle. Many don’t know what it’s like to get on the bus, drop in your money and get back off and go to the back to take your seat; they don’t know what it’s like to drink from a “colored fountain;” and they haven’t been attacked by police dogs or sprayed with high-powered firehoses. We lost a civil rights icon this week in Elijah Cummings, he was a soldier in the Civil Rights Movement and translated that passion into policy and legislative action. We must remember that voters are not only looking for candidates that

understand the problems and issues of their constituents, but they are looking for candidates that are conscious-minded. That candidate for 2020 is Bernie Sanders who is not new to the struggle but has a 40-year track record of “consciousness” and having a platform that addresses the issues of the people. There’s only one candidate who has been marching with working-class people not because he’s running for president, but because it’s right. Just ask Marriott workers, Amazon workers, and - hello! - Verizon workers, and don’t forget about the teachers; Bernie Sanders is the one candidate who has a track record of doing the right thing because he is led by conscience and not by special interests.

OS: As you know, Black women turned electoral power into political power in 2018. There was a tidal wave of Black female candidates who showed that “when we run we win.” Political analysts and polls show that Black women voted 98% for Democratic candidates. What is your take on the power of the Black female vote and the candidate you support in 2020?

NT: The Black women who ran and won in 2018 are significant not only for who they are, but also for how they ran their campaigns. From a congressional standpoint, many of the Black women on the ballot, myself included, speak about expanding access to health care and improving public education, focusing on “economic inequality, the wealth and wage gap, structural racism, and gun violence.” We live in a country where Black women continue to have higher rates of infant mortality and die during delivery themselves. When Black women benefit through addressing these systemic issues, the entire nation benefits with access to better healthcare, being paid a living wage and breaking glass ceilings. With Black women as the grassroots and community organizers and candidates in communities across America, a win for candidates who are conscious of systemic and structural racism is a win for families, and a win for policy change and reform in the legal system from the White House to the Supreme Court. We know what’s at stake, we cannot afford to continue to allow a divisive fear monger agenda to make decisions that affect everything from our families to our jobs. Dr. Maya Angelou once said that we must have the courage to stand up for ourselves and the courage to stand up for somebody else. Black women are no strangers to standing up for ourselves and for others. We raise our hands to protect our families, communities and schools. And with these hands we will have Medicare for All. With these hands we will cancel student debt. With these hands we will cancel medical debt. With these hands we will make an investment on Main Street, and tell Wall Street where to go! With these hands we will make sure that every baby in this country can aspire to live a good life, in Nebraska and across the country, because it is for everybody! Bernie Sanders is the candidate that knows these issues and has a specific plan to address them all.

OS: Criminal justice reform is on the minds of every voter for the 2020 election, and the adage that “all politics are local” is universally true. In Nebraska, there have been efforts to introduce legislation to eliminate the cash bond system where hundreds of individuals at any given time are being housed in county jails due to their financial inability to pay bail bonds or court-ordered fines and fees. This system penalizes individuals for being poor. What is the Sanders campaign position on criminal justice reform to address the issue of inequity in the system and the intersection of poverty and justice?

NT: First let’s call it what it is. The legal system has been inherently unjust for Black people since its inception in this country. The Sanders campaign supports “Ban the Box” initiatives, restorative justice

and assuring (that) disenfranchised convicted felons have their voting rights restored when they have completed their time. Senator Sanders is someone who understands that there are disparities within the disparities. . . if you are black, if you are brown, if you are indigenous, and if you are poor, this system is rigged. It is rotten to the core, and we're going to unrig it so that "justice for all" is not just an ideal but is practiced. That's it and that's all. Senator Sanders is from Vermont where there is a strong stance on permitting felons to vote while in prison unlike most states which prohibit inmate voting, some for a lifetime. In talking to people across this country, the Sanders campaign wants what everyone wants -- to have a justice system that doesn't gun down Black folks in their houses. We are at a place in this country where you can't read while Black, sleep while Black, play your music while Black, and just exist while Black. We're going to clean up this criminal injustice system. What the people want is very simple. We need to have some truth and reconciliation about the ravages of racism in the United States of America in the legal system. That's it and that's all. Bernie Sanders proposes better education and counseling, including mental health, opportunities for prisoners to reduce recidivism rates and effectively spend less money on incarceration. More training is needed for law enforcement's ability to handle mental illness situations. The Sanders campaign believes what most Americans want to see. . . . police departments all over this country whose memberships reflect the demographics of the community they serve. We also need to address the fact that racial bias exists in law enforcement as it relates to traffic stops, arrests, and those agencies should represent the demographics of the communities they serve. Bernie Sanders is a visionary and has a strategic plan to address these issues for communities across America to assure the legal system lives up to the creed of justice for all its citizens.

OS: Healthcare is an issue that concerns all Americans. In 2018, the voters of Nebraska took a giant step toward addressing healthcare disparity outcomes by passing an initiative "by the people" to allow for expansion of Medicaid for certain individuals ages 19-26 years old who meet certain poverty thresholds under federal regulations. Nebraska followed the lead of voters in Maine who approved Medicaid expansion by public referendum. The governor of Nebraska has yet to honor the "will of the people" of Nebraska. Talk some about the importance of coverage for all and what the Sanders plan is for universal healthcare to address healthcare disparities and outcomes for those who cannot afford premiums or do not have an employer-provided plan.

NT: We are the only industrialized nation that does not have a universal healthcare plan that provides healthcare coverage for all citizens. The United States pays the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs because Congress has done nothing to regulate the price of medicine. If we would join the rest of the industrialized world and negotiate with the pharmaceutical companies to lower prices, our country could save billions of dollars per year. As the wealthiest country in the world, we have a variety of options available to support a Medicare for All single-payer healthcare system that guarantees high quality, affordable healthcare as a right, not a privilege, to every man, woman, and child in this country.

A Bernie Sanders presidency means an America where folks don't die because they've got to rotate out their insulin to make sure it lasts. We are looking for an America where hospitals are not closing, but are expanding services to vulnerable communities. We want a healthcare system that is not commodified. That's it and that's all. We live in a country where our veterans are living on the streets without treatment for service-related mental health issues; we have people who are too afraid to go out

and see a doctor because they can't afford it; and we have Black women dying in childbirth in the 21st century. This is America and this is not acceptable! Bernie Sanders has a plan that will assure all Americans have a right to healthcare and not just the privileged or those who can afford to pay.

OS: With the 2020 presidential election looming, there is no shortage of candidates vying for votes across America. The mantra "Feel the Bern!" is back again for 2020, and Bernie Sanders is ranked the number three Democrat by pollsters. He is what many have called a Democratic "socialist-leaning" candidate campaigning on a platform that calls for "Medicare For All" (a policy which would effectively eliminate private health care insurance), extra taxes on the wealthy and free college tuition. Tell us why Bernie Sanders is the candidate we should vote for.

NT: Bernie Sanders is the only candidate that does not accept donations from corporate dollars. In terms of campaign finance, Sanders is one of the most outspoken politicians in his opposition to the Citizens United decision, PACs and "dark money" in politics. He rejected corporate PAC donations in 2016, inspiring most of the 2020 Democratic field to declare the same. The Sanders campaign has received contributions from one million everyday donors. Our strength is in numbers, and that is why Bernie Sanders is the only candidate who is able to say his campaign will rely only on grassroots funding in both the primary and the race against Donald Trump. Like all campaigns we are obliged to our donors, and we're proud to stand with millions of working people who have contributed \$27 at a time to the Sanders campaign.

His political platform includes breaking up big banks, higher taxes on the wealthy, \$15 minimum wage, marijuana legalization and decriminalization and the Green New Deal, among other progressive changes. Bernie Sanders is the leader of the pack on these issues, as many of Sanders' fellow 2020 candidates have adopted similar policies.

If every major industrialized nation on Earth can make healthcare a right, provide universal coverage to all, achieve far better health outcomes in terms of life expectancy and infant mortality, while spending far less per capita than we do, it is absurd to suggest the United States of America, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, cannot do the same. Don't let anybody tell you any different! Bernie Sanders has a plan for Medicare For All and a way to pay for it.

Look, people are tired of empty promises made on the campaign trail. The people want to create a system in this country that is geared toward helping people live out their greatness. Senator Bernie Sanders is the candidate that can deliver on his promises because he has a plan to do it. He has substantive policy initiatives that will deliver on issues like the \$15 minimum wage, and certainly Medicare For All. We need a living wage; people need tangible things in their lives to help them get closer to that, and solving the medical crisis that we have in this country will go a long way. We need to make sure we have policymakers who understand that men and women should be paid equally for the work that they do; that the public education system we have needs to be shored up; that we have to invest our tax dollars to ensure that a child will not be discriminated against or treated differently because of the zip code they live in. All these things are part of the Bernie Sanders economic package to lift folks in this

country. That is why America should support candidates who are committed to pushing for working people and Senator Bernie Sanders is that candidate!

OS: Thank you, Senator Nina Turner, the City of Omaha is certainly blessed by your presence and I appreciate you taking time from your very busy schedule to interview with the Omaha Star!

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Photos: Terri with Senator Turner

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