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From Marching to Running

A new statewide PAC seeks to put women in power, regardless of party. **BY SUZANNE GOLDSMITH**

"Patriot" has its roots in the Greek word for "fatherland," but the founders of a new statewide political action committee want you to know that "loyal or zealous support of one's country" is not only for men. They call themselves the Matriots, and their brand of patriotism (or perhaps we should say matriotism) demands more seats for women at the tables where policy is made.

In the era of #MeToo, the Matriots are tapping into a deep well of renewed activism. Just 10 months after six Columbus-area women founded the group, they've built their membership to nearly 400 and raised more than \$750,000 in cash and pledges.

Some of the funds raised will go to campaign contributions, and the volunteer-run group hopes to hire a director in the com-

ing year. Many notable women have pledged at least \$2,000 to support the PAC at the "founding member" level, including U.S. Rep. Joyce Beatty, Columbus Museum of Art director Nannette Maciejunes and ice cream magnate Jeni Britton Bauer—just to name a few. The group also counts men among its contributors, such as developer Ron Pizzuti. Equality Ohio co-founder Tom Grote sits on the Matriots' steering committee.

It all started with the Women's March on the nation's capital in January 2017. Buoyed by the spirit of political empowerment, Sally Crane Cox, a former newspaper publisher, hosted a dinner afterward for her marching companions—salon owner Mindy Coffey, gallery owner Rebecca Ibel, businesswoman April Zimmerman Katz, hospice advocate

▲
The Matriots, first row: Sharon Steele, Sally Crane Cox, Rebecca Ibel
Leaning on chairs: Rachel Escusa, Tom Grote
Back row: April Zimmerman Katz, Mindy Coffey, Rita McNeil Danish, Trudy Bartley, Cathe Kobacker

Cathe Kobacker and philanthropic advisor Sharon Steele—to discuss ways to keep that spirit going.

"We all said, 'OK, who's going to take the next step and run for office?'" Crane Cox recalls, laughing as she imitates the collective response within the politically inexperienced group: "Oh, I don't know about *that*." So we agreed that we would look to see if there was a way to elect more women to office."

Their research revealed a dispiriting landscape. In a state where 51 percent of residents are women, the legislature has never been more than a quarter female. Only 15 percent of county commissioners are women, and Ohio ranks 28th for political participation by women. "This is supposed to be a representative democracy," says Rita

McNeil Danish, an attorney and former judge who joined last summer and now co-chairs the Matriots' endorsement committee. "And we're not doing a very good job of representing ourselves."

The group contends that issues affecting women's health and economic status are overlooked when women are underrepresented. But when women run for office, they often receive less campaign money and rarely run again after an initial loss. On the other hand, says McNeil Danish, "A man will lose and keep coming back and coming back."

For that reason, she asserts, the Matriots will not only make endorsements and contributions in statewide and legislative races but will look at local candidates as well. "If we have a rising star, then we want to help them continue to be a rising star, not let them fail and then give up."

The group hopes to enlist at least one Matriot in each of Ohio's 88 counties, suggesting contribution amounts that range from the aforementioned founding members level down to a \$25 level for students.

Given their roots, the original Matriots are "left-leaning," admits Crane Cox, but the group intends to endorse both Republicans and Democrats—as long as the candidates embrace certain core values, including equality for women and "dominion over our bodies."

Which could get sticky. Will the Matriots find pro-choice Republican women to endorse? Coffey says pro-choice Republican candidates "will have to be brave ... and if we have their back, maybe that will help."

City Councilmember Liz Brown, a Democrat who isn't affiliated with the PAC, speculates that the group might find more pro-choice Republican women in local races. But she would be happy to see more of those women in the Statehouse as well. "Maybe [the Matriots'] dollars can help do that," Brown says. "And more power to that."

"If our philosophy is you've got to have women at the table, we also have to have differing views and different philosophies," says McNeil Danish, a Republican. "It's a growth and grace opportunity."

It isn't hard to predict priorities coming into conflict. If Republican gubernatorial candidate Mary Taylor, a pro-life candidate, wins the primary and is pitted against a pro-choice man in the general election next fall, will the Matriots make an endorsement? "I think we're going to have some tough choices and some interesting decisions to make," says McNeil Danish. "I'm actually excited about it." ♦



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