

NEW JERSEY

Lots of doors to knock: Meet Arati Kreibich, the progressive challenger to Josh Gottheimer

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It's a chilly Sunday in Hackensack, and Pat Henry's 100-year-old house is packed with volunteers. Henry's living room has an eclectic mix of colorful chairs. One is lime green, nearly as bright as the green stripe on the campaign signs taped to the walls.

The signs promote Arati Kreibich, the Glen Rock councilwoman, immigrant, neuroscientist and mother challenging Rep. Josh Gottheimer for New Jersey's 5th District Democratic nomination.

A June 2019 vote by Gottheimer turned Kreibich, who immigrated to the U.S. from India when she was 11, from activist to congressional candidate. Gottheimer led a faction that pressed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her Democratic caucus to pass an emergency border funding bill that did not include some key aid for detained migrant families.

"The minute I realized he did that, to me, he made me morally complicit," Kreibich told NorthJersey.com. "I don't know how you can do that as a human being. Most people know and understand the humanitarian crisis."

By the time Kreibich stepped up on the ottoman at the back of Henry's livingroom to rally the volunteers, the colorful chairs were full, and some people sat on a gray shag rug. It was the Kreibich campaign's third canvass launch and the largest yet, with 40 volunteers ready to knock doors.

Afterward, Kreibich stepped out onto Henry's porch, where a roll of campaign stickers sat on a folding table. Kreibich checked her phone for updates from her husband and two

sons, ages 11 and 14, who were at a debate tournament.

Reena Chojar followed her. Chojar, 27, began volunteering for Kreibich's campaign a month ago. She grew up in Saddle River and calls Kreibich "a really cool candidate." Kreibich and Chojar climbed into the volunteer's car, drove a few blocks, parked, and ventured to the first address on Chojar's clipboard.

Kreibich picked up a newspaper in the driveway and brought it to the front door. Nobody answered. She left a campaign palm card. At another house, she pushed a Ring video doorbell and waved a palm card for the camera. Nobody answered. "We'll keep going," she said, cheerfully. "It's still fun."

Nobody knew Kreibich when she ran for Glen Rock council. She realized Sunday afternoon canvasses worked best, with bonus points for rainy days that left residents cooped up at home. Glen Rock, she said, "is a microcosm. I'm surprised at how much the stories are the same."

Kreibich's volunteer team plans to knock on 1,000 doors a week. By the end of the campaign, they hope to have knocked on 100,000. "Cup of coffee says they're home," Kreibich told Chojar as they approached another house. "Ice cream. I don't know." They laughed and rang the doorbell. Nobody answered.

The first person who actually opened a door on this day was staunchly anti-Trump. "Are you going to fight his agenda?" the man asked. Kreibich said yes. "Let me see that," he said, taking a pen to sign the petition that will put Kreibich on the June 2, 2020, primary ballot. Kreibich brought up her opponent's vote for border wall funding, and the man was surprised. "We deserve a lot of changes," he said.

Kreibich deftly engages reluctant voters in conversation. People, she said, simply want to be heard, given a chance to share their stories.

"The environment we live in doesn't allow us to be nice to each other," one man said. "We're just too stressed to do better." They talked for a few minutes and he agreed to vote for Kreibich. "You guys made a good case," he said.

A woman who opened the door at a house with two small American flags was worried about "the way things are going" — and about immigration. She agreed with Trump about

one thing: immigrants should use legal means to enter the country.

“But he thinks everyone’s a criminal,” she added. “You can’t put everybody in the same category.” Is she going to vote for Kreibich in the primary? “You know what? I am,” she said. “Do you have more cards?”

Another woman recognized Kreibich. “You’re running against Gottheimer,” she said. “I know a few volunteers who might be interested.”

Kreibich’s campaign ended 2019 with roughly \$170,000 raised. Her largest donor invested \$2,800, the federal limit for an individual. Meanwhile, Gottheimer’s campaign receipts totaled \$3.5 million at the end of the year, according to Federal Election Commission filings. The congressman ranks 13th in money raised among his House colleagues. He is a top funding recipient from securities firms, hedge funds and private equity firms.

Gottheimer’s war chest helped him topple seven-term Republican incumbent Scott Garrett in 2016. “He was the glimmer of hope we had in the 2016 election,” Kreibich said. The Fifth District, which covers a diversely liberal and conservative swath of Bergen, Passaic, Sussex and Warren Counties, went 48.8 percent for Trump that year.

“The first Democrat in 84 years to win his seat, Josh has proudly built a strong record as a pro-choice, pro-equality, tax-cutting Democrat who defied the odds to defeat a seven-term Tea Party extremist in a district that President Trump won,” said Andrew Edelson, spokesperson for Gottheimer for Congress, adding that the incumbent’s views are consistent with the people in his district.

But Kreibich says the region is ready for a progressive.

The neuroscientist made the environment a hallmark of her Glen Rock council run — and now, it’s front and center in her congressional campaign. “People said not do that,” she said. But as she talked to folks, environmental issues were on their minds.

As a freshman councilwoman, she steered Glen Rock onto the list of New Jersey towns that banned single-use plastic bags. She was also involved in an effort to transition Glen Rock to 100 percent renewable energy via a community choice aggregation program.

She has attracted support from people like Henry, who spent most of her life noninvolved in politics — until 2016. “I was just a good girl Democrat,” she said. “The day Hillary

Clinton lost, I lost my mind.”

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Henry is part of Indivisible Five, a grassroots non-profit with about 600 members unaffiliated with any party or donor but positioned squarely against Trump and the Republican congressional caucus. She “campaign heartily” for Gottheimer.

After its members became disenchanted with him, the grassroots group threw its support behind Kreibich. “She’s everything we need,” Henry said. “Intelligent. Kind.”

Kreibich has also gathered support from Food and Water Action, part of a non-profit focused on climate, food and water issues; and Progressive Change Campaign Committee, a political action committee that spent \$7.3 million during the last election cycle and endorses high-profile progressives such as Democratic presidential contender Elizabeth Warren, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Rep. Katie Porter of California.

The endorsements, Kreibich said, are key, and her campaign hopes they will spur donors.

Kreibich’s path to candidacy is strewn with barriers that extend well beyond funding. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, in a bid to protect the Democrats’ House majority, said it would blacklist private political firms that work for Democratic primary challengers. When Kreibich started recruiting staffers, many people wouldn’t talk to her. “That’s an undue burden to say you have to choose between possible future jobs and your values,” she said.

Kreibich said it’s indicative of not allowing conversations about where the party is headed — and of policies that suppress women and people of color for the sake of party unity.

“The people it affects the worst are women who haven’t been allowed to be part of the political process for a long time,” she said.

Had she known the barriers she would face, Kreibich might have been more daunted about entering the race, but she probably wouldn't have been deterred from running, she said.

"People are going to come out for me because they're sick of the establishment, sick of politics as usual," Kreibich said. "It's clear that I'm not politics as usual. It's clear I'm not doing this as a career politician.

"It's clear why I'm doing it and what my values are," she added. "And I think that resonates."

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