

They See Blue Georgia – the much-needed voice for South Asian Democrats

By Uma Palam Pulendran

They See Blue Georgia (TSB – GA) a newly formed grassroots organization launched its 2020 Election Kickoff event recently at the NW Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Sandy Springs. Having an interesting twist in its name – “They See” a homophone for the word Desi, They See Blue – GA was started to mobilize Democratic voters in Georgia. They See Blue Georgia was founded in the summer of 2019. The meeting of a South Asian (Desi) from Georgia and another South Asian (Desi) member of They See Blue at the First Democratic Presidential Debate watch party in the SF Bay area, CA ultimately resulted in the creation of They See Blue – GA chapter. They See Blue (CA)– now becoming a national South Asian Democratic grassroots organization was started in the SF Bay area in the summer of 2018 to flip two seats in CA. Georgia is its first chapter to be created. By August 2019 They See Blue – GA had a core team of six members and has now grown to have more than 150 members. Its mission is to mobilize, energize and engage South-Asian Americans in the democratic process to elect Democrats to federal, state and county and local levels in Georgia.



Core team members with leader Abrams

A steady stream of guests arrived and soon the sanctuary was full, and people had to sit in the lobby area. There was an impressive array of speakers that included, Stacey Abrams, (Democratic nominee for GA Governor in 2018 and leader of Fair Fight), US Senate contenders, Sarah Riggs Amico, Teresa Tomlinson, Jon Ossoff and Sheikh Rahman the only South Asian elected member of the GA House.



Uma Palam Pulendran interviewing leader Stacey Abrams

Before the official start of the event, Ms. Stacey Abrams held a press meet exclusively for the South Asian journalists and media. Uma Palam Pulendran sat with Ms. Abrams to interview her.

The interview started with the question about priorities for the South Asian community with regards to elections. She said that the priorities are 1) voter registration, 2) those registered stay on the rolls. She made an interesting analogy of driving a car. She said, "Before you give the keys to the car you make sure, they know how to drive". Third part, the voter engagement - how it is important to connect the dots between what people want for their families and how voting can deliver that. She also went on to stress the importance of down-ballot voting, including county, municipal and school boards.

When asked to further explain the importance of registering new voters, her statement was "Registration is the point of entry for power in America! We have to remember that in a democracy, there are multiple ways you can produce your power. Some people do it with money but for voters, our way of making our voices heard is our vote and when you can add more voices to your own - things change"! She urged the South Asian community to galvanize as they are an instrumental and integral part of the community.



With regards to the importance of the census and the role of activists, she talked about Fair Count an organization she established that is working across GA and around the country to ensure that hard to count communities are participating. No one could explain better than leader Abrams the importance of the census. She explained that the district lines are drawn based on the census. And that the census is not just about counting the number of people, but about money. Those dollars pay for schools, roads small businesses, etc.

Talking about voter suppression and the work that is needed to be done to fight it, she reminded of the voter purge that happened not too long ago where 300,000 voters were purged of which 22 thousand of them were mistakes. She did not hide her disappointment for the office of the Secretary of State when she said "I don't know in any other job where you can make twenty-two thousand mistakes and keep your job. She also noted that the new voting machines have not been put in practice. With impending major elections in March, May, and November she said that the leadership needs to be made accountable. She concluded her answer with this strong statement "We cannot talk about voter suppression enough because as long as a single Georgian doesn't have the right to vote or right to vote isn't real then we have got work to do".

The next question touched on the question of how democrats or democratic activists engage with people out in rural GA especially African American and Asian Americans. She explained that the behavior of Brian Kemp to suppress votes started in 2010. She talked about the need for Medicaid expansion and installing Wi-Fi in rural Georgia. Her organization Fair Count had put Wi-Fi devices in 150 communities across Georgia.



Stacey Abrams, (Democratic nominee for GA Governor in 2018)

Then the subject pivoted to hate crimes against people of color, especially South-Asians. She pointed out that since the 2016 and 2018 elections, there has been an increase in xenophobia and an increase in the demonization of certain communities. She added that while certain community by name is not mentioned but with the leadership at the national and state level saying that all strangers or all immigrants are bad then people may use that language to justify their own behavior. She said that we need a leadership that says that hate crimes are wrong and that it cannot be simply rhetorical and reiterated the need for hate crime legislation. She insisted that every level of government, has the responsibility just not to say that you are welcome but to prove it.

She concluded her interview with a resounding message to South Asians.... "We have to think about ourselves as a unified community. That means the South Asian community believes they are part of the fabric of this state and the fabric of our future. I'm here today because I believe, and I am not just going to say it, but I am going to do the work that's necessary to prove it".

The event began with the introduction by the core-team members about the organization. They explained its goals, mission, activities and the importance of being part of it if you are a South Asian democrat. Feroza Syed who is a Trans-activist and a generous sponsor of the event was the master of ceremonies of the event.

Stacey Abram's key-note speech was rousing. She spoke about being an inclusive community. She questioned "We cannot just celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah. We have to talk about Holi and Diwali and Garbha. If they (South Asians) could not be seen, why do they think they could be heard?" She stressed the importance of every vote, saying it's an expression of the power to shape the future and lifting up the voices and noted that it's not just about electing a candidate. She ended her speech with a positive note saying, "The future is not only blue but bright". Her speech received thunderous applause and a standing ovation.



Sheikh Rahman, Rara Riggs Amico, Teresa Tomlinson and Jon Ossoff

The next speaker was Sara Riggs Amico who was also the gubernatorial candidate for Lieutenant governor of GA in 2018. She contrasted her priorities and that of David Perdue's quoting his tweets – Donald Trump gets re-elected and keep the Republican majority in the Senate. The next speaker was Teresa Tomlinson, another senate candidate who was a two-term Mayor of Columbus GA and an attorney for 16 years previously. She pointed out that GA is more likely to flip the Senate seat than Kentucky or South Carolina. She touted her accomplishments of winning two mayoral elections and having 44 debates in 11 months winning 60% of the votes in one of them. The next speaker was US Senate candidate Jon Ossoff who is a documentary filmmaker and was the GA's 6th district Congressional candidate in the 2017 special elections. Mr. Ossoff detailed the corrupt practices of David Perdue – taking corporate PAC money from big pharma, for-profit prisons and fossil fuel industry.

The last speaker was GA Senate Representative Sheikh Rahman, who is an immigrant from Bangladesh. Mr. Rahman has lived the American dream, rising from doing odd jobs like dishwashing to be an elected representative. He quipped, "American dream is still alive a but it's choking a little bit now". Mr. Rahman represents the GA state senate 5th district, one of the most diverse communities in the state and the country. He made an emotional appeal to minorities especially South Asians and youth to participate in elections as they help shape the future of this country that in turn shapes their own future.

An attendee, Venkat Pat said "Listening and talking to some of the US Senate candidates made a huge difference to me. I've never done this before. But it has opened my eyes as to why we need to be more engaged in the political process". Another attendee, Valmiki Raghunathan told "I was glad that I attended They Blue Georgia's event in spite of snow. I hope the energy and engagement with the voters will also help tip the scales in favor of Democrats, and defeat trump, arguably the worst president in recent US memory. Retaining the majority in US Congress & wresting control of the US Senate would also be high on our priorities. And, this might be the year when Georgia bleeds blue!! When asked, what the highlight of the event was, Chitra Venkat without any hesitation said "Hearing Stacey Abrams was the highlight of the event. Her speech was awe inspiring".



With over 150 people in attendance at the kickoff event, TSB-GA can be proud of its achievement in being the first and only South Asian grass roots group in GA. This fledgling grassroots group has been systematically building its infrastructure and participant engagement. TSB-GA has been holding monthly meetings to educate its members on activism and political process. Subject matter experts, candidates and elected officials are invited to speak at these meetings. TSB-GA's election activities include partnering with non-partisan organizations, other democratic activist organizations, and candidate campaigns to participate in direct voter engagement that includes voter registration, door-knocking, phone banking, text banking, host postcard parties and meet and greets with candidates and many more election-related activities. The much-needed collective progressive voice for the South Asians has arrived.

' Mar-11-2020

NEXT →

Check Out These Trending Stories From Around The Web

NextArticle

Rea