

The battle to turn Miami blue

Democrats believe they can flip Congressional District 27 from red to blue -- but first they must survive their internal war



On a Saturday afternoon in June, a few dozen people are chatting away in a Coral Gables office. The common subject is politics, but no one is arguing. They're here for a single purpose: to flip a congressional seat that's been held by a Republican for the past 29 years.

And they think Donna Shalala, former University of Miami president, is the best person to do it.

Dressed in a UM sweatshirt and standing at just five feet in height, Shalala makes small talk at this opening of her campaign headquarters. She is surrounded by supporters, a diverse group that includes seniors, millennials, Anglos, blacks, and Hispanics. When a tail-wagging canine walks over, Shalala, a well-known animal lover, gushes with affection.

"He was personally invited!" she declares as she strokes the dog's head. "He gets walked every day with a Shalala T-shirt." Crouching lower, Shalala coos to the dog: "You're collecting votes for me!"

Shalala, a Democrat, wants to replace Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen as the representative of District 27, a sprawling area of about 750,000 people that includes Miami

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Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer; Photos by Andriana Mereuta
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Beach, North Bay Village, portions of downtown Miami, Brickell, Little Havana, Coconut Grove, Kendall, Pinecrest, and other areas of south Miami-Dade. Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican first elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1989, announced in August 2017 that she wouldn't run for re-election.

If elected, Shalala, at the age of 77, will be second-oldest person to serve a first term in the House of Representatives. (The oldest? That title belongs to James Bernard Bowler, who was first elected as a representative from Illinois in 1953 at age 78.) Shalala also suffered a stroke three years ago, though her advocates insist she has the energy of someone 40 years younger. Indeed, soon after her stroke, she reclaimed a full-time teaching position at UM.

But why do this at all?



“Everybody has asked me: Why do you want to do this?” Shalala tells her supporters. “The answer is I woke up one morning and I turned on the television and I got pissed off with what was happening to our country. I was mad at the Republicans and the current person who is leading our country, and I wasn't happy with the Democrats. And I've been watching this race for some period of time like a rational person, so I asked my friend Fernand Amandi if he could do a poll and find out if I'd be a viable candidate for this race.”

Amandi is a political science instructor at UM and the president and CEO of Bendixen & Amandi International, a communications and polling firm. According to Amandi, she'll win because most

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people in District 27 know her and trust her.

“This is a defining quality,” Amandi tells the *BT*. “They know her. They like her. And they’re supporting her because of what she has done and what she’s going to do.”

With Ros-Lehtinen heading off into the sunset, Democrats are eager to turn this red seat blue. Ricky Junquera, vice president of the Miami-Dade Democratic Party, says District 27 is a top priority for Democrats, not just locally but nationwide.

“This is a district we have to win in order to take back the House of Representative,” Junquera explains. “We have to pick up a lot of seats nationwide. This is one of the top targeted districts in the [nation] for a reason -- we have very passionate Democrats in the county, and hopefully, we can flip it.”

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