



This Candidate is Fighting for Arizonans' Rights. She Gets That From Her Family

The matriarchs in Lorena Austin's life taught her the value of hard work. Now, she's using that drive to run for a State House seat.

August 16, 2022



By [Candice Helfand-Rogers](#)



Lorena Austin of Arizona learned how to work hard from the women in her family. Now, she's applying that to running for a State House seat. (Credit: Lorena Austin's campaign)

[Note: The Story Exchange will be writing about women candidates running for office in 2022 throughout the year.]

Lorena Austin's left arm is [a tapestry of tattoos](#).

Each image, in the collection scattered along her skin, honors the women in her family – evoking everything from their shared Mexican heritage, to the crops the elder generations harvested to make ends meet. “I’m so fortunate to come from an incredibly strong line of women, who taught me to fiercely advocate for myself and for others,” she says.

Now, Austin is applying the energy and focus she gleaned from them to [vy for a State House seat](#) in Arizona's 9th Congressional district, the small swath of the state her family has called home for over 100 years.

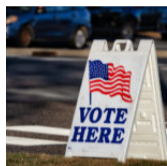
The Mesa, Arizona resident and her running mate, fellow State House candidate Seth Blattman – he's going for the district's second available seat – ran unopposed in the state's Aug. 2 Democratic primary. But in the general election, they'll go up against Republicans Mary Ann Mendoza – who has [publicly espoused antisemitic beliefs](#) – and Kathy Pearce.

The newly drawn district leans Democratic, [but not by much](#), and the race is considered highly competitive. While Arizona has a Republican trifecta – meaning the GOP controls the State House and Senate, as well as the governor’s office – [the margins are slim](#), giving Democrats hope of flipping those legislative bodies blue.

So far, Austin has scored [endorsements](#) from progressive organizations like Planned Parenthood, NARAL and AFL-CIO, and is a Moms Demand “Gun Sense Candidate.” It’s an impressive slate of support considering that, prior to this year, Austin had never considered running for elected office.

Indeed, her plans for 2022 had centered around law school applications. But when the state’s map was redrawn last December to include Mesa, “something clicked – I realized someone from here should be representing us,” Austin says. Since hers is a new district, it lacked the infrastructure that might have existed from previous races, especially in terms of rallying a volunteer base.

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And that’s not the only difficulty Austin is grappling with. Right now, Austin says she’s working three jobs to stay afloat – part-time gigs at both her father’s law office and a local Trader Joe’s, and serving as a student government advisor at Mesa Community College.

In running for office, Austin wants to make life easier for everyday people like herself, her family, and her community. “I’m not trying to be a party politician or a savior – I’m really just trying to be” a good neighbor, Austin says, adding that “you can teach someone how to write policy, but you cannot teach someone else to know your” home.

Carrying On the Family Torch

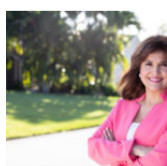
Austin’s family history is rife with tales of perseverance through hard work.

An example: Her maternal great-grandparents moved to Kansas from Mexico in the early 1920s. When unable to find jobs, they packed up and moved to San Jose, California, as farm workers. At one point, the family lived under a tarp. And the children – including Austin’s grandmother – took on work to keep the family afloat.

Her father’s family also moved to the United States from Mexico, settling in Arizona in the 1860s and started up a family-run grocery store in the 1920s that grew to become a Mesa staple. Her parents inherited that work ethic, Austin says – as well as a penchant for activism, teaching her “that even if you didn’t have a lot, you didn’t need a lot to do the right thing.”

Austin’s own early years involved struggle, too, especially after her parents divorced and her mother moved Austin and her brother to California to pursue work, which fell through soon after. For a time, the family relied upon community services and Section 8 housing to survive. Weathering that storm together – all while attending an affluent public school full of well-off children – was an “eye-opening experience” that laid bare class-based inequities to Austin.

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After graduating in 2006, Austin moved back to Arizona and enrolled in Mesa Community College. But she dropped out five semesters in a row, as she floundered with math courses and struggled to understand her sexuality.

It would take years before Austin ultimately found herself. But she did, discovering new purpose protesting against the murder of [Michael Brown](#), an unarmed 18-year-old Black man gunned down by police in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. As she spoke out about injustice, a school administrator in Mesa took note of her passion and helped her get back on an academic track.

In 2020, Austin finally earned her bachelor's degree from Arizona State University's School of Transborder Studies, where she graduated at the top of her class.

Trying to Make Things Better

If she wins the State House seat, Austin plans to tackle myriad community issues – starting with education. She cites the state's poor performance nationwide in [educational funding and spending](#) as a critical problem she'd rectify if elected.

Housing access is another focus. [Massive rent hikes](#) are causing the area, and the state, to “hemorrhage people,” Austin says, and “if we don't do something about it, Mesa won't look like Mesa.” She has called for policies that protect renters and defend against private investors who convert homes into Airbnb rentals.

Climate change and reproductive justice round out her campaign priorities. “Current legislation ... is trying to get back to old constitutional politics surrounding abortion,” she says. “We won't be able to do anything about this unless we get legislators who believe in advocating for everybody.”

As she campaigns to become one such lawmaker, Austin often thinks of the women in her family who are honored in ink on arms – like her grandmother, who she calls “one of my biggest sources of inspiration,” and her mother, who saw her through the tough times, and is “the smartest person I've ever met.”

Austin adds, “I wouldn't be here without the incredible backbone of my family and the values they instilled in me and taught me.”

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