
Young candidate facing racist, sexist attacks

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By Irin Carmon

Kentucky Republicans, who are trying to win control of the state legislature on Tuesday, may have underestimated Ashley Miller.

“I think they just said, ‘Oh she’s young, she’s brown, You don’t have to worry about her,’” said the 30-year-old nurse practitioner, who is running for state representative in the state’s 32nd district, in East Louisville. She would be the first black woman in the Kentucky legislature in 14 years; women currently make up only 18% of the assembly overall.

But Republicans seem worried indeed. In September, a website anonymously surfaced calling Miller “Trashley Miller,” singling out her job at Planned Parenthood for its connection to abortion. Miller is prochoice and provides options counseling for pregnant women, among other services, but Planned Parenthood in Kentucky does not provide abortion services. It also pointed to her modeling career, which included appearing on the cover of a local rap group’s mix tape. The website referred to the group, Nappy Roots, as “a popular gangster RAP group,” a characterization that doesn’t match the group’s alternative image but seems to play on racial fears. (It’s unclear why rap was in all-caps.)

“There were several people in the community that felt like it was a dog whistle of sorts to remind the voters that I am a minority woman,” Miller said.

More recently, a supporter reached out to Miller, she told msnbc, to tell her she had gotten a robocall asking her if she would vote for Ashley Miller if she “knew that on my previous modeling Web site that I advertised to model lingerie in men’s homes for money.” Miller says that’s false. The call also attacked Miller’s Planned Parenthood affiliation.

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In an email to msnbc, Moffett denied any connection to the robocalls. But he clearly considers Miller’s professional background to be a liability to be exploited, in terms that sound a lot like slutshaming.

“Voters need to be the ones to decide whether an inappropriately dressed model of RAP artists, who also worked as a Pregnancy Options Counselor for Planned Parenthood, is the appropriate person to represent them in public office,” Moffett told WFPL’s Phillip Bailey. Moffett was bringing up Miller’s modeling on his Facebook page as recently as October 27.

“I really think it’s desperate,” Miller said of the attacks, “and a huge distraction from what we need to be talking about.”

Republicans have not held a majority in the legislature since 1921, and if they gain the required five seats, they’ll only need a simple majority to override the Democratic governor’s veto. On their policy wish list: Legislature to roll back abortion access and union participation.

Miller was recruited by Mary Lou Marzian, a Democrat in the general assembly who first met her when Miller keynoted a Planned Parenthood event.

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“She just blew me away,” Marzian told msnbc, saying Miller was “just poised intelligent, showed compassion for the women she served. I said, ‘This woman needs to run for office.’ Women just need to get other women out and recruited to run. A lot of women feel intimidated, we’re not smart enough, or we can’t do it. We wait to be asked. The men are never gonna ask you to run.”

All that was before Marzian knew how much Miller had overcome. Growing up in the West End of Louisville as the daughter of then-crack addicts, Miller’s family sometimes lacked electricity. “There was some times we didn’t have food,” Miller said. “There were times my dad would get food from a dumpster or would steal it from a local Thornton’s up the corner.”

Support from her grandmother, as well as competing in pageants’ and playing basketball, helped Miller find her way.

When she found herself at Planned Parenthood working as a nurse practitioner, she realized she had found her calling, helping girls in whom she saw herself. “I felt like I was really able to empower girls with information about their bodies to really help them be in control of their fertility,” she said. Miller is still juggling hours at the clinic with the campaign – and finishing her doctorate in nursing.

She hopes to bring some of that real-life experience and empirical background to the legislature. “In nursing we always talk about research-based practice, evidence based practice,” Miller said. Her hope, she said, is for some “evidence-based legislation.”

But first, she has to win.

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