

Young global leader boosts US activists' aspirations

'I try not to be an alarmist but I believe democracy is under siege,' says Democrats Abroad international chair Candice Kerestan

By Elaine Halleck

Even with a roomful of expectant, older faces turned her way, Democrats Abroad (DA) international chair Candice Kerestan, a 30-something who had flown from Bonn, Germany, to Guadalajara Friday to speak to DA members from all of Mexico, did not lose her quiet eloquence.

Indeed, the admiration evident during Kerestan's keynote speech at DA Mexico's annual meeting March 11 to 13 partly turned on her relative youth—as the second youngest Democratic leader at her level. When she recounted the loss of her self-described naivete at the election of former U.S. President Donald Trump on the heels of Barack Obama—which had been her first voting experience—Kerestan's grasp of a historical perspective wider than her years seemed to resonate with the approximately 50 older listeners present.

"I saw that human rights and equality aren't a sure thing, but that there are people wanting to take them away," she elaborated after the Saturday talk, held at the Hilton Guadalajara Midtown.

Kerestan detailed other gains in perspective that followed from the experiences of youth. For example, she explained that she took a certain amount of dysfunction

for granted when she was growing up in Pennsylvania—problems with the educational and health care systems, for example—but then saw after moving to Germany to pursue a PhD in political science, that the German systems in these areas worked well.

But most of Kerestan's zeal for the work of DA-Mexico revolved around her sense of urgency for getting out the expat vote, at both the state and federal level, in this year's "midterm" elections and in the 2024 election.

For example, she pointed out that the 2020 Mexican census revealed over one million U.S. citizens in Mexico who are eligible to vote, and she suggested that the potential of expat voters in Mexico may be greater than any other foreign country. Due to her realization of this, partly spurred by many conversations with DA-Mexico chair William Chapman, she announced that she had proposed to the overarching DA group an increase in funding to provide organizers dedicated to getting out the vote among the concentration of eligible expat Americans near the U.S.-Mexico border. The proposal has yet to be approved, but Kerestan is keyed into this possibility.

"I like to say that DA provides the margin for victory," she explained. "For example,

in the 2020 election in Georgia, where it took a week to get the results, we delivered the votes that put Biden over the edge. What made me feel calm and confident during that week was knowing how hard Americans abroad had worked and that their ballots were arriving later."

She revealed plans for organizing state-by-state, virtual meet-the-candidate sessions this year, and for phone-banking campaigns and voting guides. She stressed that she wants every American citizen in Mexico to understand that anyone here who has a U.S. passport can vote—including dual citizens and people who never actually lived in the United States.

"And you can get your ballot at VoteFromAbroad.org," she pointed out.

"Democrats have come very far just by winning in 2020," Kerestan went on. "But we need to go farther this year. I try not to be an alarmist but I believe democracy is under siege. Not only that, but there are important issues—like climate change, health care and education—that won't wait. These are not trivial."

For all her admiration of Germany, Kerestan underscored that after being received "with open arms" in Guadalajara, she understands why people move to Mexico. She loves Germany, where she focuses on political science and helping university professors in Bonn to publish in English. But, "I don't want to go back!" she joked.



International Democrats Abroad chair Candice Kerestan, right, chats with an attendee at the DA Mexico annual general meeting, when she gave a short, well-received keynote address. Kerestan resides in Bonn, Germany.



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