

## **TCA Exclusive Interview with Aycha Sawa**

*TCA intern Tanem Zaman, a journalism major at George Washington University, conducted an exclusive interview on February 28 with Aycha Sawa, who aspires to be the chief financial officer (city comptroller) for Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The election for Milwaukee's City Comptroller is on April 7. Sawa qualified for the general election after coming in second with two other contenders in the February primary. She is one of four women political candidates from the Turkish American community running for public office in 2020.*

Aycha Sawa is the Deputy Comptroller of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is running in the general election for Milwaukee City Comptroller on April 7, 2020. Current Comptroller Martin Matson, who also happens to be Aycha's boss, influenced her decision to run since he was retiring and wanted her to take over his duties. With more than a decade of experience at the Comptroller's office, Aycha decided last year to become a candidate. TCA had the pleasure of having an exclusive interview with Aycha Sawa where she talked in-depth about her inspirations, her story as a Turkish American woman working in a male-dominated field, her future projects, and her involvement among the Turkish American community nationwide.

Aycha defines a Comptroller as the "city's financial watchdog", who is in charge of all the accounting centralized in the city. Regarding the financial reporting responsibilities of the office, Aycha gave us the run-down:

"Our financial statements are a book of 160 pages. It is a \$1.6 billion organization. We also monitor grants that the city gets from the state and from the veterans which is over a \$90 million payroll that we do for the city."

In addition, the Comptroller office does the independent fiscal announcements of the mayor's projects, as well as the revenue estimates and property taxes.

Inspiration to run for office came to Aycha as she started moving up positions in her career. Being able to experience the contributions that different positions bring into an office, Aycha says "The more I was in the office, I kind of fell in love with the city in a sense that I realized how much I love the city as a community I live with, but also realized the importance of the work we are doing in our office." In comparison to the private sector where her counterparts would help someone's bottom line in a company, she believes that a Comptroller's role is for the betterment of the community as a whole so that the city's financial health can be preserved and improved.

"As the Deputy Comptroller, the number two person in the office, I felt like it was my duty to serve", commented Aycha regarding how she started her journey. Even though she was very

encouraged and qualified for the position, she had second thoughts about running as she just had a newborn baby. In the end, she decided to go forth and do it.

“There is no perfect time to run. Because next term, there will be different challenges. You just got to go and do it” Aycha said.

If Aycha gets elected, one of the first operational improvements she plans to tackle is increasing community engagement through reaching out to locals.

“No one really knows who a Comptroller is. Everyone knows the mayor and all the other fancy roles. But in the City of Milwaukee, and I am sure other cities have it as well, you can sign up to be on email lists. So, regarding that, I have some ideas about how we can create more outreach and share financial information like the financials to a specific event going on,” Aycha said about her plan for improving public engagement.

Looking at the bigger picture, the biggest aspect she wants to focus on is “to make sure that the office has that presence, respect, and credibility so that the city can be financially healthy,” Aycha emphasized.

Her sense of inclusiveness was influenced through her Turkish-American heritage as she is the daughter of Turkish immigrant parents. Regarding her Turkish-American heritage, she has always been an active member of the Turkish-American community since her high school years.

“As a kid growing up in Wisconsin, I always volunteered in the International Folk Fair with the Turkish American Association which used to be very active on that.” Aycha commented. She was also actively doing folk dancing throughout her high school and university years. During her college years spent in University of Wisconsin in Madison, she was an active member of the university’s well-known Turkish Student Association, as they introduced all sorts of cultural activities and festivals to Madison, and also to Milwaukee.

Aycha continued her active involvement also after she started her professional career, as she attended the ATAA conference in 2015 in Washington, D.C. With respect to her political engagement, she went to Madison with her Turkish colleagues and talked to their representatives and senators regarding state bills that advocated anti-Turkish sentiment.

Aycha wants to reactivate the Turkish Association and to be more involved if she gets elected as the comptroller. She is eager to start new projects and help out with activities that people would want to engage in.

Aycha's excellent prior experience in this sector and her strong finance background gives her the essential wisdom needed for the good of the community. As a very successful and influential Turkish American woman in her field, it is hard for one to not wonder how this title impacted her on this professional journey.

"I have always had a "weird" name that was hard to pronounce" Aycha commented, adding that besides the name pronunciation, she hasn't faced any major impacts regarding her heritage.

"I think that if I was in your area of the country [Washington, DC], that would happen more but it really doesn't happen out here. The conversations I have with those people are mostly on the cultural level with positive intentions," Aycha added. She believes that her heritage has not been a point of discussion or conflict during her career because the majority of the people in Wisconsin don't know much about Turkey in the first place.

Perhaps the Turkish American title has not really been impactful either negatively or positively, although being a successful woman in a male-dominated sector, she says:

"I feel like sometimes there is still that "All Boys Club" thing that still exists today, and I don't think this is only in the financial sector."

Aycha says that she started noticing the gender gap more when she started working at the city, especially under more organizational settings where she would sit in meetings where she would be the only woman.

"I don't know if it a conscious thing," Aycha comments. She also provides a crucial observation making a connection between sex discrimination at the workforce and one's position on the hierarchy.

"I also think that it is more apparent as you get promoted and are higher up in management as opposed to when you are in an entry-level career professional because you are not really aware of what is going on unless something directly happens to you."

Aycha's final message that she would like to share with the Turkish-American community is a great advice that relates to both personal and professional life:

"The Comptroller's office is an independent professional office, and you want someone in that office who is ethical, has integrity and stands up for what is right for the city without getting pushed around with political peer pressure. This in fact relates to every part of anyone's life; Us as women, as we forge ahead and break through glass ceilings, couple of the main points of advice is to stay strong and always do what you believe is right. Because as long as you act with

integrity and stand by your values even if something doesn't go the way you want it to go, you are still out there doing what is right. No one can say something bad about you if you always act with integrity. This advice holds true particularly when you run for office as well. It is hard because there are people who say to you, 'I endorse you, so what are you going to do for me?'. For instance, if someone is giving you money only to get something in return, you can always turn down their money. You don't have to take the donation. I believe that the more you act with integrity and hold true to your values people will respect you more. You might not be liked by someone in the short term, but in the long term you will earn that respect. And that is what you ultimately want in your career goal, regardless of what your career choice is."