

TCA Exclusive Interview with Aylin Acikalin

TCA intern Tanem Zaman, a journalism major at George Washington University, conducted an exclusive interview on March 3 with Aylin Acikalin, who is running for First City Court Judge in New Orleans, Louisiana. The special election will be on April 4. She is one of four women political candidates from the Turkish American community running for public office in 2020.

Aylin Acikalin is the candidate for judge at the First City Court. Following the unexpected passing away of the sitting judge Angelique Aristell Reed, the First City Court in New Orleans is up to elect a new judge. With more than 20 years of experience in the legal sector, Aylin has been the Legislative Director for City Councilmember Nadine M. Ramsey and led the effort to form the Council's first Environmental Advisory Committee.

The Turkish Coalition of America (TCA) had the pleasure of having an exclusive interview with Aylin Acikalin where she talked about her story as a Turkish American woman living in New Orleans, from how she raised two children as she built a successful legal career to her involvement in the Turkish American community and the influence of the Emerge program in her career that she participated in.

Aylin has a particular interest for this position since The First City Court is a small claims court with limited jurisdiction for claims under \$25,000 and also deals with evictions.

“I felt that it was important to have someone from the community with a public service background who is used to approaching everyone with dignity, whether it be constituents or anyone who comes to the court.” Aylin commented.

Regarding the general role of a judge for the First City Court, Aylin explains, “What is interesting about this course is that it is a non-jury trial and the rules of civil procedure do not apply. This means the judge really has quite a bit of power and the lead to set the rules, since he/she makes decisions without a jury. So, it's quite an important decision.” Aylin further stated.

If Aylin gets elected, she wants to run an efficient and fair court. Her initial goals are towards working on improving accessibility, setting new forms of practices, and making sure that the judicial process runs smoothly. “Because the number one complaint I hear from the litigants is regarding the delays and the increase in costs on both sides. People just want to get a decision,” stated Aylin as she agrees with the criticisms that have been directed towards the court system.

While Aylin was building her successful legal career, she has also raised two wondrous children. As this is an exemplary accomplishment to all women who want to have both a successful career and raise a family, her comments on having the role of being a lawyer and a caring mother is very modest and inspiring.

“There are many women with multiple jobs and children who are single. I am blessed to have the full support of my family. It is hard, but we do it; we make it work.” Aylin says.

Regarding this topic, Aylin shared a wonderful anecdote regarding the time she had the opportunity to raise a question on this topic to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

“This was before I was married and had children, but listening to her story, I couldn’t help but ask her, ‘How did you do it? How did you achieve this career success and also have a family?’, and she said, ‘I couldn’t have done it without my family, or without the support of my husband’ She had the full support of her family. And luckily, so do I.”

Aylin is extremely thankful for her parents and her current partner for their tremendous support. She recalls the most challenging time in her career as during her first campaign when she went through a divorce. “My family has been extremely supportive; I couldn’t have done it without their help” Aylin mentioned.

Her experience in the workplace as a woman in the legal sector, which is known to be a male-dominated field, on the other hand, has different challenges.

“We have to deal with a lot of microaggressions, second guessing and having to explain yourself in situations where if a man were to be talking it would be accepted as true.” Aylin explains.

Aylin pointed out that interestingly a majority of judges around the New Orleans area are African-American women. Aylin says that this statistic has to do with the fact that the community gets to elect their own judges.

Regarding the community Aylin lives with in New Orleans, she says that there is a fairly large Turkish population. Due to the tourism-based economy of New Orleans, people are attracted to work either in the tourism or restaurant sector here. Additionally, due to the strong connections with the universities in the area that bring in a lot of diversity, there is not only a substantial Turkish community, but also from different parts of the world.

Within the Turkish American community in Louisiana, Aylin has been very active ever since her college years.

“One of my first jobs out of college was working for the Assembly of Turkish American Organization for about 2 year as a membership director.” says Aylin.

Along with her dad who was the founder of the Turkish American Association of Louisiana, she has always been very active in the Turkish communities around the state throughout her life. Although her direct activism within the community has been lessened recently, she has always talked about her Turkish side as a part of who she is, especially since it is a very common source of inquiry for her due to her name. Aylin says that this inquiry did have its positive aspects, as well as negative ones as she lives in a very Catholic and Southern town.

“Even though I am a blonde, green-eyed woman, when you get the question ‘Oh, where is your name from?’, and then you answer, ‘Turkey’, the way people look at you and the way they talk to you changes. When you send in your resume with the name, Aylin Acikalin, it does affect the response you may get. I feel like it has affected my ability to work. Before they know of my heritage, they speak to me and look at me in one way, and then I have to name my heritage and it changes. And there is prejudice; being of Turkish heritage does not receive a similar connotation of being European. This is prejudice.” Aylin comments, highlighting the challenges she has faced regarding her heritage.

Aylin mentioned that her name automatically brings about these limitations. “My name reveals my heritage. Even though it also has created connections that I did not think it would, it also has prevented me from doing certain things or even getting certain jobs because I did not fit a profile. But I wouldn’t have my life any other way.”

Furthermore, as a Turkish American who was born and raised in the U.S., even though she can understand Turkish, she is not a fluent speaker. Aylin mentions that due to this reason she is also not fully accepted by the Turkish community either.

Although Aylin is still very proud of her Turkish heritage, she believes that the opportunity to be exposed to a different culture than the one she grew up with along with the opportunity to travel made her who she is today. Her words on how the Turkish heritage has contributed to her identity as a whole is as follows:

“It has allowed me to have a very broad mindset of understanding and accepting different cultures, which I think is very important as a lawyer, a judicial candidate and as the member of any community. I think anybody from that comes from a multicultural background would understand that and it also gives me a level of cultural awareness and empathy that maybe I wouldn’t have had otherwise.”