

TCA Exclusive Interview with Leah Ersoylu

TCA intern Tanem Zaman, a journalism major at George Washington University, conducted an exclusive interview on June 4 with Leah Ersoylu. She is running for the nonpartisan position of trustee of the Newport Mesa United School District, Area 1, in Orange County, California. Her election is on the 3 of November 2020. As the spouse of Turkish American Sarp Ersoylu, Leah is one of four women political candidates from the Turkish American community running for public office in 2020.

Leah Ersoylu is running to serve as the Newport Mesa Unified School District Trustee, Area 1 in California. Leah has experience in public policy, public education, and public health. Additionally, she is a successful entrepreneur that runs her own consulting company, Ersoylu Consulting. Leah dedicated the last 20 years of her life in the social service sector where she worked at youth programming, public health programming, and helping organizations to plan and measure the impact of their programs through data analysis.

When she was asked what inspired her to run for public office, Leah says, “From my education and from life, I realized the power that insiders have when they truly want to make positive change, so being on the inside and changing the system from within is very important for me. There are advocates who are outside of the system trying to make things better, but there can also be advocates inside the system changing it.”

Leah also grew up in a family of public servants. Her grandfather was a city councilman and a state legislator in New Hampshire. Her mother also ran for school board when Leah was young. “I remember her campaigns,” says Leah, from when her mother ran for school board. “I just knew that running for public office was something I was interested in.”

School boards in the United States are responsible for setting the policies and budgetary directions for school districts. The Newport Mesa School District is in control of a large amount of the taxpayer’s money and are charged with the best way to educate children.

“Most people don’t know this, but our school district’s budget is about 370,000,000 dollars, which is almost double our city’s budget.” says Leah, as she explains the ideal role of a School District Trustee.

Leah thinks that a District Trustee should not only have the ability to understand those budgets, but also to understand the policies and how federal education law impacts the state law, so that the districts can work to implement new and better policies.

“I think my background and my ability to understand the education data to identify what programs in our school system are working well and which ones need improvement will be beneficial for improving public education” comments Leah, regarding how her prior experience will be helpful if she gets elected.

According to Leah, education was what leveled the playing field for her. She says that if she had not received the education she had gotten, she would not have reached her full potential. Thanks to her great mentors who guided her to continue to obtain a PhD, she not only learned the power of and what to do with education, but also became the only one of her siblings to go to college.

“Education is the equalizer, so I want to dedicate the next part of my life to ensure all of the children who grew up like me will have the same chances and have excellent education. There is a basic level of information we need to provide to everyone,” comments Leah.

After attending public school for elementary and middle school, Leah earned a scholarship to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, a prestigious boarding school in New Hampshire that is known for its excellent but rigorous academic requirements. Growing in that environment, Leah was greatly influenced to stay engaged and active in providing quality education to all. Looking back at her times at Exeter, Leah comments:

“It was a very transformative experience. What guided my whole professional career actually came from my time at Exeter” says Leah. Referring to the Academy’s key quote that has stuck with her: *“Goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous, and that both united form the noblest character, and lay the surest foundation of usefulness to mankind.”*

“It was one of the best quotes ever and it guided my whole career. Many people want to be good and help people, but then they do not have the technical ability to do so. So, for me it is a combination of both”.

For Leah, this quote from Exeter’s mission is particularly useful and is also timeless. As she holds a PhD degree in Political Science and Public Policy, she applies the message of this quote to public policy making as well:

“It is an art and a science, so you do need to have the heart for things but also the intelligence to know how systems work and to know where you can press levers to move things forward. So being well intentioned can be dangerous if you do not know what to do with that intent”, comments Leah.

During her professional career, Leah had worked in many non-profit organizations before she founded her own company, Ersoylu Consulting.

“When I started the company in 2007, it was after I had spent time working at various nonprofits such as Boys & Girls Club, a Community Action Agency (CAA), and Latino Health Access, where I was a policy director doing policy and advocacy, finding different ways to work for systems change and for health improvement in California’s Latino community.”

After her long experience with many nonprofit organizations, she decided that she needed a more flexible job that she had more control over, and where she would be able to help more organizations rather than working for only one.

“I figured that if I was my own company, it could be a good way to give back by being able to support more organizations with their data and policy, as most nonprofits don’t have huge data and research arms or policy arms.”

Leah is also doing live chats on Facebook every Thursday to highlight the interviews she has been doing with the parents of Newport Mesa School System.

“I want to highlight all of the smart and interesting parents that are ready to give back and whose voices are often not heard. They do so much to support our school and they are often overlooked by the school district” says Leah, emphasizing the significance of parent involvement.

“One of the primary reasons I am running is because I feel like our school district doesn’t value parent input as much as it should.”

“Our school board has seven members and only one is a parent. And this is not only our school district, but most of school districts are governed by people who do not have children in the school district”, she adds.

If Leah gets to serve as the Newport Mesa Unified School District Trustee, her initial goals are to implement supportive services, including mental health and to focus on educational inequities as her district.

Of course, as we are currently in a global health emergency and taking into account that Leah has a very rich history in public service, public health and environment, we asked her comments on the coronavirus’ impact among the society, more specifically on education.

Leah wants to make sure that every decision is based on science and data, as opposed to political influence; in Orange County there are vocal groups who are currently skeptical of science and want the schools to be open right now, without safeguards for public health in place.

“The hospitalization rates in Orange County are not going down. They are trending upward.” comments Leah.

“I understand that people are tired; they have been at home for months with their kids trying to work full-time and the parents are suffering. But we, as parents, can’t afford to be selfish; there are precautions that must be taken in schools with children that are non-negotiable”.

Her take on the possibility of schools’ reopening is that there needs to be virtual options and perhaps a hybrid model where perhaps children will go to school couple days a week and do online schooling at home for the remaining day of the week.

“Until there is a vaccine and a real treatment, we are in this limbo and it is horrible. We just have to admit that it is horrible and find ways to cope with it.”