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POLITICS

'I surely won't be the last' Asian American in Ohio Senate, says Tina Maharath after loss



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In a dimly lit hallway on the second floor of the Ohio Statehouse — right off a grand marble staircase — is a wood-framed door with a frosted glass window and the words "Minority Whip."

"Sorry it's kind of a mess, we're in the process of moving out," said an aide to State Sen. Tina Maharath, a Democrat from Canal Winchester who was the first Asian American woman to serve in the Senate and the first Laotian American to serve in the Ohio General Assembly.

Maharath won election to a four-year term in the Ohio Senate in 2018 without a state or county Democratic party endorsement, defeating Republican Anne Gonzales in a tight race and flipping a GOP-held Senate seat for the first time since 2006.

But on Nov. 8, Maharath lost her reelection bid for Ohio's 3rd Senate District — which includes New Albany, Gahanna, Westerville, Reynoldsburg, Groveport and parts of western Columbus — to Republican candidate Michele Reynolds by about 53% to 47%.

Maharath, along with local Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) advocates and community members, spoke to The Dispatch about what her time has meant for the Senate, Asian American advocacy, and what her leaving means for the future of it.

Tina Maharath: From child of refugees to state senator

Maharath's parents came to the United States in 1990 — the same year she was born — from refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines, where she said they were for almost two decades after escaping from Laos in the late 1970s.

She was then born and grew up in Whitehall, where she said her family lived in poverty.

“The transition from refugee camps to life in America was not the easiest,” Maharath, 32, said. “Unfortunately at 14, my mom and (two) brothers died in a car accident, and eventually I went through a series of traumas.”

In 2018, the Senate Republican Campaign Committee ran ads against Maharath citing her involvement in a fatal hit-and-run crash when she was 16. The ads said she struck a bicyclist and left him for dead on the side of the road.

Maharath later turned herself in, acknowledged her responsibility and apologized.

Placed in the foster care system at 17, Maharath persisted in carving a path for herself, later attending Ohio University, where she received both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

“I was a single mother by choice at 20 years old ... I went to OU, I worked at JP Morgan, I did everything society was supposed to tell me to do, yet I’m constantly having to decide, should I buy a five-pack of diapers today or should I pay my electric bill?” she said. “And that’s why I ran for office, I needed to change the system.”

A look back: Maharath is unlikely winner in state Senate

It was a friend from Whitehall many years ago who had died that had finally inspired her to run for office. Her friend, who was 18, “was at the wrong place at the wrong time,” and died due to gun violence in the area.

At the time, Maharath said she met with then-Ohio House Representative Michael Stinziano, who she said tried to get answers for the family.

“At that moment, I knew that’s when I could do that too,” Maharath said. “If (Stinziano) could go make a couple of phone calls and try to serve us to the best of his abilities, I felt like I could do that too as long as it’s for the people.”

When she came into office, she made impressions on the other state senators.

State Sen. Kenny Yuko, D-Richmond Heights, said he remembered hearing of Maharath back in 2018 and her unlikely campaign.

"She came in very green," Yuko said, adding that he felt Maharath didn't know what to expect after winning.

“The moment she walked in those doors in the Statehouse, she became a new and different Tina,” Yuko said. “She engaged in her job full tilt ... She attended her committee meetings, she asked great questions. I think she had a pretty decent handle in a rather short period of time of what this job entails.”

Lack of AAPI commission 'biggest failure'

Much of Maharath’s advocacy when it came to her time as a senator centered around her own personal experiences before she stepped into office — health care and mental health advocacy, resources for single mothers, AAPI resources and even her experience growing up in Whitehall.

Her sponsored bills and resolutions ranged from commending refugee communities and trying to gain state designation for a Maternal Mental Health Awareness Week, to requiring K-12 schools in Ohio to teach a unit on Asian American history.

But Ohio legislative records show Maharath’s sponsored bills didn’t do well. Only a handful made it to the House floor her first year and none were passed there. Maharath did cosponsor bills that passed in both Senate and House chambers, including measures requiring veterans be informed of available health care benefits and creating a Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission in 2019.

Maharath said the one bill that she considers her “biggest failure” was S.B. 87, which would have created an Asian American and Pacific Islander Affairs commission within the legislature to provide the Asian American community with a bridge to state government, as well as state resources..

More: AAPI students, leaders in Ohio seek required teaching of Asian American history

But the bill, co-sponsored by Republican State Sen. Niraj Antani, the only other Asian American in the state Senate, never made it beyond the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think it will be going anywhere now that my time’s ending, because now we’re down to one Asian American state senator here,” Maharath said.

Yuko said Maharath really wanted the commission legislation to pass.

“She wanted to leave her mark ... as the senator who brought some respect and acknowledgement that we have Asians living in Ohio,” Yuko said.

Maharath's tenure 'influential' for AAPI community

Despite the Asian American commission legislation not advancing, some in the community believe that Maharath has already left her mark just by being in office.

“Her being in the state Senate, as an Asian American, is obviously very influential for any Asian American who's interested in politics in central Ohio,” said Ajmeri Hoque, a local criminal defense attorney.

In 2021, Hoque, 38, unsuccessfully ran for Dublin City Council Ward 1. During her campaign, Hoque said she briefly spoke with Maharath about how to make sure Asian Americans were reflected in a positive light in Ohio.

“When you see someone in that position, who represents you, you feel like, ‘Okay, I can do this,’” Hoque said. “That's something that was very important to see.”

Maharath's impact has been seen by those involved with AAPI advocacy groups as well, like Jona Hilario.

More: With rise in anti-Asian harassment, efforts renewed to establish Ohio AAPI Commission

Hilario is a co-director of OPAWL, a group dedicated to promoting AAPI feminist leadership. She said that she felt it was really brave for Maharath to run for office, especially as a woman of color.

“Tina opened a lot of doors for AAPI candidates in Ohio,” Hilario, 41, said.

Maharath lost her reelection bid in November, in part, due to a Republican-funded attack campaign that asked where Maharath was and alleging that the incumbent really wanted to be in Minnesota where her husband, Fue Lee, lives and works as a state representative. The ads even used her own words from a social media post, in which she indicated she wanted to move from Ohio, against her.

“They targeted Tina, she was vulnerable, she was young, she was female, and it worked,” Yuko said. “The bottom line is they got rid of a good legislator who really cares about her people.”

Though Maharath lost her seat, the Ohio House gained an AAPI member in the same election as Dr. Anita Somani, an Indian American and a Democrat, was elected as to serve the 11th Ohio House District.

Maharath said her time being a political advocate in the state is not over yet. While she said she can't reveal where she's going next after she leaves office, she added: "Ohio can't just drop me dead."

"I became Ohio's first Asian American woman elected (to the state Senate), I surely won't be the last," Maharath said. "But our country needs more people like me to continue to be the spoken voice for the unspoken, and I'll continue to do just that regardless if I'm a state senator or not."

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