

RI POLITICS

Election brings diversity to Westerly's leadership

The predominantly white town in southwestern R.I. has elected its first Black town council member, first Black school committee member, and helped elect one of the first Asian American state lawmakers

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 6, 2022, 4:41 p.m.



Newly elected Westerly Town Council member Kevin J. Lowther II, left to right, newly elected Westerly School Committee member Leslie S. Dunn, and state Senator-elect Victoria Gu. HANDOUT

PROVIDENCE — Westerly, a predominantly white town in southwest Rhode Island, just elected its first Black town council member and its first Black school committee member while helping to elect one of the state's first Asian American state legislators.

The town of 18,423 people remains 91 percent white while Black residents make up 2

percent of the population, Asian Americans 2.5 percent, and Latinos 3.1 percent, according to 2020 census data.

On Nov. 8, voters elected Kevin J. Lowther II, a Democrat, as the first Black town councilman, and he has already been named vice chairman.

Leslie S. Dunn, a Democrat, became the first Black school committee member, receiving more votes than any other candidate.

And Westerly voters helped elect Victoria Gu, a Charlestown Democrat, to the state Senate District 38 seat that longtime Senate minority leader Dennis L. Algieri, a Westerly Republican, [vacated after 30 years](#) representing a district that includes Westerly, Charlestown, and South Kingstown. That victory made Gu and Linda L. Ujifusa, a Portsmouth Democrat, the [first two Asian Americans](#) to win seats in the General Assembly.

Dunn said she, Lowther, and other local residents of color have been talking about the need for greater diversity and representation in elected leadership for years, but it became evident that if that's what they wanted, they needed to run themselves.

“That is the big takeaway: If you want to see the change, you have to make it happen,” she said. “But you have to recognize it's going to be an uncomfortable process when you are going to make that change — you open yourself up to anything and everything.”

For example, Dunn said she and Lowther were accused of “making everything about race” and “trying to shove (critical race theory) down everyone's throat.” She said she had to explain that critical race theory is not taught in local schools, and she campaigned on issues such as retaining students and investing in elementary school construction and renovation.

Dunn said Westerly is part of a wider trend in which a younger, more diverse group of

people are seeking elected office throughout the country.

“We are realizing the weight it holds to not have representation — to have people making decisions for you who can’t relate to you and can’t understand what it means,” she said. “I do think people see what’s happening around them and realize they need to get involved.”

Dunn acknowledged she had not always kept up with midterm elections or policy matters. But, she said, “In the last couple of years, as we watched different rights taken away, such as overturning Roe v. Wade, young people woke up and said, ‘Oh, my God, this is going to affect me.’ They realized they have to get activated by finding people they support or running themselves.”

Dunn, 30, moved to Westerly when she was 6 years old and graduated from Westerly High School in 2010. She is director of a spa at the Foxwoods Resort Casino. She is a founding member of the Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition.

Lowther, 40, graduated from Westerly High School in 2000 and from West Point in 2004. He earned a master’s of business administration from the University of Miami. He’s a combat veteran who served in Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and South America. He served on the Westerly Planning Board and co-founded the Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition. He’s now a professional violin player, known as “[Big Lux](#),” blending hip hop, bluegrass, and jazz.

Lowther said that he, Dunn, and other members of the Anti-Racism Coalition began weekly protests after George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020.

“There was a lot of energy in the town,” he said. “So we organized, and over the next couple of years we were trying our best to influence our communities. We started showing up to school committee and town council meetings.”

He noted that a town charter change had set term limits for town council members, opening up opportunities for newcomers.

“We realized we had the opportunity to step up,” Lowther said. “The social justice movement has definitely sparked a lot of awareness that there has been inequity in representation. And it makes people realize that maybe it is time to give some folks a chance, but those people have to show up and know what they are talking about.”

He said he, Dunn, and Gu put a lot of energy into canvassing in a community that had not seen much door-to-door campaigning lately.

Lowther said he ran on a platform that focused on affordable housing, shoreline access, community centers, and sustainable development.

He also worked to establish a multicultural committee, and hopes to be a liaison to that committee now that he's on the town council. “That will help the town unlock the potential of all the underserved communities that have not played a part for more than 350 years in this town,” he said.

Lowther said he was asked to speak at this year's Westerly High School graduation ceremony, and he was struck by how much more diverse the senior class was than when he graduated from the school 22 years ago.

“Westerly is changing,” he said.

Gu, 29, grew up in South Kingstown and now lives near the Charlestown/Westerly border. Her parents came to the United States from China when they were in their 20s. She graduated from Harvard University, works as a software engineer and data analyst, and chairs the Climate Resiliency Commission in Charlestown.

Gu said she is part of a younger generation motivated to get involved to help address climate change. She said she's looking forward to working with Lowther and Dunn on

issues such as shoreline access, housing, and the environment.

She noted Lowther and Dunn played key roles in launching the Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition, and said the group continues to have weekly gatherings on the steps of the town's old post office, providing a forum for addressing community issues.—

“The most important part of that has been community building,” she said. “The energy in 2020 is being focused by people who care about the community to benefit people of all backgrounds in town.”

Gu also gave credit to the Westerly Democratic Town Committee for supporting Lowther and Dunn. The burst in diversity in local leadership stems from “people stepping up to run and feeling like they can run and have a community that supports them,” she said. “It will pave the way for more people of diverse backgrounds to run in the future.”

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