

Race To Represent 2018 : Interview with State Assembly District 72
Incumbent Carmen De La Rosa

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Moderator: Elinor Tatum

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Intro: Manhattan Neighborhood Network in partnership with the New York Amsterdam News and the League of Women Votes of New York State present Race to Represent, an MNN election initiative.

Elinor T.: Hello. I'm Eleanor Tatum. New Yorkers will be voting in the general election on Tuesday, November 6th. They will cast their ballots for offices including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, controller, state legislature, and state assembly. Today, we bring you an interview with one of the candidates running for New York State Assembly in District 72. The winner will take office in January 2019. The New York State Assembly works alongside the State Senate and the governor to create laws and establish a state budget. The 72nd District represents approximately 130,000 residents. It covers parts of the Bronx and Northern Manhattan including Inwood and Washington Heights.

Elinor T.: Joining us now is a Democratic candidate and incumbent assembly member Carmen De La Rosa. Welcome.

Elinor T.: So what three words would you use to describe yourself that would identify you as the better candidate on Election Day?

Carmen R.: Well, I'm a product of my community, so that would be one thing. I am someone who considers herself to be hardworking, and trustworthy.

Elinor T.: What were the biggest obstacles you faced this term, and how will you prepare for these obstacles in the future?

Carmen R.: This was my first term in Albany. Obviously going up to Albany for the first time as a legislator, I had to learn the rules of Albany, how the institution works and how to get the budget passed. I think that the budget is a very complex document. I'm prepared this year to continue learning this process and to make sure that my community gets the resources that it deserves in this new budget process, which starts in January.

Elinor T.: So during your first term, you drafted 15 bills and you co-sponsored a dozen others introduced by the assembly. This is your second term. What other bills do you plan to sponsor? What are some of the bills that you did sponsor? Did they pass, and where are they now? Where do they stand?

Carmen R.: Yes, so I have a lot of plans for this next session. Some of the things that are the most important for me to focus on than this upcoming session is the housing laws. My community has one of the largest rent-stabilized stocks of rent-stabilized apartments in New York State, and 2019 will be the year where we will once again take up the rent regulation reform package of bills. I'm on the housing committee. In my community, it's very important to stand up for tenants' rights, to make sure that the displacement that has been happening in our communities continues to be addressed, and that the concerns of the residents who have been long-time residents of Inwood, Marble Hill, and Washington Heights are brought to the table. I will be focusing a lot on housing issues, on how to empower the voices of tenants, and I will also continue to fight for the Dream Act. I'm the main sponsor of the Dream Act in the assembly. I think now, especially now with the attacks we're seeing on immigrant communities coming from Washington, I want to make sure that as we have a Democratic state senate, we can usher that legislation through.

Elinor T.: Now you had just mentioned the budget process, and it's going to be starting soon, and New York has a \$168 billion budget. What issue in your district would you like to see get more funding?

Carmen R.: We need to do a lot more when it comes to education in the district. My district has historically been one of the districts that has been under-funded. We've talked a lot about the formula for funding public school education. I think it's time to look back at that formula and see how we can continue to increase the investments happening there, youth development, recreational development. Oftentimes, I get visited by groups who are doing work with youth in the community. Criminal justice reform is something that we see that in our communities has a deep impact, and so working to make sure that those issues are brought to the table is important. I'm on the mental health committee, and addressing the issues of mental health in communities of color has been a priority for me, increasing access for families who have children with autism, for example. I drafted legislation that does that, but I think we also have to put budgetary implications, budgetary allocations in this process to make sure that that access reaches our community.

Carmen R.: Also, with the criminal justice system, I sponsored legislation that reinstates the bus transportation system for incarcerated individuals. Up until 2013, the state of New York had a free system of busing family members of inmates to visit their families. That system was taken offline in 2013, and we need about \$2 million, which is a drop in the bucket compared to the \$3 billion budget for the Department of Corrections to bring it back online. I'm working with the Osborne Association to make sure that families who have incarcerated family members, especially children, are able to make visitation easier, closer to home; make sure that people are housed closer to home. I believe that children have a right to visit with their parents and have that lifelong relationship, so I'll be focusing on those things in this upcoming budget.

Elinor T.: Now, what kind of campaigning have you done around your district during this election?

Carmen R.: Well you know, I did a lot of campaigning for the primary. I visited senior centers, I met with tenant leaders. I have a large contingent of women in my community who are very politically active and engaged, and so we've been meeting with them, just going to the subway stations, visiting places of worship, and just making sure that every day residents of the community know what are the issues, listening to them about what are the issues that affect their daily lives, and know that we have ideas for solutions to those issues.

Elinor T.: What are you hearing from them? What are their primary concerns?

Carmen R.: You know, housing is the number one issue in my district. It's one of those districts where people say it's one of the last remaining communities in Manhattan. Just the pricing out of long-term residents is something that's so concerning. I would say that 90% of the people who walk into my district are at or below the poverty line. With the increasing prices of rent, everywhere you go you hear people who are talking to you about that burden, of having to pay for rent when you're on a fixed income or on a limited income. Also, we're losing a lot of the professional native community that was there. If you're someone who has a higher degree and you've now moved to another community where you can afford to live maybe on an entry-level position or right out of college, and so we're losing a lot of our young professionals in the community, and parents are concerned about their children moving away and further out of the state and further out of the community.

Carmen R.: That's something that I hear a lot about, but it's mostly about the rising prices of rent.

Elinor T.: Now what bill are you most proud of having accomplished in your first year?

Carmen R.: Well, I would say the two that I'm most proud, they're like your children. You can never pick one. The two that I'm most proud of is the suicide prevention council. I drafted legislation that would create a suicide youth prevention council. In communities of color, Latina girls and African-American boys have the highest indexes of suicide tendencies, ideations towards suicide. We are seeing that in Latina girls, for example, 25% of Latina girls in New York State have seriously considered or attempted suicide. We've been working with organizations such as Comunilife to draft this legislation and make sure that an advisory board is formed with experts, and how to get preventative information into the communities. In the Latino community, for example, it's a taboo to talk about having a mental health issue or suicide. We're trying to break that stigma and really bring life-saving measures into our community. This council will be able to look at traditionally marginalized communities: Latinas, African-American vets, the LGBTQ community, and prevention of suicide in those communities.

Carmen R.: The second one is obviously the Dream Act. I'm so proud of that law. Education for me was the passport for me to get from where I was to where I am now, and I know that if it wasn't for that ability to pay for college, I wouldn't have been able to go to college. I'm the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college. I'm very proud of that, and I think we need to continue to give children, all children, regardless of their status, documented or undocumented, the opportunity to go to college.

- Elinor T.: Thank you. So, where do you stand on the proposed Inwood rezoning plan?
- Carmen R.: So I came out in opposition to the rezoning. It's no secret that I worked for the city council for five years and I worked for Councilman Rodriguez. It was a hard decision to say, "I'm against the rezoning" because of my relationship and my respect for the councilman, but I believed that opposing the plan was the right thing to do for several reasons. First of all, the situation with the displacement that's happening in Upper Manhattan, especially Inwood, didn't start now; it started, I would say 10, 15 years ago. Our communities have been slowly displaced, but I believe that this plan moved too fast and I believe that the concerns that the community brought about how deeply affordable the units that are going to be built were not addressed. That was my fundamental disagreement with the plan.
- Carmen R.: In addition, I also think that more investment needs to be done in infrastructure. If we're going to build up a community, we need to make sure that the infrastructure of that community can sustain this development. The trains, we know, are a big issue. Traffic congestion in Upper Manhattan is a big issue. We had blackouts in the '90s. We need to make sure that our grid and everything else is up to date to be able to withstand not only building and having a construction zone in our community, but also an influx of families who would be moving in.
- Elinor T.: Now the education system, can that also sustain the rezoning?
- Carmen R.: Exactly. Right now, our district is not one that is considered at maximum utilization based upon the numbers that the DOR uses. I'm not quite in favor of the formula that the DOR uses to say if a school's overcrowded or not, but what I do is that there is a lack. For example, if you go into George Washington High School, they're 2,500 students in that school. They don't have an up to date science lab. They don't have a dance room. They don't have some of the basic needs that a child who is learning and about to go into college to take chemistry courses would be able to enjoy. I feel that if we're going to bring more families into district, we need to make sure that the system that is there is of quality in order to sustain a new influx of students and not see overcrowded classrooms where children are not able to learn.
- Elinor T.: All right, so keeping on that affordability and neighborhoods and housing, we're still saying that Inwood has still been labeled "the last affordable neighborhood in New York City." The median rent in that district increased 38% between 2002 and 2014 compared with 24% city-wide. Also, fewer than 200 new units of housing have been built in Inwood over the last 20 years versus the 67,000 built in the rest of Manhattan. What do you say to tenant advocates who believe landlords use preferential rent laws as a loophole to inflate apartment prices?
- Carmen R.: Yeah, well absolutely it's a double-edged sword because that statistic that our community under Bloomberg's Administration didn't build any affordable housing is true. I think that was the impetus behind the rezoning, to see how there can be economic development in that part of Manhattan, but at the same time with increased development also comes the increased fear and the increased reality of displacement.

When you build and you're using a flawed formula once again, which is the area of median income that is above that of someone who actually lives in the community. Right now, the average median income that is used in Inwood is about \$60,000 a year. I know that the people that are walking into my office because they're in housing court make about \$17,000 a year. They cannot afford to live in the newly built apartments that are going to be coming in. This is a big issue. The preferential loopholes exist. That's part of the problem that has been exacerbated by inaction in Albany.

Carmen R.: We are pushing for 2019 to be the year with a Democratic state senate where we can finally close some of these loopholes. The preferential rent loopholes are real. I've signed preferential leases, and the reality is that some landlords are using that as a tool to say, "You can have this apartment for \$1,000," and then when the lease is up, they say, "Well now your year is up. You need to give me \$3,000." For someone who's on Social Security income or is working at a fast food restaurant, there is no way that a person can sustain such an increase, and so they are forced to move out of the community. What we don't want to see is residents to feel forced out because of this preferential rent loophole. I support legislation. I am co-sponsor of the legislation that closes the preferential rent loophole, and I've spoken on the floor in Albany of the importance of closing these loopholes for my community.

Elinor T.: Now what is your position on the legalization of marijuana and its impact on the judicial system?

Carmen R.: You know, I am in favor of the legalization of marijuana for the reason that I feel that right now, young men and women of color are being targeted by the criminal justice system for the recreational use of marijuana. I'm not someone who advocates for drug use, but I do feel that when we see that in this criminal justice system, the people that are being targeted are minorities and people who would live in my community, then I feel that we have to do something to bring balance to that system. The legalization of marijuana, statistics show that most Americans have used marijuana recreationally in their adolescence. I think that there has to be programs so that our youth are not drawn to drug use; we've seen what's happening with the opioid epidemic, but I think that we cannot target communities of color. With the legalization of marijuana, we will see that there will be a decrease in arrests made in our community, stop-and-frisks, and other practices because now using marijuana won't be as penalized.

Elinor T.: Three-quarters of Inwood's almost 40,000 residents are Latino, and Inwood contains the highest concentration of Dominican residents in the city; in fact, 175th Street and Broadway was recently declared "Little Dominican Republic." How will your office work to project Inwood from the negative impacts of gentrification?

Carmen R.: Well I'm a Dominican immigrant: I immigrated from the Dominican Republic when I was just a baby, and I'm so proud of the community and the impact that the Dominican community has left in Upper Manhattan. I think that that designation of Little Dominican Republic was something that made sense. Everyone already calls it Little Dominican Republic because everyone knows you can get the best rice and beans, the best oxtail, and all the good foods that are natural to the Dominican community, but I

think that the issue of the displacement of the Dominican community is a serious issue. In my district, for example, about 77% of the 72nd District was made up of Dominican Latino immigrants. I am sure that in the next census, we will see a change. I am concerned about the displacement of the community because we made and built a home there. My office has lawyers that come to our office for free; they serve the community. When a person is in housing court, they can come to my office and receive services to make sure that that eviction is halted and that they know their rights.

Carmen R.: I think a lot of this is about educating our community so that they understand that they do not have to just accept, for example, a buyout from a landlord who says to them, "Here's \$15,000. Give me your apartment." It's something real. When you talk about working class New Yorkers and working class immigrants, authority plays a big role in the decisions they make in their life. We want to make sure that people are educated. I have legislation that informs tenants when a buyout has happened in their building. What we're seeing with gentrification and the force of gentrification is the flipping of buildings. A landlord will buy my building today. Two months later, they sell it for a larger profit. I think that residents need to be informed, and I drafted legislation to inform tenants of their rights when their building has been bought.

Carmen R.: We're encouraging the creation of tenants associations so people can gather and talk about the patterns of abuse or neglect that they see in their buildings and be empowered. It's a movement to empower the voices of tenants to prevent the displacement of our community.

Elinor T.: Now, like most neighborhoods in Manhattan, you can't help but see the empty storefronts, and that is especially true in your district on Broadway in particular.

Carmen R.: Yes.

Elinor T.: How do you suggest or do you plan to attract and leep local business owners?

Carmen R.: Well, part of the discussion around the rezoning was just that: how do we make sure that our small businesses feel that they are supported? Commercial rent control is something that's been talked a lot about recently. I look forward to going back to Albany and engaging in those discussions. I think it's important for us to make sure that small businesses know that we appreciate them. In my district, the nightlife is the third largest employer after New York Presbyterian Hospital and the nonprofit sector. We know that these small businesses are not only keeping that vibrancy of our communities, but also they're keeping our families employed. Working in the assembly to make sure that small businesses, minority-owned businesses are able to compete and are able to stay is a priority. We're working with the Small Business Administration; also, I've brought a few workshops to help businesses improve their business plans, to help them have access to legal services if they are being displaced, and oftentimes we've even gotten on the phones with landlords who refused to renew leases to say, "This is a long-standing business, and we would appreciate your consideration of a renewal of their lease."

Carmen R.: Everything from as detailed as going in there and helping them negotiate a lease to giving them the tools to do that for themselves is really important.

Elinor T.: Thank you so much for being with us today.

Carmen R.: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Elinor T.: Thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. The general election is Tuesday, November 6th. For more information on voting, locating your poll site, and all the candidates, you can visit our website racetorepresent.com, or the League of Women Voters website lwvny.org. Thank you for watching Race to Represent on Manhattan Neighborhood Network.