

## **Amol Jethwani's Final Statement to Brown Girl Magazine**

In November of 2017, at a meeting of young local organizers from the [Alachua County Young Democrats](#), a concern over the [Florida House of Representatives District 21](#) seat was raised. At the time, we believed that there was no viable candidate in the Democratic primary capable of mounting a substantive bid against Republican incumbent, Chuck Clemons. At the time, I served as the political director of [UF College Democrats](#) and the deputy director of political affairs for the executive board of [The Florida College Democrats](#), and as an eager local organizer, I was searching for a campaign to work on, and was rising in the ranks of a local school board race.

By December, with no candidate mounting a serious offensive with a chance at the seat, I met again with my friends in local organizing circles who suggested that I mount a bid for the seat. As a young local organizer, with bold progressive values and my unique intersection of perspectives as the result of my life experiences and identities, I am one of many young, POC, queer, children of immigrants who embody the future of the progressive movement and the Democratic Party. I began to think it was time to act on the idea that I need to be the change I want to see in the world around me in a capacity greater than I ever had before. So, I took the first critical step in running for office as an LGBTQ Indian-American millennial, I went to the mandir and then went to ask for my parents blessing, support, and approval of my candidacy.

My parents have been incredibly supportive and progressive over the course of my life. And they have demonstrated that even as you grow older, you can still learn to be more accepting, more progressive, and believe more in the hope of a progressive future. When I came out to my parents in the 9th grade, they accepted me wholeheartedly and that night ordered books off amazon to read up on how to be better equipped as parents of a gay/queer child.

Growing up, my dad would wake up at 5:00 am to go open his gas station, and then later my mom's therapy clinic, before coming home to pick me up and drive me to school, where I would arrive as early as possible. My parents fought to get me in a magnet program to secure the best education possible for me and committed to driving the 25 minutes each morning across Ocala to drive me to elementary, middle, and high school until I could drive. I would not be where I am in life without their sacrifices. My parents have encouraged my activism. They caved when I protested going to Seaworld over their orca captivity program. I remember my dad turning around from inside the Seaworld parking lot, with our visiting relatives from Singapore. And so, I sat them down in the living room and explained the sense of urgency I still feel about the state of our democracy, the fate of the environment, the safety of my peers in our classrooms, in addition to so many other daunting issues. And it was with their blessing that I reached out to my first campaign manager.

January was our first official month in the campaign. In the first week, a local organizer met with me to let me know that my primary opponent, [now the Democratic nominee](#), would be entering the race and would be mounting a serious challenge for the seat. In our collective opinion at the time, [he] represented more of the same that has been run in this district unsuccessfully for the entirety of the past decade. In the second

week, we launched our [Facebook](#) page. By the third, [we] received paperwork from the Florida Department of State allowing us to open a bank account and raise funds for the campaign. Eager to raise funds to purchase immediate necessities, I reached out to a family friend who is a physician and staunch Democrat who agreed to a meeting. After finishing class and tabling for the UF College Democrats in the Plaza, I was driving to pick up my campaign manager (CM) to head to the meeting, when my closest friend called to inform [me] that a close friend from high school had taken her own life after struggling with her mental health. I was visibly off when I picked up my CM, who immediately noticed.

For the remainder of the day I was off and raised only 25% of [my] goal. I then learned the first hard lesson of “candidate-ing.” Your time is not your own time—it belongs to the campaign first. What is left at the end of everything else is your time and only in that time can you de-compartmentalize. It sounds harsh—and it is—but as hard as it was, I knew my CM was right. Time is a precious commodity on campaigns and by the next morning I had compartmentalized.

I mourned my friend Fellize at her funeral, which was emotionally intensive because I didn't have the time to mentally prepare myself beforehand. My friends and I continue to remember her through her art, her favorite music, and our memories. Mental health had already been a priority for me, having had my own experience with counseling at UF after I was sexually assaulted at a college party and participating in protests on campus to increase funding for our Counseling and Wellness Center as well as fighting for the introduction of a better sexual assault reporting system called Callisto at UF. But then we began brainstorming ideas of legislation to honor Fellize, who had been a fierce advocate for increasing mental health resources, and [we] channeled our emotions to honor her through action and legislation.

In light of [Jason Kander's recent article about mental health](#), campaigning is a toll on a candidate and their team. The stress, excitement, fast-paced nature of campaigning builds a pressure cooker of energy and stress that I had to learn to work through using meditation, focused breathing, and self-care. That still wasn't enough always though. By mid-June I had developed stress-induced eczema but was still forging on. Candidates often put self-care to the side while running, and that is a sacrifice I am familiar with.

In February, we had our first major fundraiser, yielding a fierce \$15,000. Our campaign gained overnight respect from prominent Alachua County Democrats, as well as our primary opponents. I became aware of this transition when I attended the kickoff of a state senate race, where for the first-time, prominent community members were introducing themselves to me, rather than the other way around. I was excited that we were receiving attention, but it was very off-putting that the indicator for viability was cash on hand. February featured our kick off party as well as a building period for our team, which peaked at 50 volunteer interns.

In March, the [March For Our Lives](#) movement of demanding common sense gun reform swept the nation, and it was at the March for Our Lives Gainesville event that I gave the [most important speech](#) of my campaign. My public and open commitment to championing progressive values, fighting the NRA alongside [Moms Demand Action](#) and [Indivisible](#), and running a campaign fueled by passion and courage. The day after the [MSD shooting](#), I was at the Capitol in Tallahassee, meeting with the [representative I was trying to unseat](#), demanding change and common sense gun reform. Later this summer, I worked to build a coalition of residents across Alachua county to host the [March for Our Lives Road to Change event for Alachua County/Congressional District 3](#), [which was] a huge success in voter registration and getting Gainesville fired up for the upcoming elections.

**Over the course of the campaign it was often suggested, or even outright asked , that I step aside or wait for my turn. But I chose to press on because I believe in the values I bring to the work I do and my dedication to be the change I want to see.** After losing the primary, it was my responsibility to endorse the nominee and support his candidacy. [It was] something I did with pride, even though we had differences of opinion on common sense gun reform and other key issues. Twenty years of Republican mismanagement in Florida has made it clear that it is time for a Blue Wave.

I am incredibly thankful and humbled by the support I have received from people of so many different backgrounds, who believed in me and the values and policy initiatives I am fighting for. This campaign sparked an interest in local organizing for different pockets of the *desi* community across North Central Florida that I hope to help foster into a powerful grassroots movement. We [are seeing] the *desi* community begin to enter into the realm of Democratic politics in greater numbers than ever before. I am proud of the work we have done to enfranchise hundreds of first-time *desi* voters, student voters, and build a volunteer force emerging from a diverse cross section of the State House District. I believe I was successful in my pursuit of aiding the ignition, from the spark of the trauma of the 2016 election, to increase energy in fighting for progressive values and ensuring that communities fight for the seats at the table that they deserve.

The campaign pressed on through the summer and over its course, I had incredible experiences meeting my personal heroes Senator [Kamala Harris](#), Senator [Cory Booker](#), Mayor [Andrew Gillum](#), and [Nikki Fried](#). Through grassroots organizing, hundreds of *desi* Americans voted in the primary election, and a passion for increasing our community's representation has been sparked. I am extremely humbled to have had the privilege of running for office as well as the learning opportunity of being a candidate for office. Picking up where the campaign coalition building left off, I am fired up to organize for the Democratic ticket on the ballot this November.