

The world according to Sophia: Travis ready to prove herself
(Extra)Ordinary

By Kurt Van der Dussen

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Sophia Travis inherited an accordion from her grandfather, who was Finnish. Staff photo by Jeremy Hogan
When the Monroe County Council convenes for its first work session of 2005 on Tuesday and its first regular meeting on Jan. 11, there's not much question who'll get the most attention.



It'll be Sophia Travis, one of three Democrats elected to the council on Nov. 2.

Old warhorse Warren Henegar will prompt laughs with his folksy humor, and Michael Woods will win respect for his attention to detail. But Travis will arrive with the most public awareness.

The reason: A single ill-advised remark by a Republican opponent a month before the election that may well have guaranteed Travis not just the election but also her race-leading vote total.

In taking the offensive against the Democratic slate at the Farm Bureau's candidate forum, GOP council candidate Andy Dodds dismissed Travis' qualifications to serve with "She plays the accordion. That says enough," as if that automatically disqualified her from any "serious" endeavor.

Travis said last week she'd been expecting some such crack at some point in the campaign because accordionists live with it.

"Anyone who plays the accordion has to have a good humor," she said with a tolerant smile. So she said she'd already prepared herself "with quips and comebacks," though she decided not to fall back on any that night.

She said Dodds' remark didn't hurt even though she considers herself a sensitive person. She said that despite the impression she knows her soft voice and youthful visage convey, "I'm actually a very, very tough person.

"I'm a very fearless person," she said. "You have to be fearless to play the accordion" because of the dismissive public perception of the instrument, and "you have to be fearless to be a politician" because it takes courage. And she made clear she'll not be afraid to ask a lot of questions, some of them tough, on the council.

Travis' first 18 years were a continuous training in toughness. Born in Omaha into a family in which dad was a career Air Force man, the family was moving all the time. She rattled off 10 places in the U.S., Germany and Finland where she lived while growing up.

"I went to four high schools," she said.

As the daughter of a Finnish father and a Korean mother, she treasures her biracial, bicultural heritage and says her sensitivity to the need for diversity in public representation was a major factor in getting her to run for office.

"For all you Korean Finns out there," you now have someone to represent you, she quipped.

In 1984 she came to Indiana University to major in East Asian Studies. After graduating, she stayed in Bloomington and entered the IU School of Music to seek a master's degree in early music, but never finished it.

Meanwhile, she'd met "my soulmate," Greg, in 1985. They were friends for several years, then started "becoming romantic" in 1990. They finally married seven years ago and moved into the historic old 1850s Ketcham House on Fluck Mill Road six years ago.

There is one thing Travis is afraid of: That the whole accordion thing will overshadow her efforts to serve on the council.

To begin with, Travis is a serious professional musician who also is a skilled classical pianist and harpsichordist. The big old home she and Greg share with four cats and a love-sick beagle is a repository of 19th-century pianos and a grand old harpsichord, all of which she says no piano tuner she knows wants to take on, plus several vintage electronic organs and her arsenal of accordions.

She owns three, has five on loan, and three or four that are broken and need parts.

Surprisingly, she didn't even start playing the accordion until 1992. But despite its complexity — all those dozens of tiny buttons the left-hand fingers must push to activate different sounds while the right hand plays the keyboard in what she called "a one-man band" — she mastered it quickly.

She plays it at all sorts of occasions, of which many are formal affairs for which she is well paid. She has done a Bach piece as a wedding processional. She is in high demand for special events across the Midwest that require German or Italian music.

"I've played on every stage at the music school," she said of her professional performances.

Beyond that, she produces CDs, writes and sings pop songs, free-lances articles on music and has a bent toward philanthropy. For example, a year ago she was instrumental (no pun intended) in helping IU's Wylie House acquire a 1795 fortepiano.

But the music she has brought both individually and in groups such as Bloomington Squeeze to the poor and to prisoners gives her at least as much satisfaction. She said she has become familiar with every part of the county jail because of playing there over the years, something she thinks will be an asset on the county council.

She said she knows firsthand of social needs. "I've had friends who were living in a car or in a warehouse due to situational factors," she said. And she says she'll bring knowledge of social services needs to the council.

"Through music, everything comes together for me," she said. "People, shared experience, and an eternal way to utilize one's talents, hard work, and seemingly disparate themes surprisingly converge. I believe musicality and musicianship parlay to politics quite well for the same reasons," she maintained.

Interestingly, just two years ago she wouldn't have seen herself in politics. She remembers the first time it was suggested to her: She'd spoken at an anti-I-69 event at City Hall, and city Clerk Regina Moore urged her to think about running for office.

"I just thought, 'Are you lunatics?'" Travis laughed. But Moore and other Democrats kept after her and last winter she filed for the council. "A huge part of the decision was simply being asked," she said.

The rest is history. In the May primary she led the field among the four Democrats seeking the three council-at-large slots on the fall ballot, then led the council balloting in November.

And when she takes her seat Tuesday, she'll hardly be the first professional musician to sit there. There was another in the 1990s, a fella named Al Cobine.

Reporter Kurt Van der Dussen can be reached at 331-4372 or by e-mail at kvd@heraldt.com.

Sophia Travis, who was elected in November to an at-large seat on the Monroe County Council, said the house where she now lives is where she plans to grow old. Staff photo by Jeremy Hogan



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