

Georgia on Their Mind

STAFFERS FOR PETER DEFAZIO WORKED DOOR TO DOOR IN GEORGIA TO HELP DEMOCRATS WIN BACK THE U.S. SENATE

By Emily Topping

It had been a long few days walking through the neighborhoods of Savannah, Georgia, and the miles were starting to catch up to Sierra Dameron. The field director for Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio, Dameron had traveled all the way from Eugene with five other Oregon organizers to urge Georgia residents to vote in the critical Jan. 5 Senate run-off elections.

The two Georgia races had the potential to put the Senate back in the hands of the Democratic Party, ensuring that incoming President Joe Biden's legislative agenda had a chance of passing Congress.

By the end of their trip, the team had covered more than 60 miles on foot and 1,800 miles by car across three separate counties. Still, they knew they couldn't slow down until the polls closed on Jan. 5.

The two potential Democratic senators, Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock, would have to fight a decades-long history of voter suppression to mobilize Georgians, specifically Black and low-income voters, to defeat the two Republican incumbents.

In the week before the election, Dameron spent hours working her way through a stretch of low-income neighborhoods near Savannah, guided by an app Democratic field organizers use to track their progress. She could see who was registered to vote, which homes had already been canvassed and which might need a second visit to offer residents a ride to the polls. According to the app, the home she walked up to now housed four adult residents, only one of whom had cast their ballot.

"Hi, ma'am," Dameron said as the door opened. She made sure to adjust her face mask and stand a few feet apart from the entryway. After confirming that the woman had already voted, Dameron asked her to remind the other members of the household, listing their names.

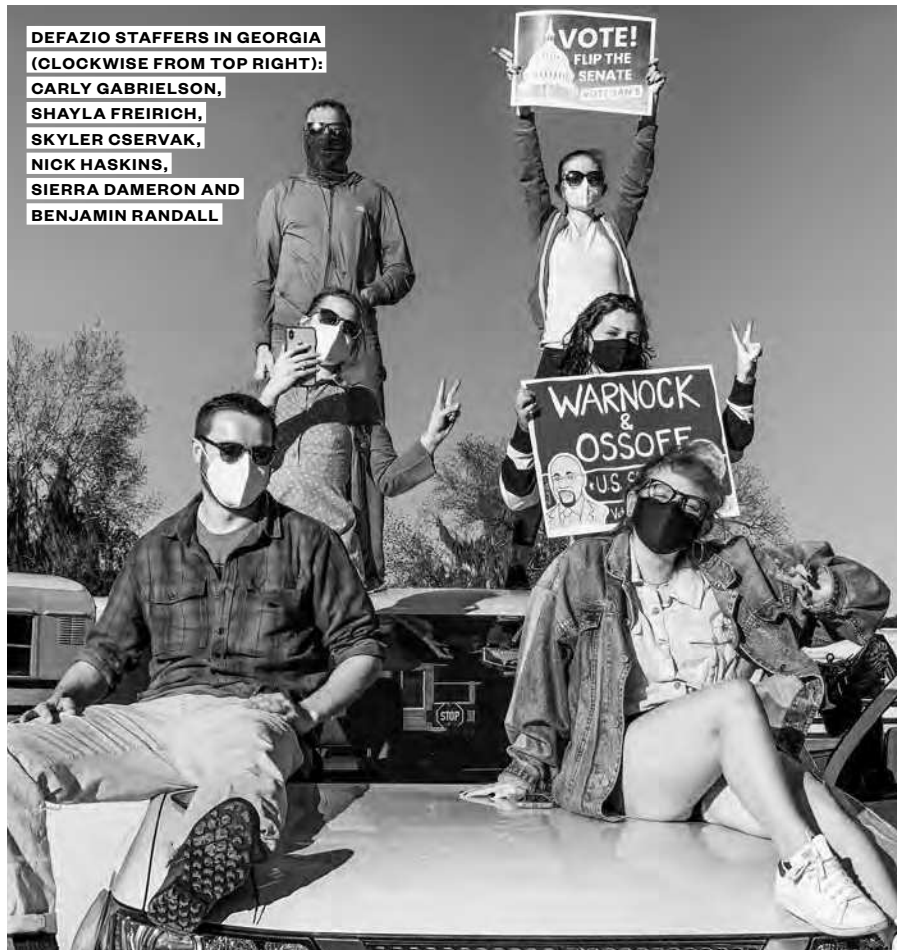
"Oh, honey," said the older Black woman holding the door, shaking her head. "All of them have passed away in the last two months from COVID." She asked Dameron to please update her records.

Georgia has been hit particularly hard by the pandemic — the state shattered its single-day record of cases on Jan. 8 with nearly 13,000 new infections. The death rate in the state is 109 per 100,000 people, compared to Oregon's 41.

Part of the issue stems from a lack of statewide direction. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp originally barred local municipalities from enacting mask mandates at the beginning of the pandemic. Although he eventually reversed the order in August 2020, allowing cities and counties to impose stricter COVID-19 safety measures if they choose, private businesses and restaurants can opt out.

At the same time, lack of a strong federal relief program means that many Georgians — much like residents of other states — have been forced to continue working. Racial and class inequalities also mean that certain groups, like Black people and those below the poverty line, are at much higher risk.

Reporting from the *Washington Post* shows that one in three Black people in the United States know someone who's died of COVID. In Georgia, where 32 percent of the



population is Black, the disparities are staggering.

"It was very difficult to come from Oregon, where we have these restrictions to keep us safe," Dameron says, "to see how these people's lives are so affected."

Dameron says the pandemic seemed to be the number one issue concerning voters, along with wealth inequality and disenfranchisement. Minimum wage in Georgia is \$5.15 an hour, and many voters said they struggled each month to pay rent.

Oftentimes, when Dameron and her team knocked on doors, they discovered residents who were unable to vote in the first place because of past criminal histories.

"I'd say a third of the people I spoke to were disenfranchised, a lot of times from drug cases," she says. In Georgia, strict drug laws mean that possession of more than an ounce of marijuana is considered a felony. Felons are barred from voting until the completion of their sentence, meaning some people Dameron spoke to, who were unable to pay their legal fees from past cases, hadn't voted in 20 years.

Carly Gabrielson, DeFazio's campaign manager and a 2013 University of Oregon graduate who joined the trip, says their main goal was not to get in the way of the work that local activists have been putting in for years.

"It was remarkable to see the broad coalition building, whether in religious circles or communal circles," Gabrielson says. She thanks Stacey Abrams, Georgia's former House minority leader, for the years of grass-roots activism to get voters to the polls. "People were so excited and determined, despite all of the barriers."

Dameron was brought to tears by the determination of one woman, who drove more than four hours one way from Savannah to Atlanta to pick up her daughter's ballot and return it to her home county. Other voters

were excited to even see activists touring their area — one woman, whose house sat at the end of a winding, rural road, said she'd never met a political organizer in her 20 years of living there.

"Georgia has proven that groups of people can come together and change," Gabrielson says. "We're seeing such an incredible expansion in the South and elsewhere with more people of color, and more young people who realize they have a role to play."

Final counts as of Jan. 16 show that the organizers' hard work paid off: Democrat Ossoff defeated incumbent David Perdue by 55,232 votes, and Rev. Warnock defeated Kelly Loeffler by 93,550. The election of two long-shot Senate seats in Georgia, the first Democrats elected to the Senate from Georgia since 2000, means both houses of the United States Congress are now blue.

Organizers in Georgia, however, did not have much time to celebrate their incredible victory on Jan. 5 — a day before the attack on the U.S. Capitol building.

Gabrielson, Dameron and the rest of their team were still in Georgia, at separate Airbnbs and hotels, when news of the attack broke.

"The Warnock race had just been called and we were feeling the jubilation of that moment, and then suddenly realized this awful event is unfolding in D.C.," Gabrielson says. Members of DeFazio's team quickly convened in one hotel room to watch the news together.

"We were able to contact Peter. He understood that the president's supporters were being goaded on, and this is incredibly dangerous," Gabrielson says. DeFazio was evacuated from the Capitol building and soon confirmed to his staff that he was safe. In an interview with OPB, DeFazio describes anticipating the chaos and going to REI and purchasing bear spray to defend himself.

For Gabrielson, who once worked as an intern at the U.S. House of Representatives, it felt surreal to see a place she holds in such high regard being overrun by domestic terrorists.

"Like a lot of folks, we were devastated and then infuriated," she says. "They're desecrating a sacred space."

Dameron described the air in the crowded hotel room as one of overwhelming sadness. "We were grateful that we could be there for each other," she says.

Since returning home from Georgia, members of DeFazio's team haven't had much opportunity to reflect on their significant success. Political organizers are already looking to the 2022 midterms and opportunities to replicate their victories across the U.S.

In the immediate future, Gabrielson and Dameron look forward to working with a blue Senate to achieve Biden's "100 days agenda," which includes tackling the coronavirus with the distribution of 100 million vaccines, as well as steps to overhaul climate policy.

"We're entering a period of reckoning and rebuilding," Dameron says. "I think the past four years have certainly done a number on the fabric of our democracy, but the individual threads are so strong." ■