

Cherelle Parker is proud of her West Oak Lane roots. As mayor, could she save Philly’s ‘middle neighborhoods’? | Meet the candidates

Cherelle Parker is running for mayor with a mission to help preserve the “village” that raised her and other neighborhoods like it.



Former City Councilmember Cherelle Parker is one of the top Democratic candidates for mayor.
Anton Klusener/ Staff illustration/ Staff photos

by Sean Collins Walsh
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When Cherelle Parker arrived at the Parkway Program high school in Center City, her life could have gone either way.

She was a tall, athletic, and spunky teen who wore pink track suits, smoked cigarettes, and wasn’t all that interested in school, a former teacher said. Her neighborhood was being torn apart by drugs, and Parker’s

outward confidence belied devastating traumas, including the loss of her mother at 11.

Parker made it that far thanks to her “village,” as she puts it — her grandparents and neighbors in her West Oak Lane neighborhood. And she went a lot further thanks to a speech.

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“I, Cherelle Parker, was a child that most people thought would never succeed,” Parker declared in the address, which won her a School District-wide oratorical competition in 1990, made newspaper headlines, and reportedly reduced adults to tears. “You know? They almost had me thinking the same thing.”

She went on a tour of churches as a high school senior, and spoke in front of City Council. There she met the trailblazing Black Philadelphia politician Marian Tasco, who mentored Parker through a career that saw her become a state representative and Council majority leader.

Parker is now [running for mayor](#) with a mission to help preserve the village that raised her and others like it. She calls them “middle neighborhoods” — proud, blue-collar areas stuck between the extremes of poverty and wealth, and struggling to hang on. Middle-class Black neighborhoods have been shrinking in cities across the country as some families fall into poverty and others flee to the suburbs.

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Parker said that she remembers the “deep-rooted sense of pride that people in my neighborhood had about owning their house, cleaning their neighborhood, and what made people want to move there.”

“To have a neighborhood of choice, you needed a good public school, you needed a quality recreation center. We had our spiritual institutions there,” she said. “We had a solid community.”

The question is whether Parker could restore that sense of pride and save those neighborhoods as mayor.

All of the major candidates in [the crowded May 16 Democratic primary](#) for mayor have said they want to improve city services in neighborhoods across the city. But Parker's story and her focus on quality-of-life issues set her apart from most of her rivals.

Philly mayoral candidate Chelle Parker's 'home' was more than a building

A Lincoln University graduate with a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Parker is a political moderate, but her ideology doesn't fit neatly onto the usual left-right spectrum. She believes strong government intervention is needed to correct historical injustices and provide opportunities for working families. But she also wants to save others from "the lack of dignity" her family experienced when her grandmother had to enroll in welfare programs that offered cash assistance and food stamps.

"I remember purple 20s and green 10s and brown dollars," Parker, who is 50 and lives in Mount Airy, said in an interview. "People who receive [public assistance] don't like it. I hated it. I saw what it did to my grandmother's spirit."

Those stances have put her at odds with some in the city's rising progressive movement, including [State Rep. Chris Rabb](#) (D., Philadelphia). Rabb is the only elected official who has recently won office in areas typically dominated by candidates from the [Northwest coalition](#), the vaunted Black political organization that launched Tasco's career and, in turn, Parker's.

Rabb said that he doesn't doubt Parker's commitment to her neighborhood and others like it. But he noted that she has never won an election without being the Democratic establishment's anointed candidate, and questioned whether that makes her the community's best representative.

"She's not a grassroots candidate," Rabb said. "She's never won in a [seriously] contested race and therefore never had to build bridges with folks outside of her political camp."

Endorsements from Parker, who is the 50th Ward's Democratic leader, and other officials in the Northwest coalition were key to [Mayor Jim Kenney's 2015 victory](#), a move Rabb thinks reflects poorly on her now.

"She was the biggest proponent of Jim Kenney other than Jim Kenney," Rabb said. "You can say many things about Jim Kenney. Being a bold visionary is not one of them."

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Teacher to majority leader

Parker started interning for Tasco while she was still in high school. After briefly working as an English teacher in New Jersey, she landed a full-time job working on [Tasco's Council staff](#) and eventually rose up the ranks to lead the office.

In 2004, she ran for state representative and won with her powerful mentor's backing. Tasco refers to Parker as her "daughter."

Parker spent a decade in Harrisburg and came away with some of the biggest legislative victories of her career — as well as the most significant blemish.

In 2011, she was elected chair of the Philadelphia delegation in the House. Months later, she was arrested for [driving under the influence](#) after being pulled over driving the wrong way on a one-way street in Germantown. She was convicted and unsuccessfully [appealed the case](#) several times.

But Parker’s colleagues stood by her, and she helped secure passage of several pieces of legislation for the city despite serving in a House controlled by Republicans. In 2014, for instance, Parker helped pass a bill to prevent mass layoffs of Philadelphia teachers by enacting a [\\$2-per-pack city tax on cigarettes](#).

[Council President Darrell Clarke](#), who got to know Parker well during those years, praised her for shepherding legislation that provided property tax relief to Philadelphia homeowners.

“It would not have been able to happen, frankly speaking, had she not been able to reach across the aisle,” Clarke said.

On paper, Clarke and Parker are unlikely allies. Clarke was a protégé to John F. Street, the former Council president and mayor. Street often clashed with Tasco, and Clarke defeated Tasco when he was elected Council president in 2012.

But as Clarke put it, “those issues had to do more with our former employers than Cherelle Parker’s relationship with Darrell Clarke.”

Parker won Tasco’s North and Northwest Philadelphia-based 9th District seat on Council in 2015 [when Tasco retired](#). On Council, she has largely focused on issues specific to her district, while also pushing to increase government contracting opportunities for minority-owned businesses and clean up neighborhood commercial corridors across the city.

Clarke didn’t stand in the way in 2019 when Parker maneuvered to [oust then-Councilmember Bobby Henon](#) from his role as majority leader while he was under indictment on federal bribery charges. That made her the No. 2 lawmaker in Council.

“Her ability to move from legislative body to legislative body and her relatively quick ascension to leadership in City Council is something that is not normal,” Clarke said.

Kitchen-table issues

Tina Covington’s dining room had a popcorn ceiling, paintings of flowers on the walls, and a tea kettle on the shelf. As her guests finished snacking on hoagies and chips, Covington picked up their plates off her white tablecloth and threw them out.

The place was spotless. It was very much Cherelle Parker’s Philadelphia.

Covington, who worked with Parker in Tasco's office, had invited about a dozen neighbors over to her West Philadelphia home on a recent Saturday for a coffee klatch so they could hear Parker's pitch. All of the guests were Black, and only one was a man.

In a green dress and gold earrings, Parker began with the customary Philadelphia introductions of which high schools everyone went to — “We're Hilltoppers,” one woman said — before moving on to her proposal to keep schools open year-round from 7 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

“Every child is not born into a family that allows them the opportunity to be a child,” she said. “We're going to give them the structure, the play, this thing called Roblox,” a computer programming game, she said.

She hit on her plans to get more people access to the good-paying jobs in building trades unions, to financially assist low-income families with home repairs, and to revitalize neighborhood commercial corridors — all policies designed to provide some stability for the village.

“Government's role is to make sure you have access to opportunity,” Parker said. “Government is supposed to be able to take away any excuse you have why you can't make it.”

As the discussion was winding down, 46-year-old Melanie Wroten, who had been sitting quietly, suddenly spoke up.

“I'm so afraid in this city to the point that I don't go anywhere,” said Wroten, a hair stylist.

Having already talked about her [“community policing” plan](#) — hiring 300 police officers with a focus on walking the beat and getting to know neighbors — Parker answered by saying the city needs more therapists who can work with those traumatized by gun violence.

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Wroten said she was undecided about the mayor's race before the event but came away ready to vote for Parker.

“She spoke highly of having more cops patrolling the streets and making it a safer place, and that's something that's very important to me,” she said. “If that's something that's in the forefront of something major for her to resolve, hey, I'll be in Philadelphia forever.”

Before leaving, Parker held up a check from one guest — “This is how we stay on TV!” — and complimented Covington on her home.

“Look at the architectural details,” she said. “This is what I'm talking about.”

Literary inspiration

In her award-winning speech as a teenager, Parker described how discovering Black literature gave her hope that she could rise above her circumstances. That discovery happened in the classroom of Parkway teacher Jeanette Jimenez.

The first book Parker fell in love with was *The Street*, a novel by Ann Petry that tells the story about a down-on-her-luck woman who suffers a range of insults and injuries while trying to get by in Harlem. Jimenez recounted teaching one passage to illustrate how the author afforded the main character, Lutie Johnson, some dignity despite her many troubles.

“Her high heels are clicking, and that sound of those high heels was the sound of strength — that she could hear herself, and she existed, and she existed to show up in a certain way and say a certain thing and not be just flirted with and tossed around,” Jimenez said.

Jimenez said reading Black literature allowed Parker to see herself in the characters. Eventually, her confidence grew to the point where she was curiosity expanded.

“One day Cherelle — I’ll never forget — looked at me straight in the eye, and said, ‘I think now I’m ready to read those white classic books they want me to read,’” Jimenez said. “She clicked that she was part of the bigger world.”

African American literature remains Parker’s true love, and she named her 10-year-old son Langston, after the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes.

Like Lutie Johnson, Parker seemed to encounter tragedy at almost every juncture of her young life. She credited Jimenez with helping her to cope with and channel that sense of loss into the speech that changed her life.

“I probably should have talked to somebody about all that loss — my dad not being there, my mom dying early, my grandmother dying — I never talked to anybody about that,” she said. “So thank God for having adults around and, quite frankly, adopted mothers and fathers who would push me and encourage me.”

In other words, thank God for the village.

Staff writers Anna Orso and Julia Terruso contributed to this article.

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