

Will ex-Montrealer Kamala Harris be the one to unseat Donald Trump?

Many think former Westmount High student and U.S. Senator Kamala Harris could be the one to give Trump a run for his money in 2020.



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A former Westmount High student could prevent U.S. President Donald Trump from winning a second term in 2020. Senator Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) is considered by many to be a potential candidate to give Trump a run for his money.

At a time when the Democratic Party is looking for a new identity, some betting websites have placed her in front of the Democratic nomination. Mother Jones, a current-affairs magazine, recently argued that she is "one of the Democrats who could beat Trump in the 2020 presidential election." In 2015, the Washington Post ran a profile of her under the headline: Is Kamala Harris the next Barack Obama?

Yet very few people know of her connection to Montreal.

Wanda Kagan, now a co-ordinator at the Jewish General Hospital's internal medicine department, fondly remembers Harris, who she said was her best friend and with whom she founded a troupe of six dancers called "Midnight Magic." The future politician wrote in the 1981 Westmount yearbook that dancing with the troupe was her favourite pastime.

"We used to play at community centres for seniors, or we danced at fundraisers. Outside school, dance took up a lot of her time," Kagan said in an interview.

After graduating high school, Harris returned to the U.S. Kagan, who hasn't seen her in years, got a phone call from a friend in 2009, telling her to watch the Oprah Winfrey Show. She was surprised to see her childhood friend, then a San Francisco district attorney who had just published a book, being interviewed.

"Anyone would be surprised to see her girlfriend be interviewed by Oprah," Kagan said. "But in reality, I'm not surprised at what she's accomplished, because she's a fighter. She's strong, independent and has always fought for the rights of others."

That desire to fight for social justice goes back a long way.

At 13, Harris held a demonstration in front of the building where she lived in Montreal, her sister Maya said in an interview with the San Francisco Gate in 2012. Furious that the building owner had forbidden children to play on the lawn, the teenager convinced other youth to demonstrate with her. She and her friends changed the owner's mind.

That anecdote doesn't surprise Montrealer Trevor Williams, who knew both sisters well. He was Maya's boyfriend for two years when they were teens. He describes the Harris sisters as studious and popular.

"They always had the best grades of their class. Everything seemed so easy for them," he recalled. "They succeeded because they worked hard and their mother was very strict. Often, while the rest of us went to the movies, the sisters had to stay home to study."

About 40 years later, Harris is fighting in Congress. She was elected to the Senate in 2016 and sits on the intelligence committee to shed light on Russian interference during the election campaign. She has the wind in her sails, especially since she shook Justice Minister Jeff Sessions in June when he was questioned before the committee. Pushed to the last limits by the incessant questions of the elect, Sessions declared: "It makes me nervous to be so pressed with questions." Since then, she has been constantly attracting attention.



U.S. Senator Kamala Harris, D-Calif., arrives at a rally of health care advocates, grassroots activists, and others outside the Capitol in Washington Sept. 19, 2017. **ANDREW HARNIK / AP**

Harris — whose father is Jamaican and a professor of economics and whose mother is an Indian researcher who specializes in breast cancer — was born in Oakland, Calif., in 1964.

In the mid-1970s, her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, was hired as a professor at McGill University and as a researcher at the Jewish General Hospital. Separated from her husband, she moved to Quebec and enrolled her daughters at Westmount High School.

Harris pursued further study in the United States. She earned a degree in economics and political science from Howard University in Washington before completing a PhD at the University of California. She was elected attorney-general of San Francisco in 2003, a position she held until her election as attorney-general of California in 2011.

Obama drew the spotlight to her, but for the wrong reasons, when he made awkward remarks about her physical appearance during a fundraiser in San Francisco in 2013. The president praised her, portraying her as tough, devoted and brilliant. He added, however, that she was "by far the prettiest person to be the minister of justice of the country." The speech was considered sexist by some and innocuous by others. Obama apologized.

In 2006, he supported her senatorial campaign in California, which she won with 62 per cent of the votes. The support, which was given not only by Obama but by Democratic Party stalwarts like Vice-President Joe Biden and influential representative Nancy Pelosi, combined with her fierce opposition to Trump, fuelled rumours of a presidential candidacy.

Christophe Cloutier-Roy, UQAM's researcher in residence at the Observatory on the United States, said he would be surprised if Harris did not show up in 2020. "Since her arrival in the Senate, against Donald Trump, she voted against most of his bills and appointments. She participates in several fundraising campaigns and raises a lot of money. These are indications that she could run against Trump in 2020."



Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) speaks during a rally for the Dream Act at the U.S. Capitol Oct. 3, 2017. Harris focused on women, families, and the LGBTQ community. *MARK WILSON / GETTY IMAGES*

Not only does Harris have a very good chance at winning the Democratic nomination, she has, according to Cloutier-Roy, the right profile to unify a political party that has been very divided since the last election.

"She is close to establishment, but she also has a good background on issues that are dear to the Democratic base. For example, she defended the rights of migrants when she was a prosecutor. She also defended prison reforms and LGBTQ rights. The support she has given to Bernie Sanders's bill on medical aid for all positions her on the left on social issues."

Harris doesn't only have friends on the American left. Winnie Wong, co-founder of the "People for Bernie" movement, described Harris in an article on the MIC.com website as "the favourite candidate of very rich people and disconnected Democrats."

According to Ginette Chénard, co-president of the Observatory on the United States, there are factors that play against a possible candidacy.

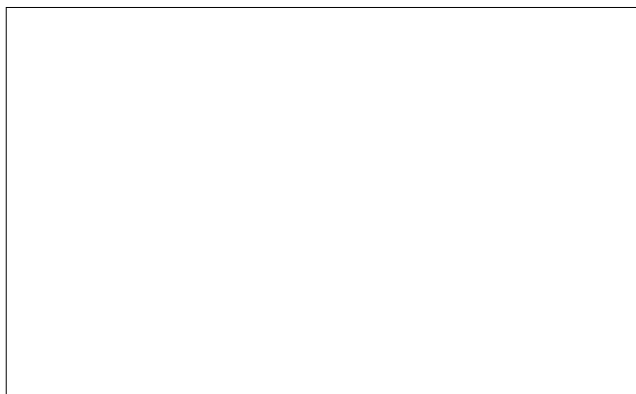
"The Democratic Party has not been able to perceive the anger of the working class, the loss of jobs, the relocation. It's a party that has abandoned the regions," she said. "Will the white working class succeed in convincing her? Harris has been successful in fundraising in New York, but this is not where she should be involved. She should do more than Bernie Sanders, who is crusading in a very active way. I don't see her doing that."

The next Democratic presidential candidate will have to unite the centrists and progressives, and to beat the Republican Party, the aspiring president will also have to re-create the grand coalition of young adults, educated employees, ethnic minorities and blue-collar workers who brought Obama to power.

Harris still has time to put a strategy in place if, of course, she plans to run for president.

When MSNBC host Lawrence O'Donnell questioned her intentions in 2020, she replied, "Lawrence, I do not even know what I'll eat for supper." But that did nothing to silence the rumours.

Harris did not respond to Presse Canadienne's request for an interview.



Whether she is the next presidential candidate, Harris will remain a source of pride for Westmount High. Teacher Sabrina Jafralie is on a mission to get Harris to meet graduating students next year.

"I want to teach them to see beyond the school walls. I want them to understand that they have the potential to accomplish anything. Everything is within their reach. I would like Harris to

10/10/2017

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come and give them a word of encouragement. I want them to understand that those who attend this school can have an impact on the world."

Karen Allen, a guidance counsellor, shares the same enthusiasm. "I am really impressed and excited because I have been walking the corridors of this school for a long time, and I am really proud to see that this black woman, a former student of this school, has gone where she has.

"For our students, having this kind of model is an inspiration, to feel that you can leave the corridors of this school and move up to the most important position in the world, it's very exciting. To be able to offer this kind of model to our students goes beyond our expectations."