

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Nina Schwalbe is one of 10 candidates in the crowded primary congressional race to replace retiring Democratic Rep. Jerry Nadler in NYC's District 12. The Democratic Primary will take place on June 23.

District 12 has been redrawn to include the Upper West Side constituency (former District 10) represented by Nadler since the 1990s, the Upper East Side, and all of Midtown Manhattan. Nina joins us today to talk about her campaign.

NS: Thanks for having me. Glad to be here.

VC: Nina, this is a pretty crowded field. And you've never run for office before. So, what made you decide to throw your hat in the ring?

NS: Well, I did run for office in that I was the president of my high school athletic association so I have run for office before, albeit a while ago... We're losing our democracy, we're losing the systems that keep us safe, from vaccines to abortion, SNAP, science and the basic rule of law. We are in deep trouble. We have measles outbreaks, Ebola outbreaks, and these are warning signs. Measles was a clear warning sign that our public health systems were failing and when your public health systems or basic systems are failing, that means all of your systems are failing. I had never thought I would run for political office, and my decision was really that a year ago, or now a year and a half ago, Trump canceled diversity, equity and inclusion programs, he withdrew from the World Health Organization. 200,000 of my colleagues who work in science, CDC, public services, Department of Education lost their jobs and Congress was doing nothing. I saw the writing on the wall and thought, people have to step up because our political structure is not serving us well. And that's what really motivated me to run.

KK: Wow, that number is mind-blowing. 200,000 have been let go.

NS: Yeah, and that's only a fraction, really, because it's not only Federal employees, it's all the contractors and people that deliver services on behalf of the Federal government. I don't know if we have a truly accurate count... I don't know if we have a truly accurate count with the knock-on effects of those funding's streams stopping affects everybody from community organizations, arts organizations here in New York City that do after-school programs for kids to life-saving HIV programs in Uganda. It's all over the world that stopping that funding has resulted in the direct loss of jobs. And then we have the services that have been lost too, the SNAP services, Medicaid now will be lost to many, the Affordable Care... there's just this ripple effect which is malicious.

KK: I'm glad you're running, that's for sure. Like Vanessa said, you've got 10 other candidates running or trying to get the seat. What sets you apart from, let's call it, the pack?

NS: Yeah. I think there are now eight. A couple of people have dropped out. (VC/KK:Oh, OK, we were talking about that). No, it's OK. There are eight on the ballot in the Democratic primary. I think there's one Republican on the ballot and a couple of independents on the Democratic ballot. I've spent my life delivering lifesaving programs for people around the world. I'm not a career politician; I'm not a celebrity. I don't have a billionaire's checkbook behind me or the legacy Dems I've spent my life working with, through and sometimes lobbying for better government by delivering real programs to real people. It sounds like a big number, and it is, but I've led programs that have delivered literally billions of vaccines around the world. I led the Biden administrations COVID 19 global vaccine distribution program which delivered 500 million plus COVID vaccines to people around the world, so I know how government works. The COVID program that I led, it was at USAID and that's one of the reasons I say that so many of my colleagues... that agency was shuttered. And through that program I worked with lots of other government departments. I worked with the Department of Defense, with the State Department, with the CDC, Health and Human Services. It was an inter-agency, actually part of the National Security Council Inter-Agency Program which also, really let me see first hand how government works, and I saw through that, that passing a bill is just the first stage. And then it's all in the execution of passing the bill. So, we have lots of bills passed that really don't go anywhere and I think that some of the crises that we face in the city—housing, as you know, is the number one crisis in the city—accessibility, the Americans with Disability Acts, we have lots of acts that should be getting money to our city that aren't. How do you know that? You know that because NYCHA repairs on housing aren't being taken care of because the HUD funding that was appropriated by Congress hasn't come through. We know that in our district alone, over 60% of our subways aren't accessible to

people with wheelchairs which is in direct contrast to the Americans with Disabilities Act. So that's another example of Congress passes a law but if you don't follow it through, well, it's just a piece of paper. So that's where my experience I think directly ties to the needs of the district. It's about, you pass the bill, that's one thing but you've got to follow the money and make sure it's delivering to people.

VC: Exactly. So, these are great projects. How do you think your experience with these projects will give you an edge once you're in Congress?

NS: I understand how government works from being inside it and delivering on congressional programs and answering to Congress. We frequently had to go in and speak to Congress and answer to Congress. And I understand how these programs do or don't deliver on the ground. One thing that's been incredibly successful around the world has been, just to give you an example, community scorecards. What community scorecards do is they let communities feed back to government about what's working and what isn't. The example I give, which is sort of a silly example but it gives you an idea. When you go through airport screening you have that little smiley face-smiley, not smiley, in the middle—but what you should do if you hit that screen, you should see a screen with all the tallies of what everybody else has hit. So real community scorecards, about our subway system, about our housing, about any Federal program, about our Medicaid, about our Medicare, would have that tally go up so it's transparent, public, and the government has to account for it. The other thing that we can do better in government is performance indicators. I mean laws are passed, money is allocated, and there's very little reporting back. I think it's a practical approach to problem solving and having solved complex problems which is something I can bring to the Congress now.

KK: Why do you believe Congress is at a stalemate, not just with issues like healthcare, but across the board. What could you do to break the stalemate?

NS: This is another place where my experience comes in handy. A lot of the work that I've done, we call diplomacy. Health has been one of the arms of our diplomatic corps, really since the end of the second world war with agencies like USAID. Part of it was benevolence. Part of it was soft power. And what soft power means, it's a form of negotiating with others to reach an agreement that is beneficial for both. I have done a lot of negotiating with people that fundamentally disagree with us. I have negotiated with North Korea, with China, with Russia, to find mutually, to find win-wins, Venn diagrams where we overlap and areas where we are

both interested in the same outcome and I think that's a skill that we also desperately need in Congress and I can bring to Congress. And we talk about healthcare. We know that everybody in America is concerned about drug prices. We have polling upon polling that shows us this is a number one concern among Americans. We know that red states and blue states both rely on the Federal government for primary healthcare services through these wonderful things called federally qualified healthcare centers. We have them all over the city, all over our district and we know we need more of them. And we know that red and blue states are terrified about the cuts to Medicare and Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act. It's affecting everybody. We know that nobody on Medicare thinks it's right that their glasses, dental and hearing isn't covered. Those are universal red-blue state issues. So, I think we find that common ground and then we move forward on that. So, I have a lot of hope. And I have done work in the past; we call it lobbying but it's not really lobbying. Lobbying is when you're paid by somebody to do their business in Washington. It's old school advocacy. You represent a group of people and you go up to Congress and you knock on the door and you make appointments with them and you explain the position of your community. So that's advocacy. And on issues like health, we do have a lot of bi-partisan support.

VC: So, other than healthcare, what issues are top of mind for you?

NS: Mostly I would say that top of mind for New York as part of our campaign which has been super grass roots, and I met you all at a Beacon for Democracy protest where people stand on the streets and hold up signs that say stop the war, so it's been a grass roots effort. We have spoken to thousands of New Yorkers and what we hear from New Yorkers are first that they are in existential crisis. They're really worried about what's happening. Many people say they can't even read the news any more because it's so upsetting. But where the rubber hits the road is when first people talk about healthcare, then they talk about housing and then they talk about a federal issue. The Federal issue has actually changed a bit over time so when I started campaigning it was over ICE. It's been consistently, I would say, unauthorized and illegal wars that has come through. The Voting Rights act, also a major one, we're restricting voting rights, so those are the issues, having heard that from New Yorkers, are the issues that I will focus on first. We've already talked about healthcare and these three areas that we can do something about, drug pricing, primary care and protecting and expanding Medicare and Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act. In terms of housing, we just need more money. There's a lot of debate about privatization but if we just fund our public housing, we would be in a great place. We're not funding it and we find lots of excuses not to. Oh, we're going to start an unauthorized war, or whatever. But we've got to get congress and. Again, this is the difference

between passing the bill and seeing it through. There is money appropriated, there is money allocated by Congress and it's not coming to us. So, let's get that money here. The other thing on housing is, at this point, it's in crisis. We need a dedicated social services agency for housing that thinks this through. Public housing. Not just public-private housing, but public housing. And then there are a lot of triage or stopgap for people who are suffering right now. We have a voucher program for people who can't afford to pay their rent. They're stuck. Thousands of cases behind. We have an immediate triage that we can activate and then we have longer term fixes to that. Rights and justice, we've talked about abolishing ICE. For us all that means is that we can't have a force that goes around killing people on the streets, detaining... we have a crisis now at Newark with the immigration center there and now many residents of that center are on hunger strike because the conditions are inhumane. We have these stories; we have children in detention on the Texas border. Essentially, we say detention but what we mean is jail. We've got to get rid of the department that is essentially perpetrating war crimes in our own back yard and even in our city. And we also have to use the funding instead of bloating HSS for humane pathways to immigration. Those exist. That means more judges, more translators, more family services and making it a faster pathway. And the third part of that is the diplomatic corps. We have 80 ambassadorial posts that are not filled. That means there's nobody there to run the shop. It's like having an office with no boss. A lot of people's first point of entry into their immigration pathway into the US, and the way it should be, is to go to the embassy but the embassy's doors are essentially closed.

KK: I saw today on TV that more than a hundred embassies do not have anyone in it. (NS: Correct). No ambassadors.

NS: Eighty posts when I last checked, no ambassador in place. And again, they're just like treading water without the ambassador and the staffing. I was looking at the staffing positions, there was an article in the Times on this, that the staffing positions at the CDC in Uganda. They're empty. It's great that they have those positions but they're empty. So, this is a major issue around immigration.

VC: And, we've got a health crisis in Africa. Ebola.

NS: We do. We have the health crisis in Africa which is only exposing that we are completely unprepared here in the US. The US government has called for volunteers to staff the airports for screening. That's their basic function. The number one function of the Centers for Disease Control. That was why they were set up. We also have a new thing whereby we're denying

people with green cards access to the US to come back if they're suspected of Ebola. I hope we can go a little bit more into that in this set but I do want to come back to the other issue which I'm hearing from New Yorkers which is also about artificial intelligence. I've done a lot of work on artificial intelligence; I've published a peer review article in The Lancet. I've published a number of peer reviewed articles on artificial intelligence and I've set up a data collaborative in Geneva which was sort of supposed to be like CERN for data and get all countries to share their data so that everybody could access it equally. I think that we need much more public discussion about this from all of the candidates. My work is focused on medical care and the issues around medicine and public health are similar. Data privacy, models gone, models going in their own direction without our input and an over-reliance on unregulated sectors. So, I think this is a broad debate and it's bigger than one particular area. I also want to continue the Biden administration's call for a congressional committee, essentially a blue ribbon committee on AI which looks at all the sectors around AI and not just one because it is about... the Biden administration's sector was focused on security but it's about security, it's about education, it's about health, it's about employment, it's about our whole way of living.

17:25 VC: It's affecting all aspects of our lives, isn't it, AI?

NS: It is, and in medicine we saw the writing on the wall a little bit and the article that I published was in the beginning of 2020. We saw the writing on the wall because we knew the data sets weren't very representative and we knew that once an algorithm starts it goes unchecked and unlike a medicine you have all these review processes to make sure, or we did before the Trump administration, to make sure that your medicines remain safe, they're checked, there's quality control checks. Once that AI algorithm blooms off, it goes in its own direction. And that's why we call it, and this is a little bit different from Mr. Bores' proposal, what we're calling for is a review of these models before they're released by independent expertise, not review of the model after it's released, would love more chance to talk about that, see it more on the candidate stage.

KK: I also think that if you talk about it the public won't be as afraid of AI. They feel that it's fighting them, for their jobs or whatever, they don't realize how powerful this is.

NS: That's right. And with guard rails and guide rails and regulation-that's what guard rails and guide rails mean-there are ways to use it effectively to improve our lives. Without those we're in deep trouble. We've been calling on government now for the last six years to put these in place but that's pretty much fallen on deaf ears. There were some attempts, again,

under the Biden administration. Those have been rolled back entirely. (VC: Right). And it's here to stay. So, we have to deal with it.

VC: It sure is.

NS: It's never too late to start to work to do the right thing.

VC: Absolutely. Now you're campaigning. You're on the campaign trail. What do you find is the most challenging part of campaigning?

NS: I wasn't expecting to spend eight hours on my feet every day walking the streets. I have to buy a new pair of sneakers with amazing frequency. (Laughter) And there were some really cold days. But the challenge of campaigning-can I start with the positive before I go to the negative? (VC: Of course, of course) the amazing thing about campaigning is meeting wonderful, incredible people all over the city and have them share their stories. I usually try to talk to people, after I've handed out my card to say what's bugging them and people have been really open to share their stories and what's upsetting them and what they want to see changed. That is incredible. I think what's most frustrating has been the media. Because the media decided very early on that there were four candidates in the race. The New York Times ran major profiles on almost all of the guys, not all of them, but almost all of them, and none of the women in the race. I was saying to somebody today, you know, probably if I was Beyonce (laughter) I would have been covered even though I'm a woman, or Taylor Swift (laughter) I'm sure that would have gotten coverage too but it is remarkable how early they decided that they were calling the race. And they did it based on money. And they say, we're only considering you a viable candidate if you've raised such and such money. That's almost the first question you get asked on day one. People ask you, what's your path to victory, and what they mean by that is exclusively how much money you've raised. They don't care if you say, we've got people on the streets, we have over 100 volunteers, we have grass roots at every greenmarket, we're pounding the pavements old school, and they just want to know how much money you have. And that to me was sad and surprising. And then the other thing I haven't understood is, to use a nerdy science term, the correlation between money and polling. Clearly, if you've sent out brochures to everybody in the district everybody knows your name. And those brochures cost between \$1.25 and \$1.75 per person to send out. So, if you've gotten ten brochures from somebody they've spent more than ten bucks on you. So then when the poll comes, of course you've only heard of the candidates that either got major broadcast because they're already celebrities or who have billionaires behind them, because

you received ten mailings from them. So that was also a big surprise. I hadn't understood that. European countries do this well. They have laws and restrictions on outside money. They have laws and restriction on mailing. So, it's not like this is rocket science, this is about political will to change the system.

KK: Well, how do you go about funding your campaign?

NS: I called everybody I knew (laughter) from childhood. I started with my high school class. I started with my 8th grade class (VC: Oh wow) and worked my way systematically to the present day. But mostly by talking to people and just word of mouth, spreading the word. We did one text message and realized that text messaging also costs money. It's about three and a half cents for a text message that you get from a candidate. If there's a photo in it, it's more. This is all money. And I did some funny texting from my own phone to friends and they would write back "stop." (laughter)

KK: Are you saying there is a cap for the money you must have in order to run?

NS: I'm saying that there is an unspoken "club" number. So, to get on the stage at the 92nd Street Y you needed to have shown that you have raised one million dollars. And that's not unusual to get on the stage of the, I can't remember the limit or the floor, even for the national, the League of Conservation Voters did one with Hunter and the Eleanor Roosevelt House and there was also a floor. It was a very high one. It wasn't a low one. So, it feels like these are not inclusion criteria the way that they're set they're exclusion criteria. And we don't want to run a campaign that way. I don't think we should be spending millions of dollars on campaigns. It's crazy. We should be spending millions of dollars on services for people and not for campaigns. And we really need campaign spending limits and rules around this. There are no rules. It's the wild west. (KK: I agree with you) You can put in as much of your own money as you want, you can have as much outside PAC money as you want. There's no matching funding for a federal program which is something that the states, New York State and City have been very good at putting in which helps level the playing field for people. It's really the wild west, or the worst of Chicago in the twenties. Tammany hall. It's just, I had no idea of the extent of this, I had no idea. Call me naïve but I think it's good to see it firsthand. And I think we're going to show you can change the system. And I think we're going to purposely show that you don't need a million dollars to make a dent. We are going to do it through grass roots movement and organizing. And you may ask, what's that million dollars for? You do have to pay people. We believe in paying interns. It's important. There are lawyer's fees, there are

filing fees, so there are some real costs. But where people are really put a lot of their money is advertising and mailers. That's where a lot of the money goes, TV ads...

VC: I know, we all get tons of them. I get tons of them in the mail. What about your staff? How do you go about hiring and maintaining a staff?

NS: We have an amazing team of people. We're pretty lean, we're a pretty lean crew and we've got people that believe in wanting to change the system. There is a whole industry of politics, just like every industry is an industry and we just didn't go that route. My campaign manager was a community board leader and a PTA head. There's a woman who is our deputy communications manager. I was teaching, a guest lecturer up at Columbia in public health and she came to me through that. Afterwards she said she'd love to volunteer. So, it's really, again, word of mouth to spread, people who want to join, doing things differently. And we are different. We don't have a lot of political... we're doing things differently. So that's the mission. People have been amazing. We have an amazing group of people. And we'll get more now that college is out. Anybody listening to your podcast, we'll take them all because it's about hitting the streets and I'm hoping on the East side you guys are seeing our signs now.

KK: I was going to ask you about the rewarding part of your campaign but I think you've answered that, meeting the people. Can you add to that?

NS: It's amazing to meet people and hear from New Yorkers. There's so much stress in the air. People are really upset and it's an upset that, some people are really just extremely angry. And I get that on the street. But they need to release that somewhere. They are angry at our political structure and it's fair. And I'm OK to take that on the street because once they've screamed at you, they move on to a conversation about what's really upsetting them. There's a group of people that call this deep canvassing. But what it really means is just listening to people. We need so much more of that out on the street. So that is really a privilege and I really enjoy it. And I also like being able to call out what's happening that's so wrong in our world, this illegal war that we're waging, 100,000 civilians in Gaza, there's so much to call out. And then Ebola, we're not allowing people with green cards back into our country because they are suspected of Ebola, there's so much to call out. So being able to use this to call out the issues that are upsetting so many of our fellow New Yorkers.

VC: Tell the people where they can reach out to you.

NS: That is great. You can reach out to us on our website. It's really us on the other end. It's info@ninafornyc.com. You can DM us on Instagram at @ninafornyc and if you're not on social at all, contact Kathleen and Vanessa and I'll give you my phone number, no problem. We have a whole range of volunteer opportunities, from standing at greenmarkets, making phone calls, putting up signs, and it's really all about getting out there and talking to people. So, it's very rewarding. And last night we had a karaoke night and that was pretty fun. (VC Really?) It was the first time I had ever done Karaoke. (VC: So, what was your karaoke song?) I did it with my son. We did Pippin.

KK: My favorite show in the world. Which one, what song?

NS: We did "Everything Has a Reason." (VC/KK Ah.) And then I went into a little Grateful Dead (VC: All right! A Deadhead! All right! I love it.)

NS: So please join us and thank you for this opportunity and also encourage people to get out for Beacon for Democracy. It's a wonderful effort of people just standing out and speaking their voices and using their voices and that is what democracy is and should be.

VC: Absolutely.

KK: This has been an incredible insight into what someone like you, a candidate, has to go through and we thank you.

VC: Yes, and don't forget to vote! Right? Everybody's vote counts.

NS: Early voting starts on the 13th and you can still get an absentee ballot, and I know they are coming to people which is wonderful and the vote, and the polls, are the 23rd. Thank you again.

31:58 VC: Thanks again Nina. This has been terrific.

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