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Representative Sarah Anthony Brings A “Fresh Perspective” To The Michigan Legislature

“A strong woman stands up for herself, but a stronger woman stands up for everybody else.”

Newly elected 68th House District Rep. Sarah Anthony is a shining example of this adage.

The 68th House District is located in Ingham County. It includes Lansing Township and part of the City of Lansing.



Representative Anthony was born and raised in Lansing. She is the first African-American woman in the city’s history to serve in this role.

Notably, Rep. Anthony is the Democratic Caucus Chair for the 2019-2020 legislative session. She is one of many Democratic women who are poised to lead Michigan into the future.

East Lansing attorney Takura Nyamfukudza recently sat down with Rep. Anthony, on behalf of BRIEFS, to discuss her goals and concerns as a state legislator.

BRIEFS: *You gave your opponents during the primary, and more so during the general election, what some might describe as a “shellacking.” Does the great confidence that your constituents have shown add more pressure to an already demanding position?*

REP. ANTHONY: The primary victory shows we ran a well-oiled machine and that my message resonated with Lansing. I think I was one of the only candidates from this community. I had a way about knowing the issues – you can’t fake or learn that.

One of the big fights was about how progressive, or how left of left, one is. Being an extreme Democrat did not resonate. People want an effective negotiator who can work across the aisle. They want collaboration. I have a track record for doing that with people in the other party. My own party and people are ready for me to do the same now. The decisive margin was great, but it was also a mandate to do a good job.

BRIEFS: *It has been said that “a failure to plan is a plan to fail.” What are your goals as a Representative and how do you plan to achieve them?*

REP. ANTHONY: My first goal is to create systems in my office that ensure a connection between the community and the Capitol. I know from my position in [former 68th District] Rep. [Joan] Bauer’s office how important that is. I want to serve the community. People need to know that this is their go-to office to get things done if they have state issues.

I will create avenues for people in Lansing to get active and engaged in state government. I’ve been hired to do a job and think about this 24/7. It is impossible to overstate the importance of citizen engagement. Remember: we had a record turnout in a non-presidential election year. We need to keep people engaged and plugged in, especially at the state level, so that when the next election comes around, it feels natural because they’ve been engaged.

I plan to build strong relationships with committee chairs and colleagues so we get legislation passed. Even when in the minority, I believe it’s possible to get things done on behalf of the district.

BRIEFS: *What are your concerns in the Legislature? What, if any, impediments do you think you may encounter?*

REP. ANTHONY: Hyper-partisanship! I didn’t encounter that at the county level – we could always find a middle ground, even if publicly we had to take our stances. Given what happen[ed] during lame duck, I’m apprehensive about hyper-partisanship. From the time you step into your office, you are divided based on party alignment. It impedes good public policy.

Oftentimes, people who are in the process – interest groups, lobbyists, current or former legislators – become jaded. I want

to remain optimistic and bring a fresh perspective. I will funnel noise away to continue to have innovative ideas.

BRIEFS: *Can you describe one of these innovative ideas?*

REP. ANTHONY: I'm working on a district office. It will probably be staffed part-time. This building I'm in right now may seem accessible to the "average person," but it's not. You need ID and parking isn't easy. People still need to access resources. Where do they go? Some people say you're in Lansing, so people can just come to you. People who've never seen it done before cannot imagine what a district office would look like. So a satellite office within Lansing is one of those ideas.

BRIEFS: *What has been the highlight of your term so far?*

REP. ANTHONY: The day I was sworn in and surrounded by the previous four state representatives.

Being able to go to the floor on my first day and getting advice from [Lansing Mayor] Andy Schor, then having him introduce me to former colleagues was special. I also appreciated having my former boss whispering advice and encouragement. Representative Lynne Martinez showed me the ropes, too. And I received sage advice from former [Lansing] Mayor David Hollister. Generations of wisdom were showing me off.

Having my parents there beaming with joy was not bad either. I've never been shy about leaning on their wisdom and of those who came before me. That's one of the biggest gifts any young legislator could have.



BRIEFS: *What lesson do you wish you had learned before you started?*

REP. ANTHONY: In every notebook, I write "You belong here" because there are moments where I suffer from imposter syndrome. I still feel inadequate in some spaces, irrespective of the number of degrees I hold. I have to remind myself that if you're in the room, you belong there. I wish someone had told me to use my voice and my perspective to uplift my voice and that of others.

BRIEFS: *I'm sure you're familiar with the term "poli-tricks." What are you doing to change the negative perception people may have of government right now?*

REP. ANTHONY: I do that by not being the politician that everyone expects. Being forthright and having a moral compass helps, as well as giving people more information than they ask for. Being able to justify your votes is another way to change that negative perception. Being approachable is yet another. All of those things dismantle the perceptions that people have.

BRIEFS: *This view from your office is impossible to ignore. Does being so close to constituents have an impact on how you make decisions?*

REP. ANTHONY: Absolutely! I am very lucky that I am the only state representative of 110 who can look out and see my constituents. Homeless people, college students vying for that first position and even attorneys – I see all of them. People come on their lunch break to watch me vote on issues. That helps keep me accountable.

I like the fact that people walk up to the office and have an idea about a bill. It's very unique. I'm always in the district. It's not unusual to catch me doing constituent work in Meijer and discussing policy at the mall. Teachers at my nieces' school ask me questions about bills that will impact their pension. All of this refines the ability to communicate and makes you more accountable.

BRIEFS: *How significant a role do your personal experiences play in the positions you take on legislation? I ask because people have asked me how I sleep at night because I'm a criminal defense litigator.*

REP. ANTHONY: I bring all parts of my personal experience to the job. I can't not bring my public school background. My mother was on government assistance for a year when we were little. We are a middle-income family. [My personal experience] is an asset. The only way it becomes a deficit is when you can't see other perspectives because your own cloud your judgment to the point that you become detached.



BRIEFS: *February is Black History Month. We have had a black president and black governors. We currently have black state representatives in offices all over the country. Are we done? If not, what is left?*

REP. ANTHONY: We are not done. The last two years show us that there's a lot of work to do before we achieve racial equality. Justice received by minorities is lacking. The existence of an African-American president doesn't erase injustices and discrimination here or around the world.

Yet to say we haven't made progress would be short-sighted. I think getting African Americans in the door is a great step. Another important goal is to ensure they are empowered in those positions so they can empower other people of color. Trainings and equitable policies will help us achieve that. We have a way to go.

BRIEFS: *Who are the three most influential – positive or negative – people in your professional life?*

REP. ANTHONY: Representative Joan Bauer because she taught me the art of negotiating and not having to be the loudest, boldest person in the room to be an effective professional.

A woman named Jewell Gillespie who worked for Mary Waters. Jewell selected me to be an intern in her office. That was my first experience in this building and my first job in this world. [Representative] Joan [Bauer] called Jewell to make sure I'd be a good fit. Jewell was my mentor when it came to ensuring that people in the community were taken care of.

The third person will go unnamed. When I was first running for the [Ingham] County Commission, there was someone who I thought would be supportive in that effort. That person was not supportive and actively worked against me. It was hurtful and I took it personally because this was a prominent person in the community. That experience taught me a valuable lesson about not relying on anyone else's support and endorsement and, instead, relying on myself.

BRIEFS: *Life balance is important. How do you maintain balance? What are your hobbies?*

REP. ANTHONY: Balance is a myth. We beat ourselves up because we haven't found work-life balance. Sometimes work will outweigh family, friends, etc. Just accept it. I read, spend time with my nieces, snowboard and travel. And I watch "Star Wars" movies.

BRIEFS: *What are your three favorite places to eat in Lansing?*

REP. ANTHONY: Street Kitchen for brunch. Athena's for breakfast because it reminds me of my brother. And Soup Spoon, especially the Ethiopian vegan stew.

BRIEFS: *Tell me about your dream vacation. Where would you go and with whom?*

REP. ANTHONY: I hate being cold, so I'd love to go anywhere warm with Michelle Obama. I think she'd be so much fun to hang out with. I'm going somewhere warm soon and I'm taking her book. It's like my dream is coming true.

BRIEFS: *What are your three favorite songs and why?*

REP. ANTHONY: Donny Hathaway's "A Song for You" because his voice sounds wonderful.

"Sara Smile" by Hall and Oates, for obvious reasons. "A Love Supreme" by John Coltrane because I'm a jazz lover. The instrumentation is just pure. It's a beautiful album.

BRIEFS: *What advice do you most frequently give that you should follow yourself?*

REP. ANTHONY: Use your voice. Nobody else has your perspective. That's true in the professional and personal sense.

BRIEFS: *What are some fun facts about you that people could not learn from Google?*

REP. ANTHONY: I've never had a cavity. My first international trip was to Paris and Brussels. My mom has never left the country, so she was especially nervous about it. I went to great lengths to keep her calm. An hour or so after my flight took off, there was a terrorist attack. I have another international trip soon that I won't be telling my mother about (I'll be back by the time this article runs).

(Photos provided by Rep. Sarah Anthony & Takura Nyamfukudza.)

More About State Rep. Sarah Anthony

Education

Representative Anthony graduated from Everett High School in Lansing. She earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Legal Studies from Central Michigan University. She also earned a master's degree in Public Administration from Western Michigan University and completed a fellowship with the University of Michigan's New Leadership Academy, an opportunity that is extended to a small group of people who have an eye on leadership in academia.

Work Experience

Representative Anthony's first job was working on a campaign as a field organizer to preserve affirmative action in Michigan. She then worked as the Michigan liaison for a congressional campaign. Afterward, she joined former Rep. Joan Bauer's office as the district relations aide, where she helped with constituent issues. She was the front line between the community and Rep. Bauer, and worked with Lansing residents to improve government services.

In 2010, Rep. Anthony began an eight-year run at the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN), a statewide non-profit organization that helps first-generation, low-income

college students receive credentials and income. She served various roles while there, including Director of Finance and Operations, Deputy Director and, during her last six months, Acting Director.



Lansing residents elected Rep. Anthony to the Ingham County Board of Commissioners in 2012. She was the youngest African-American

woman to serve in this capacity in the United States. During her time on the Board, she served in many leadership roles, including Chair of the Democratic Caucus and Finance Committee, and Chair and Vice Chair of the Board.

Memberships & Organizations

Because of her current position in the Michigan Legislature, Rep. Anthony exited various roles on boards and other organizations. However, over the years she has been actively involved in the Greater Lansing Food Bank, Capital Area Michigan Works, Capital Area United Way and the Michigan League of Conservation Voters. She is also a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.