

Women of the House

Two Kent State alumnae are giving back to their Ohio communities as government representatives at the federal and state level.

Emilia Strong Sykes, BA '07, JD

In 2022, US Rep. Emilia Strong Sykes (D) became the first Black person elected to represent Ohio's 13th Congressional District, which encompasses all of Summit County and parts of Stark and Portage counties. For eight years, Sykes served in the Ohio General Assembly, representing House District 34. For three of those years she led the Ohio House Democratic Caucus.

Sykes says she is committed to fighting for economic opportunity, safer communities and affordable healthcare for Northeast Ohioans with the spirit of bipartisan cooperation to get things done for those she serves.

Below, we highlight Sykes' responses when asked about her political career.

MOTIVATION FOR ENTERING POLITICS

Both my parents were public servants [Barbara Sykes, former state representative, and Vernon Sykes, serving a second term as state senator for Ohio Senate District 28], so I learned from a young age the importance of service. I never intended to run for office. But when an opportunity to serve my neighbors in the state Legislature arose, I took it. I knew I could make a difference and give back to the people and community that raised me.

As a state representative, I learned the intricate connections between state and federal politics, and how both were important in the lives of everyday Ohioans. The insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, moved me to run for Congress. I'm thankful that the people of Ohio's 13th District elected me to serve them, and I will fight every day in Congress to protect, preserve and strengthen our democracy.

POINTS OF PRIDE

I'm most proud of my work to pass Ohio House Bill 1 [in 2018], bipartisan, priority legislation to protect the safety and security of people in violent relationships. It was the first time that a member of the minority party carried the priority piece of legislation, to the best of our research.

I'm also proud of the success I've had working across the aisle to deliver meaningful results that improve the lives of Ohioans. During my first year as Ohio House minority leader, our caucus was able to successfully work with the majority to



pass nearly double the percentage of bipartisan bills compared to the previous two legislative sessions.

NEW ROLE AS US CONGRESSWOMAN

I'm excited to work for my constituents, learn more about the needs of our communities and, ultimately, deliver meaningful, bipartisan results.

As the first Black person to represent this district, I recognize the importance of having a congresswoman the constituents can identify with, one who understands the issues they face every day. And I hope my position indicates that we belong here, in the halls of Congress and beyond.

VALUE OF A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Our government only functions if we have a diversity of thoughts and ideas and backgrounds. Public institutions support education and learning for a much broader variety of people than private institutions. That is why it's important to support these public institutions and make sure they still thrive so people can get more opportunities and participate in our government.

In Congress, there are a lot of folks from Ivy League schools; there are very few state school/public school members. Still, a public, state education is valuable and produces top-notch scholars and even folks who can find themselves in the halls of Congress one day.

Gail Pavliga, BA '91, MA '98, PhD

In 2020, Gail Pavliga, a private counselor and former professor of educational psychology at The University of Akron and Malone University, ran for state government and won. As state representative (R) for Ohio House District 72, which encompasses nearly all of Portage County, Pavliga has embraced the challenges of representing a bipartisan district with many competing views and opinions.

She chairs the House Behavioral Health and Addiction Recovery Supports Committee and is a member of the Finance and Higher Education committees and the Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development and Natural Resources.

Below, we highlight Pavliga's responses when asked about her political career.

MOTIVATION FOR ENTERING POLITICS

You have to have a plan for where you want to make a difference. With NEOMED, Hiram [College] and Kent State all in this area, I thought we needed someone in the community who was an advocate for and understood higher education.

I also started to look at how, as a mental health professional, I could be a bigger voice for mental health. It's such a big issue because everybody knows somebody who's either suffering from mental illness or struggling with addiction. We didn't have a strong voice for that in the statehouse, and I decided that it was my time to be heard. It's become a passion of mine.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Everybody's got a different idea of where they would like to have policy or where they need help. It is a delicate balancing act. Not everyone is going to agree out here in the extremes of politics, but there are areas where we can all agree. Don't we all want our children safe and well educated? Don't we all want access to mental health services? Don't we all want lower taxes, better lifestyle and access to parks and recreation?

POINTS OF PRIDE

Right now, I am sponsoring House Bill 3. We are trying to find an answer to providing affordable housing, so people will stay here after they graduate, maybe work in the greater Northeast



Ohio area. Developers would get tax credits in exchange for capping rents because many people in Portage County and in Kent, especially, are paying up to 50% of their income for housing.

I have worked tirelessly with the Ohio Mental Health Association and many other partners to get the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which is a national hotline, set up in Ohio. We now have 19 call centers across the state. Each one of those receives 8,000–10,000 calls a month, and 80% of those calls are able to be resolved with that phone call or directed to local agencies that can help the callers.

All calls are answered by the third ring, and only 10% of the calls are answered out of state, most of which are from veterans who are transferred to a call center that deals specifically with their mental health needs. Some centers can receive text and chats, which opens them up to teenagers. So, this is serving all constituents across the state.

PROMOTING POSITIVITY AND POSSIBILITY

I want people early on to have a vision for their life and an idea of where they belong. Being a graduate student, being an entrepreneur, running for politics, as I have done—these are high-level risks, and sometimes you're not going to win the first time around. Too many of us are held back by fear of failure. ⚡