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Democrats in Hell's Kitchen? Believe it.

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Mark Robinson, Congressman Jerrold Nadler, and Marti Allen-Cummings. Photo courtesy HK Dems.

BY NATHAN RILEY | Donald Trump's election provoked waves of revulsion all over New York City. In Hell's Kitchen, a full-time drag performer, realizing his rights would be under attack, sought advice from a politically connected friend — City Councilmember Corey Johnson, who suggested he join a political club.

Following up on that suggestion, Marti Allen-Cummings surfed the Internet, but couldn't find a club in his neighborhood. Nevertheless, he persisted. Neighbors and friends of his wanted a political club that would represent the current day diversity of Hell's Kitchen.

There was, in fact, already a political club in the neighborhood, but it's one not suffused with the rainbow hues that would embrace Allen-Cummings and those he spoke to about the issue. The

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venerable McManus Midtown Democratic Club was founded in 1892 when political battles between Irish Democrats and Protestant Republicans animated city politics. Jimmy McManus, a Democratic district leader for more than half a century, is now basically retired but the club remains in the family. Mickey Spillane, Jr., a nephew, is a district leader in what is formally known as AD 75 part B, but Dick Gottfried, the local state assemblymember, said of Spillane, “I haven’t talked to him in two years.”

Johnson and Mayor Bill de Blasio are busy this year running for reelection, but other electeds have no such obligations. Allen-Cummings emailed Gottfried on his public mailbox and a senior aide spotted the message. Gottfried, clearly pleased with the outcome that ensued, enthused over the phone, “It came together very quickly.”

Wendi Paster, that senior Gottfried aide, called Allen-Cummings back. On Facebook, Allen-Cummings asked his followers if they wanted to start a club, and Mark Robinson, a friend, offered his living room for the first meeting.

Paster was there for that December meeting — and, crucially, leaders of the Manhattan Plaza Tenants Association showed up. These two high-rise apartment buildings on W. 42nd St., home to many artists, formed a critical springboard for the new political club, the Hell’s Kitchen Democrats.

For Allen-Cummings, it was all a big learning experience. District leaders, nominating petitions, collecting signatures were unknowns, but he and other neighborhood residents who met in December proved to be willing pupils. Events also gave the new group momentum.

Cynthia Doty, an Upper West Side district leader from the Three Parks Independent Democrats, remembers meeting members of the new club at phone banks for Jon Ossoff, who ran for Congress earlier this year in a Georgia Republican district with an open seat. The Hell’s Kitchen Dems marched as a group in the New York City Women’s March the day after Trump’s inauguration. They answered Trump’s white supremacist message with posters placed in stores in blocks above 34th St. proclaiming, “All Genders, Religions, Ethnicities, Sexual Orientations, Human Beings Are Safe Here.” By doing the work, they earned the trust of elected officials.

But it was evident the group had one big handicap — they were unknown, while the Spillanes, including Mickey’s sister and fellow district leader Denise, had the familiar name. But Gottfried, his fellow assemblymember Linda Rosenthal, State Senator Brad Hoylman, and Congressman Jerrold Nadler all endorsed the new group. None of those officials are up for election this year, but according to Paster, they wanted the new club’s members to be able to say, “We’re here, we’re serious, and we’re not going away.” They gave the club credibility and access to the skills of other insiders.

One of Hoylman’s top staffers, Eli Szenes-Strauss, helped Paster in getting the club’s nominating petitions for city candidates and district leaders into shape, spending hours training Hell’s Kitchen residents on the intricacies of collecting valid petition signatures.

The club held meetings at community spaces in the district that runs up the West Side from 34th St. to about 70th St. By May, its members were fully engaged in the endorsement process, supporting de Blasio, Johnson, Letitia James for public advocate, and Gale Brewer for borough president.

All of them, of course, are incumbents overwhelmingly favored to win again this year. What was significant, however, was that this represented the first time the neighborhood ever had an open public endorsement meeting. The McManus club, following an older tradition of boss rule, plays follow the leader. It doesn’t hold public endorsement meetings.



This poster appeared in windows on the West Side in recent months. Image courtesy HK Dems.

In settling on district leader candidates, the club chose Thomas D. Shanahan, a gay civil rights attorney, and Marisa E. Redanty, a past president of the Manhattan Plaza Tenants Association and a well-known local activist.



Tom Shanahan, Assemblymember Dick Gottfried, Marisa Redanty, Olamide Faison, and Jeffrey LeFrancois holding young Elijah LaFargue. Photo courtesy HK Dems.

Shanahan and Redanty were up against the Spillane siblings, heirs to the McManus hold on the neighborhood. The Hell's Kitchen Dems may be new to political organizing, but they are not social media novices. A Facebook ad featured local elected officials touting Shanahan and Redanty as "a new generation of Democrats in Hell's Kitchen."

A video, also posted to Facebook, featured a very regal Marti Allen-Cummings wearing a full-length deep red evening gown urging voters to "Remember to vote locally" for district leader.

The campaign also included "Dear Neighbor" letters from well-known local residents like former Borough President Ruth Messinger and a video from former State Senator Tom Duane.

The Spillanes' campaign, in contrast, was decidedly old school — posters mounted in store windows throughout the district.

On primary night last week, the new club held a party at the Ritz, a well-known gay bar on W. 46th St. Though turnout citywide was down given de Blasio's inevitability, more than 1,000 voted in Manhattan Plaza. The mood at the Ritz became ebullient as the evening wore on.

In the end, Shanahan pulled 1,763 votes to Mickey Spillane's 1,403 for the male district leader slot, while Redanty outpolled Denise Spillane 1,844 to 1,339 for the female post. It was a clean victory for both Hell's Kitchen Dems candidates, but Shanahan and Redanty both understand that a rematch could well emerge down the road. The new club is careful to speak respectfully of its rival.

In the aftermath, Allen-Cumming offered a "shout out" to the army of volunteers whose "hard work" gave the neighborhood a "voice."

Gottfried believes the new club will grow. The district includes Hudson Yards, where new high rises will add thousands of new residents. The Hell's Kitchen Democratic Club will be there to greet them.

"We had activists without a political club," Gottfried remarked, "but they certainly came out of the woodwork" after Trump's upset win last November.

The new club successfully mobilized voters because it embraced diversity, something Hell's Kitchen residents love about their neighborhood. In this instance, Donald Trump gave a boost to progressive politics.