

Bio:

My name is Sara Dirksen Keel, and I'm from Cleveland, Tennessee in Bradley County. I attended Lee University, where my parents Carolyn and Murl Dirksen are both professors, and I graduated in 2008. After Lee, I received my Master's Degree in Literary Studies from University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and am currently a PhD candidate and Teaching Fellow at Georgia State University in the Department of English.

What I'm working on now professionally:

In the fall, I will begin my fifth and last year as a full time graduate student at Georgia State University. I recently received an Advanced Teaching Fellowship, which is awarded to a small group of graduate students in the final phase of their scholarship. My scholarly work is in the field of Transatlantic Transitional Literature, which in plain English is Literature from America and Great Britain written between 1880 and 1920, which includes Late Victorian, Edwardian, and Early Modernist literatures. I also teach Freshman Composition at the college level and have been doing so, at least part time, for six years. Though I enjoy the scholarly work for its own merit, my ultimate goal in pursuing a PhD is to be equipped to teach full time at the college level. I love being in the classroom, having the opportunity to share my passion for the written word, and being able to watch my students grow in their abilities and as individuals.

Politically, right now I'm still just getting used to being Chair. It's a lot of work, and it's all very new to me. I am working on growing my county party's visibility in our community and working to take back our reputation and narrative from the opposition. To that end, we are working towards organizing public service and voter registration events and attending any local events that will have us. We are also working to strengthen the community between our members to become a cohesive group instead of a room full of strangers.

Where do I want to see the party go?

That's a really big and a really good question. On the state level, I want to see us become real competition for the GOP. Tennessee is seen as a red state with no possibility of swinging blue. And because of that, we are often overlooked when it comes to national elections and down-ballot support. But it hasn't always been like that in Tennessee, and I would like to see us give the Republican Party a run for its money again.

As a whole, what I really want to see from the Democratic Party is unity - from the leadership but also from the individual members. To me, our Party is about equality. For some voters that means economic equality and for others it means equality of gender, race, or sexual identity, to name a few. Our primary interests, what pieces of equality affect us most deeply, are varied, and we have allowed those differences to create fractures. But those interests are all facets of the

same ideal, and I want to see us work together towards that single, big, complicated goal. So where do I want to see the party go? I guess the answer is, “everywhere.” I’m a Democrat because I believe deeply in the policies we stand for, and I believe that we have the potential to do so much good, in this nation and in the world, if we can work together.

Why did I get involved in politics and what motivated me?

In some ways I’m pretty new to all this, but in other ways, I’ve been around a while. I have been interested in politics, really, since I can remember.

When I was little, other kids my age wanted to be ballerinas or cheerleaders, police officers or firemen, and I always wanted to be “the first woman President.” Then when I was about eight or nine, I participated in this department store fashion show. And as each kid walked down the runway, the MC announced what they wanted to be when they grew up. So, my turn came, and I was so excited. I thought the crowd would be happy to hear they had a future president among them, or I thought that at the least they would be impressed by choice of professions. Instead, when I got to the end of the stage and the MC announced, “Sara here wants to be the first woman President!” the room filled with laughter. I get it now, it’s kind of funny. But at the time, that laughter was heartbreaking. It told me that the idea of a little girl from Tennessee becoming President was laughable, ridiculous. And after that, I set my sights lower and I learned to say what all the other little girls said.

I stayed interested in politics after that, but things had changed. In high school, I joined Young Democrats and Model UN, and in college I added a short stint as the President of my university’s College Democrats to that roster. At that point, though, I was mostly in it for the fighting. I’m a student of Literature. I love words, and I believe in their power. In high school and in college, I constantly tried to harness that power by picking fights over politics. It was an easy thing to do as a Democrat in the South at an evangelical university. My spouse says that he first realized he was in love while I argued with a colleague about gun control. I would debate with anyone, anywhere. That kind of energy isn’t sustainable, though, and by the end of college I was burned out.

I felt I was constantly draining my energy into arguments that didn’t make a difference, and I was living in Tennessee, where I felt like my vote didn’t matter much either. So there didn’t seem to be a lot left for me in politics. I still voted Democrat, but for a long time, I otherwise kept my head down.

And then Hillary ran for President, and everything changed. I didn’t like her at first. I thought she was too aggressive and too cold, that she had a mean resting face. But then I began to learn about inherent sexism and the double-bind of women in leadership and all the gender stereotypes I had internalized, and I softened towards her. I heard about the Ready for Hillary campaign, and

I realized that I, too, was ready. And when, for the first time in a very long time, I thought it was possible for a girl to be President, something long lost woke in me.

It seems so obvious now, but I had never realized how underrepresented I was, as a woman, in the halls of our government. Maybe more accurately, it actually never occurred to me to expect to be represented. Hillary's run showed me not only what was possible but what *should* be *status-quo*. And it rekindled that love of politics that I'd had so early on - one that was based on hope and possibility instead of anger and contention. The election was a blow, there's no denying it, but instead of feeling defeated, it made me realize that we had to take matters into our own hands - that the vision of the future we were given is something that we will have to work for. So I became involved in my local party, and when I was asked to run for Chair, I agreed. And here I am. I'm really happy to be back and involved in the Democratic Party. It truly feels like I have come full circle.

Why is it important to be a Young Democrat?

So there's two parts to this: becoming involved in politics young and being a Democrat. For the first part, everyday decisions are being made in government that affect us. And the consequences of those decisions are something that we, as young people, will inherit. So it is important that we take an interest in who is making those decision and why they are deciding the way they do. We should also work towards being at the table. Getting there takes a lot of planning and determination, so it's important to start early.

As for being a young *Democrat*, what else would you be? The Democratic Party and what it stands for has always just made so much sense to me. I honestly struggle to see why people choose anything else. I believe that our Party is right on economic policy, environmental policy, education, social services, identity politics, you name it. I suppose many people with the same beliefs choose no party at all, but I see that as a disadvantage. I think that it is important to be a Young Democrat because participation encourages good citizenship: it builds informed voters and political and community involvement.