

New breed of politicians hit Boston



By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 22, 2013

Michelle Wu's shoes have seen better days. But for this candidate — and the many others entering politics in this suddenly wide-open city — things are looking pretty great.

Holes in the soles forced Wu to retire her first pair of black pumps. Their now-forlorn replacements are headed the same way, heels shredded. She began her run for an at-large City Council seat back in December, when the odds were long. That was months before Mayor Tom Menino announced he wouldn't seek another term. And before two at-large and two district councilors decided to vacate their seats to try to replace him.

Wu's chances are clearly much better now. In addition to the suddenly open political landscape, she and her shoes have worked incredibly hard day after day, showing up at T stops in the morning, house parties at night, and

at countless community and political events in every neighborhood in-between. She has also raised a boatload of money for a first-time council candidate — about \$180,000.

She's polished and well-connected (she worked in City Hall and on US Senator Elizabeth Warren's campaign), with a compelling back story: A graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School, Wu took over the care of two of her younger siblings five years ago, after her mother grew ill. They both still live with the candidate and her husband in the South End, and Wu is guardian of the youngest, now 16. At 28, Wu understands the struggles of parents and small businesses (she once ran a cafe) better than most.

And as those shoes attest, she is very good at the retail thing. On Thursday morning, she visited the Chinese Golden Age Center, in Chinatown, where elderly residents sipped watercress soup, and a concert from Hong Kong blared from a giant television. She was escorted by "Uncle" Frank Chin, a close ally of Menino, who, at 81, is still Chinatown's kingmaker.

He told voters Wu went to Harvard, that she taught citizenship classes in Chinatown, that she could be the first Chinese-American city councilor. Wu was at ease, speaking to residents in Mandarin. One woman, who was confused by the Chinese characters for the candidate's name and was surprised to learn she was a woman, was concerned about affordable housing. Others fretted about whether their friends would make it to the polls to cast their ballots for her.

There's no need for fretting. Wu probably won't want to read this — she is a very careful politician, a trait I'd like to see leavened if she succeeds in this race — but her campaign has an incumbent feel to it. She does acknowledge her expectations have risen since December, however.

"At first I wanted to start a conversation about the city's future and what that would mean," she said. "I had a lot of ideas. Given that it was a mayoral year, I thought there was a chance there would be an opening, but who knew? I wanted to get out and learn about the city."

Now 17 hopefuls are competing for two at-large seats (the two remaining

incumbents will just about certainly be reelected), and many others have their eyes on district seats. It is a beautiful thing to see. Not all of them are as fully-formed or as promising as Wu, but the field reveals a city suddenly bursting with potential.

“Across the city, people are talking about ‘new,’” Wu says. “Everybody is excited about the new energy.”

I’m intrigued by some of these candidates, including Jack F. Kelly, whom I was inclined to dismiss at first: Kelly worked as City Hall’s Charlestown neighborhood liaison, and is a creature of Menino-land. But then Planned Parenthood gave him one of two sought-after endorsements (the other went to incumbent Councilor at Large Ayanna Pressley). Kelly, a former addict, impressed the group with his expansive views on how teen health and pregnancy are connected to poverty, violence, and education.

Suzanne Lee, running for the District 2 council seat currently held by Bill Linehan, excites me, partly because she is a well-respected educator, and a bold activist. But mostly, it’s because she is not Linehan. That dinosaur tried to use the redistricting process as a personal power grab. Then there was his recent attempt to score points with Southie voters by challenging new state Senator Linda Dorcea-Forsy’s right to host the St. Patrick’s Day Breakfast. Enough.

Chris Conroy of Roxbury is a dedicated educator who was an extremely effective special ed teacher at Codman Academy. And Annissa Essaibi-George of Dorchester is a teacher, business-owner, and mother of four (including triplets) whose perspective the council could use.

These are heady days. And if the city gets the right mayor – one who is happy to give credit where it’s due, one who doesn’t want to hang around for decades – those who get to the council might get a chance to shine. That will encourage more Michelle Wus to enter politics. And that’s just what Boston needs.

The more ruined shoes, the better.

Yvonne Abraham is a Globe columnist. She can be reached at abraham@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@globeabraham](https://twitter.com/globeabraham)