

Easy to print version

The Unexpected Congresswoman

They said it couldn't be done. Carol Shea-Porter '74, '79G thought otherwise.
by Sue Hertz '78

To win the Congressional seat in New Hampshire's first district, history dictates that you have to capture Manchester, or at least break even. Carol Shea-Porter '74, '79G knew that as she stood near the doorway of the Rimmon Club that Friday evening before election day. She'd done her best, escorted by a few locals to the new Manchester senior citizen center and the Rotary Club breakfast, confidently marching door to door in the previous weeks asking for support in her quest to become the state's first Congresswoman. But here she lingered by the shuffleboard table in this crowded West Manchester bar, with the Budweiser sign glowing and smoke hanging in the air like fog over Mt. Washington Valley in spring, wondering just how to proceed.

The visit to the West Manchester social clubs was the idea of two city aldermen. Although West Manchester doesn't represent all of Manchester, it represents a certain population, a population of masons and carpenters, descendants of Canadian, Irish, and German immigrants, a population that calls itself Democrat but, more than likely, votes Republican. It's a religious group, mostly Catholic, that reads the right-leaning *Union Leader*. The aldermen figured that if Shea-Porter, the unknown Rochester Democrat, the long-shot, the candidate whose own party didn't think she would win, could successfully woo 100 of these West Manchester voters, each voter would tell friends and family, and those 100 votes could morph into the thousand that might, just might, capture the state's biggest city. And if she captured the biggest city, the aldermen reasoned, she might defy the overwhelming odds and make history.

Shea-Porter exchanged looks with Caroline French '64, one of her campaign advisors. The place was packed, standing room only, since all the leagues--dart, pool, and cards--were in full gear. "What are we going to do?" thought French. "It's Friday night in a bar."

Another look at Shea-Porter, who with her auburn page-boy and casual slacks looked more Pottery Barn than pool hall, told French what they would do. They would do what they had done for the past year. Shea-Porter would work the crowd and French would hand out campaign literature. The woman was fearless, French knew. She would talk to anyone anywhere.

Shea-Porter headed to the dart board. "I don't want to interrupt your game," she said, "but I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Carol Shea-Porter and I'm running for Congress." The darts froze. Heads turned. "What issues would you like to talk about?" she asked.

And she was off. Asking for problems, offering solutions, promising she'd do her best. Even the two tattooed guys at the bar, who had said at first that they liked her opponent, Republican Jeb Bradley, reported to French later that they had changed their minds, that she was "terrific."

French wasn't surprised. She'd seen that reaction, from the affluent Seacoast to the Lakes Region to the hamlets in the White Mountains.

Four days later, after the polls had closed and the ballots tallied, Carol Shea-Porter, the candidate who was outspent 10 to one in the primary and five to one in the general election, whose closest advisors were a nutritionist, an antique jewelry dealer, and a medieval scholar, stunned the state--and the country--by winning the coveted spot in the 110th Congress. She claimed Manchester by 1,000 votes. The aldermen, of course, credited the Friday night visit to the social clubs. Others in Manchester attributed the victory to her impressive performance in a debate against Bradley at a local synagogue. Still others felt that Shea-Porter won because she'd knocked on so many Manchester doors.

In the aftershock of the 2006 election, there was no shortage of theories on how a Democrat who had never held public office, who had no money and no name recognition, could triumph over a Republican incumbent in a district that hadn't elected a Democrat to Congress in 31 years. The most common rationale, of course, was that Shea-

Porter was lucky. A candidate from the right party at the right time, she benefited from national frustration with President Bush and the war in Iraq. She benefited, too, from the enormous popularity of another Democrat, New Hampshire Governor John Lynch '74, whose name preceded hers on the ballot. And she benefited from a changing demographic; No longer an epicenter of Yankee Republicanism, New Hampshire is one of the fastest growing states in the Northeast and the new residents tend to be independent and well-educated. That combination, according to Andrew Smith, director of the UNH Survey Center, equals more voters leaning left, particularly since many of the new residents emigrated from blue states. Smith predicts that New Hampshire will be all blue within 10 years.

Shea-Porter's win was, Smith says, as clear-cut as if "she had a D on her back and Bradley had an R." Since the public couldn't vote against Bush, it voted against Bradley, and probably of equal importance, adds Smith, the coattails of John Lynch were huge. "People voted the top of the ticket and then straight down."

Yet on the evening of Nov. 7, when the last ballots were counted and Bradley had conceded to Shea-Porter, who had won the seat by less than three percentage points, the Shea-Porter celebrants at the Frank Jones Center in Portsmouth harbored a different theory. As they cried and hugged and pumped their fists in the air, Shea-Porter's supporters would have argued that beyond Bush-backlash, beyond Lynch's coattails, the real reason their candidate won was because she is, quite simply, exceptional.

Shea-Porter wasn't shocked because, she says, she had her ear to the ground and "could hear the volcano rumbling." And because she had refused to let others define the rules by which she played.

It is a cold December morning in a Rochester restaurant, not far from Shea-Porter's home. During the campaign, Shea-Porter and French and other members of the inner circle would come here to strategize over coffee and pastries at the seating by the window. "That's our table," says French, proudly pointing. Her job today, as it was during the campaign, is to make sure that Shea-Porter makes all of her appointments. On time. But French, gray-haired and good-natured, just two months shy of turning 65, won't elaborate. Shea-Porter is, after all, one of her best friends.

Shea-Porter, scrubbed and fresh in black fleece, smiles wryly. More earthy than polished, the 54-year-old congresswoman-elect is makeup free and relaxed. Even when campaigning, she had a practical aura, a woman who preferred sensible flats over heels and turtlenecks over Armani. She is, as her friends say, comfortable in her own skin. When a volunteer once told her that too many trips to the hairdresser would ruin her homespun image, she laughed. On the occasions when she was inspired to upgrade her wardrobe, she found herself more interested in hearing the sales clerk's life story than trying on suits.

She was, she says, a reluctant candidate. She had no intention of running against Jeb Bradley, whom she had confronted for years at his town hall meetings with constituents. Although she disagreed mightily with him on almost everything, from Iraq to privatizing Social Security to raising the federal minimum wage, she didn't want to put herself or her family through a campaign. Her children were getting older--her daughter was in college and her son in high school--and her husband Gene was supportive, but the prospect of media intrusion and all that time away made her shake her head whenever her lunch group, a cluster of women she had met while working on presidential campaigns for Wesley Clark and, later, John Kerry, suggested that she consider a run.

Instead, she prodded others at the table. Sue Mayer had attended almost as many of Bradley's town halls as Shea-Porter. But Mayer didn't think that her years of teaching and graduate work in 15th-century German history and the nearly two decades she had lived in Canada provided the necessary credentials. Caroline French had always been political--when her husband died suddenly in 2004 during his campaign for state representative, she and her family requested that friends honor his memory by voting for John Kerry for president--but she wasn't interested. She preferred to help other campaigns, which left her time for her antique jewelry business.

Attention would always return to Shea-Porter. She knew Bradley's record better than anyone, and her family had deep New Hampshire roots. Most important, Mayer says, "She's quick on her feet." She knew how to use stories and metaphors to explain complicated subjects, and she understood the issues.

Still, it wasn't until Shea-Porter spent more than a month volunteering at Louisiana shelters in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that she changed her mind. She found the scene deeply unnerving--the despair, the chaos, the

destruction, the death, the crushing number of people seeking shelter and support. "Where is the government?" she remembers thinking. "There is no place for these people to turn."

When she returned to New Hampshire, she announced that she would run. She felt as if she had been in the front yard talking about the issues, while the real dialogue was in the living room. "If I were elected," she thought, "I could move inside." She asked Mayer to be her campaign manager.

"I've never run a campaign before," said Mayer.

"I've never run for office before," replied Shea-Porter.

Problem #1: No one knew her name. While she'd grown up in Durham and Lee, the fourth of seven siblings and the daughter of devout Republicans (one of her first childhood memories is that of holding a Barry Goldwater for President sign) and had earned a bachelor's degree in social work and a master's of public administration at UNH in the 1970s (after the election, she would joke that one of the best perks of office was being able to park in the UNH president's driveway while visiting campus), Shea-Porter had lived out of state for two decades. First she had lived in Colorado, where she met her husband, Gene, an officer in the Army, then in New Orleans, where she worked as associate director of a senior center, and finally near Baltimore, where Gene commuted to a new job in D.C.

In Maryland, Shea-Porter worked for senior centers, led an effort to bring affordable housing to her community, and helped create a social service agency that served the local homeless and poor. She also taught politics and history at a local community college. They returned to New Hampshire in 2001 because Shea-Porter was homesick; she chose Rochester because she liked the socioeconomic mix, thinking it would help ground her children. And although she had met plenty of people through her role as chairperson of the Rochester Democratic Committee and her work on presidential campaigns, few voters outside those circles knew who she was or what she stood for.

Problem #2: She had no money. And everyone she talked to in the National Democratic Party and the New Hampshire Democratic Party told her she needed cash: the average Congressional campaign costs over \$1 million.

Problem #3: She wasn't interested in fundraising. She preferred to talk to people, to listen to their thoughts and share hers on Iraq (remove the troops as soon as possible) and education (reduce student loan interest rates) and economic opportunity (no more tax breaks for the very wealthy). "I represent the other 99 percent," she'd tell whoever would listen. The 99 percent that focused less on the stock market and "more on finding money for pizza on Friday night."

Problem #4: Because of the above, both the national and state party machines endorsed her opponent, Jim Craig, a well-established state representative from Manchester who served as the state house minority leader. "She wasn't raising any money," says Bill Shaheen '65, the long-time democratic activist and husband of former New Hampshire governor Jeanne Shaheen. "If you don't have money, you don't have a shot."

It's not that they didn't think that they needed any money. Rather, Shea-Porter and Mayer thought that they could campaign successfully with limited money. Instead of buying expensive television ads, they would use age-old methods of news delivery. Mayer reasoned that if the medieval crusaders could spread news effectively via horseback and foot, then think of how fast word could travel with the help of phones, highways and the Internet. Leaping ahead a half a millennium, they also borrowed from Malcolm Gladwell's best seller about change, *The Tipping Point*, which examines how certain ideas and behaviors act like outbreaks of disease. All you need are "carriers," people who will successfully convey the word to different populations.

First, they announced Shea-Porter's candidacy and key platform points through e-mail lists they had collected during the 2004 campaign. Members of those lists had lists of their own. Names begat names. Then they contacted environmental activists, health care professionals, educators. They began organizing house parties at which Shea-Porter would talk to a handful of people. The more people she talked to, the more people she recruited. She recruited Dave Kulju, a computer-savvy guitarist from Portsmouth, to build a web site. She recruited Ranan Cohen, a nutritionist from Newmarket who had served on the town council and organized local campaigns, to serve as her volunteer coordinator. And she recruited 82-year-old Romeo Dorval, a former banker who knew everyone in Manchester, to mobilize his forces for her.

As her inner circle drafted "carriers," Shea-Porter talked. She talked in coffee shops, in living rooms, at parades. Wherever people gathered, she talked. She talked about the need for affordable health care and prescription drugs. She talked about an energy plan that made the United States more independent. She talked about privacy, that the government should not interfere with reproductive or medical decisions. She couldn't walk through a room without talking to someone. At a function during the primary, Dorval says he watched as Jim Craig "walked from Point A to Point B and Shea-Porter stopped 100 times to talk to people."

What many remember is that she was so *nice*. Wise, knowledgeable, and *nice*. Not cynical. Not patronizing. She laughed a lot. She listened. She didn't lose her composure. When Bill Shaheen bumped into Shea-Porter at a picnic in Jackson for the Iron Mountain Democratic Committee, he warned her that she couldn't beat Jim Craig in the primary. He had money. She didn't. He was from Manchester. She wasn't. Shea-Porter didn't argue. She just smiled and said, "Now, Bill, when I win the primary, will you help me?"

"If you win," he said, "I'll do anything you want me to do."

After the primary, when she beat Craig--and two other opponents by 14 points, Shaheen became her campaign's co-chair. Her other co-chair was Jim Craig.

She had learned to disagree respectfully as an adolescent. More often than not, she was the dissenting voice at the Shea dinner table when the Vietnam War was debated. She revered both her father, a lawyer who had served in the Navy during World War II, and her mother, an antiques dealer, and learned to argue with facts, not emotion. And even though many of her siblings harbored different opinions, they were then, and are now, "very close," says Shea-Porter. During the congressional campaign, when she would be called a radical, when opponents nicknamed her "Moonbat" or tried to paint her as left as Howard Dean and Ted Kennedy, she was perplexed. "You can't be a liberal extremist and be welcome in a Republican family," she says.

Volunteers, not money, became the heartbeat of Shea-Porter's crusade. But instead of enlisting college students, the lifeforce of most political campaigns, Shea-Porter sought older volunteers. For one thing, she couldn't pay college students. For another, she wanted people who not only had time--retirees, middle-aged people with grown children--but also had strong ties to their communities, who felt passionately enough about the issues to work hard.

And work hard they did, those 600 volunteers. In North Conway, volunteers paid for their own newspaper advertisement. In Dover, "Carol People," as they called themselves, wrote personal notes on 55,000 postcards. In Belknap County, Lynn Rudmin Chong '67, a writing instructor at Plymouth State University, held signs, hosted Shea-Porter parties, sent hundreds of e-mails, and wrote dozens of letters to the editor of every newspaper in the district. On the coast, Cathy Cavallero, a Rye elementary school teacher, visited every home of every registered independent and Democratic voter in Seabrook, a blue collar town often overlooked by both parties. She then moved up the coast, soliciting votes in Hampton, North Hampton, and her hometown of Rye. She visited mobile home parks as well as cul de sacs of McMansions.

The volunteer frenzy left observers speechless. "There's never been anything really like it before," says Kevin Landrigan, senior political writer for *The Telegraph* of Nashua. What intrigued Landrigan was that because few thought she had a chance, Shea-Porter and her organization flew under the radar, receiving less scrutiny than other campaigns.

That, of course, helped. Shea-Porter could speak frankly, because few of her events were covered by the press. Only one of her handful of debates with Bradley was televised. She could woo trade unions by talking about the tough jobs she'd held while working her way through college, from scraping dishes at Stillings Dining Hall to sanding auto parts at Davidson Rubber to gluing heels at Dover shoe factories. She could talk to veterans about her father's service in the Navy and her husband's in the Army, about the need to take care of those returning from Iraq. She was refreshingly honest, says John Joyal, a welding instructor at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, who helped win her the endorsement of his union. "She looks you in the eye," he says. "And she doesn't dance around questions."

Despite the polls that always showed her lagging, despite the *Concord Monitor's* endorsement of Bradley, the

one that called her "brusque, even abrasive," Shea-Porter sensed victory. As she walked the sidewalks of Manchester, people rapped on windows, gave her the thumbs up, and honked as they drove by. As tired as she was, she waved, she smiled, and, of course, she talked.

In the hours and days after the election, as pundits absorbed the surprising win, she began to earn some respect, even from the right. Although Charlie Arlinghaus '88G, president of the Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy, a free-market think tank, agrees with other Republicans that it was "a good year to be a Democrat," he says Shea-Porter also worked hard and energized a lot of liberal residents. She was knowledgeable, Arlinghaus says, and used what little money she had well. She aired only two TV ads, one of which featured Shea-Porter and her mother, who was introduced as a lifelong Republican, and who then asked the audience to vote for her daughter. "Everyone remembers that ad," he says. "It was a great symbol of her campaign: cheap but effective."

In less than six days, Shea-Porter will be sworn in to the 110th Congress. She has yet to pack, yet to figure out her BlackBerry that is now filled with names like Pelosi and Obama, yet to renew her driver's license and register her car. All of these things she rattles off to her chief of staff Harry Gural, who has made the mistake of saying that the upcoming days won't be stressful. They are in a Manchester restaurant with French and some other members of the inner circle after a day stuffed with meetings--staff in the morning, environmentalists in the afternoon--a rally for presidential hopeful John Edwards and a thank-you tour through the West Manchester social clubs. She had promised to return if she won.

On this evening in late December, Shea-Porter has no way of knowing that in the first 100 hours of the new Congress, she will have the chance to keep other promises she made on the campaign trail, that she will vote to extend stem cell research, lower interest rates for college students and make prescription drugs affordable. She has no way of knowing that she will stand on the House floor to speak against President Bush's plan to send 20,000 additional troops to Iraq. All she knows right now is that next week she will begin the commuting life between Washington during the week and Rochester on the weekends. She knows that she will soon manage a staff of 18, a blend of campaign cohorts--Sue Mayer will serve as senior policy advisor--and seasoned Capitol Hill aides. To succeed, she recognizes that she must balance people who know her with people who know Washington. For those jobs, she says, "I received more applications than there are residents of New Hampshire."

She is well aware that her job is vulnerable, that Republicans are determined to win it back, that in 2008 she will not benefit from a Bush backlash and that she will no longer be Carol the Campaigner but Carol the Congresswoman. She will be a politician with a record. Anything could happen. Yet that is then and this is now and she is confident that if the rumbling volcano she heard during the past 14 months is accurate and truly does represent the will of her district, she will endure.

As she stands to leave the restaurant, a table of four begins to clap, then another breaks out, and another. "We love you, Carol," one woman yells. Shea-Porter walks over to the woman, shakes hands, smiles.

And begins to talk.

Sue Hertz '78 is an associate professor of journalism at UNH and author of Caught in the Crossfire: A Year on Abortion's Front Line. Her articles have appeared in national and regional magazines.

[Return to UNH Magazine Winter '07 features](#)