

When Townsend failed to pass a budget override last year, **Qenan** Francois was among those in the unique position to see the real effects.

After the failed override, Francois, now 18 years old and a senior at North Middlesex Regional High School, saw the consequences when 21 district staff members had to be laid off, including some of his past teachers. Townsend was one of many towns to go through an override vote and fail to pass it, and it opened Francois' eyes to the kinds of consequences that can happen with simply "following the status quo."

Fast forward to this spring, just days before the April 28 local election. Francois noticed that nobody had thrown their hat in the ring for an open North Middlesex Regional School Committee seat. So, as a student and voter in that very district, Francois mounted a last-minute write-in campaign to fill that seat, and won with 96 votes and no named opposition.

"I had thoughts about running before, but prior to the Saturday before the election, I didn't think I would be doing it," said Francois in a phone call May 14.

Francois used the timing of Townsend's Earth Day celebration to get the word out about his candidacy on short notice, and it paid off in a race where every vote was a write-in vote. Now a sworn in member of the committee, Francois' focus will be on supporting the teaching staff and extracurricular activities in the district, and to "make sure the youth voice is heard."

"Last year they were on the chopping block to save money. At the high school we have over 20 clubs, 20 or 30 athletic teams and all have very high student engagement," said Francois.

Francois will soon finish up his high school career, and he will move on to UMass Lowell to study economics, something he took a class for during the override debate and fell in love with and was able to apply to the real-life scenario playing out in his town.

At a time when the general sense across the country is that politicians are too old, Francois' election broke a status quo, but in Greater Lowell this year he was one of several young candidates to win a local elected position.

"There is no way the youth of this country will be able to have any sort of substantial impact unless we put ourselves in the hot seat," said Francois.

On the very same ballot in Townsend was Harrison Mayotte, who won a one-year term as the town clerk in a race against Sarah Logan. While town clerk is often an elected position, it typically serves a more administrative role in local government, which Mayotte, at 20, already had some experience in. Before moving to Townsend Mayotte grew up in Chelmsford, where he served as a department support coordinator in the Town Clerk's Office up until his election last month. He also serves as an alternate member on the Nashoba Valley Technical High School Committee, and graduated from Nashoba Tech in 2023 with a high school diploma and two associate degrees from Middlesex Community College.

Having since received his bachelor's degree in business administration from Southern New Hampshire University, Mayotte said in a May 21 phone call he thinks he wants to pursue a long-term career in public administration, and perhaps aim for a town or city manager role. With his relative youth, Mayotte said he has time on his side for that career arc.

"Being 20, I have 43 more years until I retire. I have a handful of years ahead to explore different options," said Mayotte.

Mayotte said he may look to a master's or law degree in the future, but for now he is putting his focus on his current role, for which he was sworn in on May 5. For young people who may want to put their name out

there for a political or administrative position, Mayotte had simple advice.

"Do your research, and be prepared," said Mayotte. "As a former Boy Scout, 'be prepared' was the motto, and I take that to heart."

In Billerica, another current student convincingly took an elected position last month, but this time for the town's Select Board, and among a rather crowded field of candidates. Daniel Darris-O'Connor, an 18-year-old senior at Billerica Memorial High School, was one of two candidates to win a seat in a race between five candidates.

Darris-O'Connor has been involved in town in recent years, first as a student representative on the Billerica School Committee, and as a member of the Substance Abuse Awareness & Prevention Committee. Political tensions have been high in Billerica recently, and Darris-O'Connor said he saw things becoming "too politicized," especially when it came to the Select Board's relationship with the town manager.

Like some of his other young counterparts, Darris-O'Connor is preparing to attend UMass Lowell this fall, where he wishes to study international relations, while simultaneously working toward his dream of becoming a pilot. For those interested in running for office but who may be intimidated by the prospect, Darris-O'Connor said there are ways to gain that kind of experience without having to run for something first.

"For anybody getting involved, young or old, the only thing holding a lot of people back is putting their foot in the door," said Darris-O'Connor in a May 14 phone call. "Help out a campaign first, apply to some of the appointed boards, and talk to your elected officials."

Since his election, Darris-O'Connor said some of his friends have jokingly referred to him as "selectman" in their normal conversations, but otherwise his relationships with his classmates are largely the same as before the election.

On the state level, the trend of victorious younger candidates took the form of state Rep. Tara Hong, who at 24 years old unseated incumbent Rady Mom in the Democratic primary for Lowell's 18th Middlesex District last September. He would then go on to win the general election without a candidate from an opposing party.

Hong's win last year was his second attempt at the seat, with an unsuccessful run in 2022 at the age of 22. While Hong is on the older side of this field of young candidates in Greater Lowell, he said in a May 21 phone call he was happy to see more younger candidates running for office.

"My advice to them is to just keep going. Don't give up from all of the negative responses from some people," said Hong.

In the first five months of his term, Hong said he at first had some difficulty getting to know other representatives and getting his points heard, but said a lot of success in the Legislature is "up to you and how much you put into it."

"There have been a lot of good responses, a lot of feedback and a lot of friendship as well," said Hong.

Even during his unsuccessful bid for the seat in the Legislature, Hong said he found some success in presenting himself and convincing people that age does not matter in politics.

The trend of young election winners was even visible just outside of Greater Lowell. In Andover, 19-year-old Chris Shepley won a seat on the School Committee in March after his second attempt in as many years.

Ahead of his graduation from Andover High School last year, Shepley ran for a seat in a decision spurred by the Andover teachers' strike the previous November.

"I just felt the current officeholders were not representing the community. I had spent a lot of time talking about it with people, and finally one of my friends said, 'Why don't you just run for office?'" said Shepley in a May 21 phone call.

After his loss in 2024, Shepley said he didn't think he would run again, but after a number of people reached

out asking if he would give it another shot, he put his name in again this year.

"Things were a lot smoother and I was able to kind of get things going a lot faster, and I was fortunate to be endorsed by the teachers' union," said Shepley.

Shepley is also attending UMass Lowell as a business administration major with a concentration in accounting. He hadn't planned on running for any sort of office before his first attempt, but said he has already found a deep appreciation for the work and "trying to shape my community."

Even in his loss last year, Shepley's presence on the ballot may have had an impact on its own, with election officials telling him they noticed a sharp uptick in younger voters compared to prior years.

"Obviously the turnout for local elections is usually pretty bad, but I was really excited that a lot of my classmates were involved," said Shepley.

Shepley's advice to anyone his age looking to run for something is to just go for it.

"It is so important, because oftentimes, whether it is the Select Board or School Committee, there are not a lot of young voices on there," said Shepley. "The only way to start to bring change is to get people there. It's tough sometimes getting over the age barrier, or trying to talk to a retiree and say, 'Hi, I am running for office,' and they look at you and see a kid ... You have to run for the right reason and you have to have a message."

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