

“The beginning is the most important part of the work.”  
PLATO GREEK PHILOSOPHER

# Alder candidates hone digital campaigns, set different priorities

BY KADE GAJDUSEK  
STAFF REPORTER

Three Yale students running to represent downtown New Haven on the Board of Alders will face off in the Democratic primary in less than two weeks, and the candidates are still honing their online personas.

Norah Laughter '26, Elias Theodore '27 and Rhea McTiernan Huge '27, all running to represent Ward 1 in New Haven's legislative body, have made efforts to reach voters through screens. After all, much of Ward 1 consists of Yale buildings and student housing, including eight residential colleges and Old Campus — which sat largely empty over the summer.

With the primary quickly approaching on Sept. 9, candidates have highlighted different parts of their platforms to spread the word about their events and encourage students to register to vote. Students can register to vote in the primary in-person at the Registrar of Voters until Sept. 8.

The three candidates' websites all list resources for voter registration — including Ward 1 maps, the phone number of New Haven's registrar and polling locations.

But when it comes to highlighting specific elements of their campaign platforms, each candidate has taken a unique approach online.

**Theodore mimics Mamdani**

Theodore, who claims inspiration from New York City mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani's approachable digital demeanor, was the first to create

a campaign Instagram page and made his first post on July 22.

In his video posts, Theodore is frequently en route to various locations around Ward 1. On his Instagram page, he often offers to bike and meet followers wherever they are. He told the News he plans to keep up this offer if elected alder.

Theodore's Instagram page also identifies his five primary goals if elected alder: meeting every constituent, bridging the gap between Yale and New Haven, incorporating more community input in decisions, improving essential infrastructure and making municipal government more accessible to everyone.

His website explains some of his background, including that he moved to New Haven when he was 6 years old and first went to The Foote School and then to Wilbur Cross High School, the largest public school in New Haven.

Theodore recalls his entrance into local politics when he and fellow Wilbur Cross baseball players took up the issue of poor field conditions with the Board of Alders and successfully received money for its repair. The experience made him optimistic about the roles of local officials.

“Being from New Haven means understanding the beauty of a small city,” Theodore said in one of his Instagram stories. “Being from New Haven and staying in New Haven and being involved in New Haven I think reflects a sense of hope.”

**McTiernan Huge showcases favorite parts of New Haven**

A fellow Wilbur Cross graduate, though she graduated high school a year before Theodore,

McTiernan Huge is adamant about caring for her hometown.

On her campaign website, McTiernan Huge describes Wilbur Cross' financial difficulties and lack of resources. When she came to Yale, she knew that she would have access to more resources than she did in high school and, therefore, wanted to give back, she said. Since starting at Yale, McTiernan Huge has worked closely with the current Ward 1 alder, Kiana Flores '26, who endorsed McTiernan Huge's campaign.

“Creating content that is engaging, informative and lays out important issues in the ward has been my goal, but I am also hoping to showcase New Haven and its spaces, events and resources,” McTiernan Huge said. “New Haven is truly such an amazing place, I love it so dearly and it's been wonderful to show that on social media.”

McTiernan Huge grounds her campaign posts in her love for different parts of New Haven. She frequently mentions her time spent vending at farmers' markets, living in Wooster Square and making jewelry for her local business.

On McTiernan Huge's campaign Instagram page, she talks about a number of issues she would focus on as Ward 1 alder, including increasing funding for public schools, protecting New Haven's sanctuary city status, implementing safe bike lanes and affordable buses, and advocating for increased grocery options.

She criticizes the money allocated toward public education as too small on her website — which she blames on the fact that Yale takes up a significant portion of tax-exempt

New Haven property.

McTiernan Huge's campaign website originally misstated how much funding New Haven schools get from local property taxes and attributed the incorrect information to an article from the News, despite the News' article having the correct statistic. Her site originally said schools receive 92 percent of their funding from property taxes, rather than 56 percent, which is the actual percentage.

When asked by the News about this mistake, McTiernan Huge said that she found the statistic on a website that had republished the News' article. She then corrected the error on her campaign site.

**Laughter features voices of her supporters**

McTiernan Huge is not alone in her critique of Yale. On both her website and Instagram, Laughter, a Kentucky native, advocates for bringing Yale to the negotiating table — with its employee unions and its host city.

Her first semester at Yale, in 2022, Laughter joined Students Unite Now, a student group that promotes increased financial aid and student wages, to advocate on behalf of labor unions and working students. She has organized alongside unions since she arrived at Yale and testified in support of Connecticut Senate Bill 8, a piece of legislation that increased worker protections.

In addition to working with SUN, Laughter is also the Ward 1 co-chair on the Democratic Town Committee. On her website, she reports running on a shared platform with Alder Frank Douglass, a retired Local 35 union member who represents part of the nearby Dwight neighborhood.

Theodore might model his social media after Mamdani's, but Laughter was recently reposted on Mamdani's Instagram story after she tagged him in a screenshot she took of his original post depicting him with unionized U.S. Open workers.

“This was just a repost from a tag (which we do regularly) and nothing more,” Mamdani's press secretary Dora Pekec wrote the News. Mamdani and Pekec did not comment further on Laughter's campaign and have not since engaged with the Ward 1 race.

Laughter's social media posts largely feature quotes from her supporters, which include both Yale students and various local residents. Many of their quotes focus on Laughter's involvement with unions and advocacy groups, both at Yale and in New Haven.

Laughter told the News she was not particularly excited about the online campaigning craze, instead preferring to engage with voters in a face to face manner, but she understands that campaigning digitally might be the key to a successful campaign.

“I fear it's a necessity,” Laughter said when asked about the online format of campaigning. “In my dream, I would just talk a lot to them all day about what they would want to see in their lives.”

Laughter was the last candidate to release a campaign site.

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COURTESY OF ELIAS THEODORE, NORAH LAUGHTER AND RHEA MCTIERNAN HUGE  
Three Yale students running to represent downtown New Haven in the city's legislative body have prioritized registering voters but taken different approaches to presenting their campaigns online.

# Students who cannot vote in the Ward 1 alder race engage anyways

BY JAKE ROBBINS  
STAFF REPORTER

The Yalies running to represent downtown New Haven in the Board of Alders have caught the attention of classmates who aren't eligible to vote for them.

Three undergraduate candidates, Norah Laughter '26, Rhea McTiernan Huge '27 and Elias Theodore '27, have thrown their hats in the ring to represent Ward 1 on New Haven's Board of Alders. Earlier this month, all three candidates successfully petitioned to appear on the ballot of the Democratic primary election, which will take place Sept. 9.

Six residential colleges, Benjamin Franklin, Morse, Pauli Murray, Silliman, Ezra Stiles and Timothy Dwight, are outside the bounds of Ward 1, the district in New Haven which most encompasses Yale and is typically represented by an undergraduate. Despite this, the three Yalies running for Ward 1 alder have courted students with social media campaigns and tabling events regardless of what college they call home.

Ward 1 encompasses eight of Yale's 14 residential colleges and all of Old Campus, where most first-year undergraduates reside. The district also includes about half of the New Haven Green. The other six colleges are in Ward 22, which is represented by Alder Jeanette

Morrison and also encompasses the Dixwell neighborhood.

Morrison, who has represented Ward 22 for 14 years, said she has noticed heightened student engagement in this year's Ward 1 alder race, which is unusually competitive. While she doesn't believe the race has fundamentally changed levels of student engagement with New Haven, she said it has stimulated increased attention to local politics.

“I wouldn't say there's been a major shift in how students engage,” Morrison said in a phone interview. “What I see is an onset of involvement: Students are becoming more aware that they have opportunities to participate in local politics, even if they are not directly voting in Ward 1.”

Campaigns like Laughter's, which include both student and local volunteers, reflect the race's ability to encourage student engagement with New Haven, Morrison said. Still, she said that the Ward 1 election has not significantly impacted levels of student engagement with Ward 22's politics.

Morrison cultivates relationships with Yale students in her district by appointing student co-chairs to represent Ward 22 on the Democratic Town Committee and by holding meetings at the six residential colleges within her ward. She said this structure

allows students to learn about local government and helps her build stronger connections between Yale and New Haven.

While many undergraduates' needs — such as housing and dining — are met on campus, Morrison noted that graduate students and off-campus students tend to interact with her office more directly, particularly when navigating issues like landlord disputes or rental conditions.

Although Zach Pan '27, a junior in Ezra Stiles College, cannot vote in the Ward 1 election, he said he has followed the race closely, spoken with several candidates and plans to attend campaign events. He said that seat carries weight beyond Ward 1 because of its role shaping Yale's relationship to the city.

“Even though I live outside Ward 1, I believe the alder will have a pivotal role to play in ensuring the University properly funds New Haven,” Pan said. “That is what motivates a lot of my interest and participation in the electoral process.”

Tajrian Khan '27, a junior in Benjamin Franklin College, said he has been following the Ward 1 alder race closely despite not living in the ward or being able to vote in the election.

“I've read the YDN and New Haven Independent features on each candidate,” Khan wrote

in a text message. “I've been seeing Elias's campaign all over Instagram. I've also seen him speaking to voters in person all over Ward 1, as well as helping new voters register.”

Khan, who was born and raised in Dhaka, Bangladesh, said his experiences studying urban planning and volunteering in New Haven have deepened his understanding of the city's politics and made him more attentive to the race.

Like Pan, he feels that municipal decisions made by the Board of Alders impact students across campus, regardless of where they live. While he does not plan to attend any in-person campaign events, he said he will continue following the candidates platforms closely.

Miriam Levenson '29, a lifelong resident of the New Haven area and a student in Silliman, said she first learned about the Ward 1 alder race through social media, where she frequently saw campaign videos, especially from Theodore.

Though Levenson later learned that her Silliman address disqualifies her from voting in Ward 1, she said the visibility of the campaigns still motivated her to pay closer attention to local politics.

“I was planning to vote in the election, though I hadn't decided on my candidate,” Levenson wrote

in an email to the News. “I found out that I'm not going to be directly involved in the race, but I'm still excited to know what Yale students can be involved in the city I love, and that they want to be. Every poster, table or video I see about the Ward 1 race reminds me to be involved in local politics.”

Levenson added that she views the Ward 1 alder role as an important bridge between Yale students and New Haveners, both practically and symbolically.

Citing issues like housing, transportation and Yale's voluntary contributions to the city, Levenson emphasized that the alder's influence extends beyond Ward 1 and affects the broader Yale community.

Although she did not know her alder's name when asked by the News, Levenson said the race has pushed her to feel “more responsible” for learning about her ward's representation and becoming informed about local government. She added that the contest has motivated her to consider deeper civic engagement, even expressing interest in running for a city position in the future.

The Board of Alders meets at New Haven's City Hall, located at 165 Church St.

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