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Bye-Bye Boys' Club

How Annie's List is
revolutionizing
Texas politics.

by Bob Moser

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(left to right) Senator Wendy Davis, representatives Kristi Thibaut and Carol Kent.

Bye-Bye, Boys' Club

How Annie's List is revolutionizing Texas politics.

by BOB MOSER
photos by CHRIS CARSON

"God forbid that the day will come when we will see women turned loose upon the nation, a set of raving, tearing politicians, standing elbow to elbow with the rabble and toughs; unsexing themselves to the detriment of the home and of all social and domestic relations."

—Anonymous Texas woman, quoted in the *San Antonio Express*, 1894

In the spring of 2007, Diana Maldonado figured she was ready to take her next leap. A former teen mom who'd grown up poor in the border town of Eagle Pass, she'd already made a lifelong habit of exceeding expectations. "Eagle Pass was really a wonderful place to grow up," she says. "But in that community, you weren't expected to go to college. Nobody knew how to give kids a blueprint for that. But from the third grade on, I just knew. Somehow I would."

Somehow she did. While raising two young children, Maldonado worked her way through St. Edward's University in Austin, graduating magna cum laude. She became an award-winning efficiency expert during 23 years in the state comptroller's office in Austin and won election in 2003 to the school board in traditionally conservative Round Rock, ultimately becoming the first Latina president of that board. Along the way, she demonstrated that underneath her ebullient personality—Maldonado seems to break into a broad grin every few minutes, and lets loose with a merry, trilling laugh almost as often—was a force to be reckoned with, possessed of "an old-fashioned 'can-do' work ethic, personal grit, and an ability to reach across traditional political barriers to build alliances and get practical things done," as the local *Williamson County Sun* has effused.

Even though the Round Rock schools had transformed into a statewide model for educational improvements during her tenure, Maldonado couldn't stomach the thought of a third term. "After countless school board meetings, staying up late, trying to find solutions that at bottom were problems stemming from the state level—poor policies and a lack of funding—I was

ready for something else," she says. "When I'd go to the [Texas] school board conferences, you'd have over 1,000 school districts, and whether they were large or small, rich or poor, there was this common thread that everyone was struggling. That got me started thinking: Maybe I could make more of a difference in the Legislature."

But how to get there? Williamson County had long been a Republican stronghold, strong enough for its state representative, Mike Krusee, to have won eight terms stretching back to 1993. But Maldonado saw signs that his district was ready to elect a Democrat. Thanks to high-tech employers like Dell and thousands of Austin refugees who had come looking for affordable housing, "the demographics have been changing, and with that change came more Democratic voters and more independents as well," she says.

Even so, in a year when Democrats were threatening to reverse the Republican majority in the state House, Maldonado's GOP opponent was sure to rake in plenty of money to fend off a challenge. It would take more than a candidate as gritty and talented as Maldonado; it would take a kind of Democratic campaign that Williamson County had never seen. Which is exactly what unfolded, as soon as Annie's List got wind of Maldonado's interest.

In April '07, while the Lege was slogging through another contentious and mostly unproductive session, Maldonado went to an education fundraiser in Round Rock and chatted up the local Democratic chair. "That was like on a Saturday evening," she says. "Monday morning, I got a call from Robert Jones." Since 2006, Jones, who worked for EMILY's List, the national woman's PAC, and directed the Texas House Democratic Campaign Committee, has been political director of Annie's List, a Texas PAC with an impressive track record helping pro-choice women get elected. "The next thing I knew we were doing lunch," Maldonado says. "And the next thing I knew after that, I had started a 19-month campaign."

Maldonado went through Annie's List candidate training. She was given three staffers trained in the group's campaign school. She broadened and sharpened her message beyond her educational expertise. She knocked on countless doors, day after day, keeping herself to a personal vow: "For everyone who says no, I told myself, I will always talk to five who say yes." She phone-banked "until I was hoarse." Whenever a volunteer came back from block-walking and reported an undecided voter, Maldonado called each one personally. "They were surprised to be hearing from the candidate," she says. "But I told them that's part of the change we're talking about."

This past November, despite an infusion of almost \$600,000 into her opponent's campaign by Republican and big-business groups in the final six weeks, Maldonado became one of four new women legislators to "flip" Republican districts across the state. Over the past three election cycles, Annie's List candidates have taken eight Republican seats and sent 13 new lawmakers to Austin, setting records for women's representation in each of the last two sessions. Those women, in turn, are threatening to turn the most powerful boys' club in Texas into a very different, less dysfunctional place.



Rep. Diana Maldonado.

Founded in 2003 and named for Annie Webb Blanton, the first woman to win statewide election in Texas, as state superintendent of instruction in 1918, Annie's List was born of desperation. Texas politics, dominated by such swaggering exemplars of faux-cowboy *machismo* as Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush, has long been one of the nation's least friendly venues for women—nowhere more so than in the Lege. While about 6,000 men have served, fewer than 150 women have occupied desks on the House or Senate floors. Until 1975, there had never been more than five women in the Legislature at one time; that year, suddenly, there were nine—out of 181.

For most of the state's history, the few women who made it to Austin were greeted on their first days with bouquets and corsages—and then expected to sit back and keep quiet. In a 2007 *Observer* profile, groundbreaking politician Sissy Farenthold recalled to contributing writer Robert Leleux that a few months after her election to the House in 1968, "I read in the newspaper that the governor [Preston Smith] had told a group of Democratic women from Michigan, 'I feel that I can say in all confidence that within 10 years, a woman will be elected to the Texas Legislature.' And I was *in* the Texas Legislature," along with Barbara Jordan, the future congresswoman from Houston. "So the next morning, I marched right into the governor's office so that I could introduce myself." Smith's reaction is unrecorded. But the message was clear. Farenthold recalled it as "one of the moments when I really got it, really got a glimpse of what women were up against. ... Because even if you were nominated, even if you got elected, you still weren't *there*."

Ann Richards' breakthrough to the governor's office in 1990

and Kay Bailey Hutchison's subsequent election to the U.S. Senate changed perceptions a little but did not exactly result in a wave of women being sent to Austin. By fits and starts, the number of women in the Lege did slowly creep upward—until the infamous redistricting spearheaded earlier this decade by U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay. In 2002, five women lost their seats after their districts were turned into Republican redoubts. "Suddenly," says Rep. Valinda Bolton, whom Annie's List helped elect in 2006, "there was not a single urban or suburban Anglo Democratic woman in the Legislature."

The 2003 session proved calamitous for issues that progressive women had long championed. The Children's Health Insurance Program was sliced nearly in half. Textbook and education funding tanked. The budget for family planning was cut significantly. A small group of Texas women decided there was only one thing to do: Find a way to get more of their own into office. But despite helping Houston's Alma Adams and McAllen's Veronica Gonzales knock off incumbents in 2004, Annie's List got off to a rocky start—so rocky that it almost didn't make it to the next election cycle. The organization nearly broke apart after donors discovered (and *Texas Weekly* reported) that it was spending 81 percent of their contributions on overhead expenses and paying one cofounder, former statewide Democratic candidate Sherry Boyles, a salary and expenses that added up to about a quarter of the group's 2005 donations.

When Boyles left in early 2006, Austin activist Kelly White came aboard, teaming with Jones to stage a remarkably quick revival. (White serves on the board of the Texas Democracy Foundation, which publishes the *Observer*.) Channeling its resources into candidate and staff training, year-round fundraising and carefully targeted voter mobilization, Annie's List candidates accounted for four of the six Democrats who unseated Republican representatives in 2006. With momentum from '06, the group continued to establish itself as a state-of-the-art example of the grassroots transformation that has made progressives viable again, in Texas and across the South, after three decades of being out-hustled and out-organized by right-wingers.

Bolton's 2006 campaign exemplified the approach. "I've told Robert I'm the poster child for why and how Annie's List works," Bolton says. At 47, she was a political newcomer who'd worked most of her career in nonprofits, serving for a time as training director for the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence. Bolton was well-liked and well-known in her Southwest Travis County district, which she says had been redrawn during the DeLay mess to create a Republican seat. But before she could tackle a Republican opponent, she was facing a tough primary against four Democrats, most notably Jason Earle, son of that longtime Travis County district attorney and hero of the Democratic establishment, Ronnie Earle. "To say that running against him made fundraising difficult would be one of the great understatements of all time," Bolton says. "People were constantly telling me, 'I think you're wonderful, I think you'd do a good job, but ...'" But they didn't want to risk disloyalty to Ronnie Earle.

"There was plenty to indicate that a Democrat could win in the district," Bolton says. "We had several women judges and

"Women tend to be more collaborative and less competitive. There's an emphasis on the process, and on finding win-win solutions."

Democrats in other offices. But people didn't think I could win. Until Annie's List took a gamble on me." The group kicked early "seed money" into Bolton's campaign, demonstrating her viability to other potential donors. But, Bolton says, "What mattered was not just the influx of cash, but also the logistical support. Before they decided to take me on, I'd been making fundraising calls for two months in my kitchen." Now she had a place to go—and a group to lean on for polling, voter targeting, message sharpening and staffing. Annie's List trains scores of Texans (mostly, but not exclusively, women) every year in its campaign schools and sends promising recent college grads to Washington for EMILY's List training before integrating them into its target campaigns. Bolton's campaign got a boost from trainee Tommy Tynes, an amiable bundle of energy who's now Diana Maldonado's chief of staff.

For Bolton, there were other benefits. "I have this tendency to shoot from the lip," she says, chuckling. "Robert's really good at *attempting* to rein me in from that."

After dispatching Jason Earle in the primary, Bolton stuck to her message of pragmatic change during a fierce general-election showdown with Republican Bill Welch. In the final 30 days of the campaign, smelling trouble, Republican House Speaker Tom Craddick and his allies poured \$800,000 into Welch's campaign. "It became the single most expensive House race in Texas history to that point, and not because of *my* spending, I can assure you!" says Bolton. In all, Annie's List gave Bolton \$80,000—but because it was early and well-timed, it was money that mattered.

Building momentum and credibility after its 2006 turnaround, Annie's List became the 18th biggest donor to Texas campaigns in 2008, disbursing more than \$800,000 total—led by the \$155,000 it spent to help Wendy Davis, a former Fort Worth City Council member, unseat an incumbent in Tarrant County. That victory gave Democrats their lone pickup in the state Senate. "The important thing was the early seed money they provided," Davis says. "I had \$50,000 to start the race; my opponent had almost \$1 million in his war chest. But just as important as the contributions from them directly, Annie's List opened an avenue to so many other donors who were absolutely crucial to my campaign. They connect you with so many people around the state who are supportive of progressive women in public office. There's a ripple effect from the Annie's List endorsement."

Taking another gamble in 2008, Annie's List got behind Houston Democrat Kristi Thibaut's second run for the House. "People thought we were crazy for that one," Jones says. In 2006, Thibaut had won just 42 percent against the same Republican

opponent she'd be facing in '08. Annie's List researchers found, though, that the GOP voter base in Thibaut's highly diverse district was weakening. Even so, "You can have the right district and be the best candidate in the world," says Thibaut, a former legislative aide and well-known community activist, "and if you don't have the resources to get your message out, you can just forget it. Not only did Annie's List make a huge commitment money-wise, they also gave me a staffer and paid for him. He's going to be on my staff in Austin now."

What difference does it make to have more women legislators? The classic answer, supported by several academic studies, is that women tend to focus on issues that hit close to home, quite literally. Women have been more likely to sponsor legislation to improve education, pay equity, health care and family-leave policies, and—no surprise—to defend reproductive rights and combat sexual and domestic violence. "Ultimately," says Annie's List executive director and fundraising whiz Bree Buchanan, "electing more women is a means to an end. What we really want is to promote a progressive agenda."

The Annie's List legislators have been fairly effective on those issues thus far, especially considering that it generally takes a few terms for House and Senate members to accrue the power to push their bills through. Both Gonzales and Bolton were named "freshmen" of the year by different groups after their first terms. Rep. Ellen Cohen, the former head of the Houston Area Women's Center whom Annie's List helped send to Austin in 2006, notes that she "passed a bill that raised funds for sexual-assault programs—the only revenue-raising fee in the entire session."

But the women Annie's List has elevated to the Legislature are hardly carbon copies, ideologically or otherwise. They are all pro-choice, but beyond that, they're a varied lot. "I took some positions that would look conservative to a lot of people," says Davis. While serving on the Fort Worth Council, she fought an effort by local police and firefighters to unionize. And she made a point of working "with people Democratic candidates are often not comfortable with, Chamber of Commerce and Rotary folks." But Davis was assured by Annie's List and the state Democratic Party, she says, that they were ready to support "someone who's moderate, who has a proven record of working across the aisle to get things done."

"People think Annie's List people are all working for a particular agenda," says Carol Kent, former president of the Richardson school board and a self-described moderate who unseated a Republican incumbent in 2008. "But there's not a mindset to this. There's no dictate to it."

Cohen agrees. During her campaigns, she says, "Annie's List gave me that solid rock I could turn to whenever I needed additional advice. But they didn't try and get involved where they shouldn't. It wasn't, 'We're helping you and giving you funds and you have to do it *this way*.'"

What Annie's List legislators do have in common, most of them agree, involves more legislative style than substance. "The main difference," says Bolton, "is not *what* we focus on but *how*

we focus on it. Women tend to be more collaborative and less competitive. There's an emphasis on the process, and on finding win-win solutions."

"Women are mediators by DNA," Gonzales says. "We're good at being able to work with others. You always negotiate in families, and women are often the go-betweens. Women have sometimes a softer and more diplomatic way," and in terms of being effective in the Legislature, that's often "what it's all about. So many times the vote comes so quickly that people will vote with the person they trust and who you know is being honest with you."

The effectiveness of the Annie's list legislators will not be hurt, this session, by the fact that all of them were among the 64 Democrats who signed a pledge not to support the re-election of Republican Speaker Tom Craddick, crippling his effort to win back the gavel. In December, they were all among the 85 House members who committed to support Joe Straus, the new, less ideological Republican speaker.

At the Lege, the women say they are no longer treated as an exotic or invisible species. In Farenthold's terms, everybody knows they're *there*. Of course, during campaigns, they still run up against the occasional stereotype, like the time last fall when Maldonado was asked if her hairdo was modeled after Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin's (the sophisticated, down-sweeping version, not the beehive). "I've been wearing it longer and better than Sarah," she responded. And moved on.

At times, though, it appears that running as a woman brings decided advantages in the current climate of "change." Kent will never forget one day on the trail last summer. "It's mid-July, and hot hot hot. I've been walking the Garland area, knocking on doors, for far more hours than I probably should have been. I come to one more door and knock, knock, knock. I hear some rustling behind the door. You can always tell when someone's peeked out and decided not to answer.

"So I leave behind some literature, head out and turn down the sidewalk again. I hear the door creaking open back there, and suddenly this man is running after me, calling out, 'Wait! Wait!' He says, 'I want you to know that I'm supporting you.' I thought, 'Hmmm—I didn't even have a chance to tell you what I'm standing for.' But he says, 'I'm supporting *every* woman who runs this time. Men have run everything for so long, I'm supporting the women!'

"And you know, I was about to pack it in for the day. But after that, I couldn't help wanting to go and knock on 20 more doors." ■

WOMEN TO WATCH

For profiles of Senator Wendy Davis and representatives Carol Kent and Kristi Thibaut, check out the *Observer's* new Legislature page at:

www.texasobserver.org