

## An ‘accidental politician,’ Aruna Miller prepares to become Maryland’s next lieutenant governor

Pamela Wood 12/14/22 6:00 a.m. EST



Lt. Gov.-elect Aruna Miller poses for a few candid photo during an interview at The Baltimore Banner. Miller, a Democrat from Montgomery County, is a transportation engineer by training, served in the Maryland House of Delegates, immigrated to the U.S. from India as a child, and will be the first woman of color as Maryland lieutenant governor. (Kirk McKoy/The Baltimore Banner)

The way Aruna Miller sees it, she’s an “accidental politician.” And even when she launched a political career, she never imagined she’d climb to one of the highest offices in Maryland’s state government.

But on Jan. 18, she’ll become the second-ranking official in Maryland, the second woman and the first woman of color to raise her hand and be sworn in as lieutenant governor of Maryland alongside the next governor, Wes Moore.

“I cannot tell you what a profound moment it’s going to be,” Miller said in an interview with The Baltimore Banner. “I can’t even comprehend it.”

Moore hopes that when Miller takes the oath of office, it launches her into a new level of public service.

“She’s not just going to be the next lieutenant governor for the state of Maryland,” Moore said at a campaign event this summer. “She will be the most consequential lieutenant governor in this country. And you can mark my words.”



That's a lot of hype — and hope — for someone who never considered a political career for most of her life.

Lt. Gov.-elect Aruna Miller talks with The Baltimore Banner about her political career. An transportation engineer by training and former member of the Maryland House of Delegates, Miller will be the first woman of color to serve as Maryland lieutenant governor. (Kirk McKoy/The Baltimore Banner)

Miller, 58, immigrated to the United States from India as a 7-year-old child. She often tells a story of stepping off the plane in New York City and seeing what she thought was confetti welcoming her to America.

It was snow.

As Miller's family adjusted to their new country — weather, food, culture — politics was not part of family discussions.

"We never talked about politics at the kitchen table," she said. "We never talked about civic engagement, because it was more important that we assimilated into the new world, work hard, study hard, stay under the radar."

At the urging of her parents, Miller went to college for civil engineering and launched a career as a transportation engineer. She got married, had kids and ended up in Maryland.

After becoming a U.S. citizen in 2000, Miller cast her first vote in that year's presidential election.

"I remember distinctly crying in the polling booth. Like, 'Oh my gosh, this really makes me an American,'" she recalled.

That civic euphoria was short-lived, however, as the race between Democratic Vice President Al Gore and Republican nominee George W. Bush ended up in a dispute that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Bush was declared the winner and Miller, who had voted for Gore, felt "so defeated."

She ended up calling the local Democratic Party: “I don’t know a single thing of what you do. I have only voted once in my life, but I want to do something because I feel like I should be doing more.”

That led to Miller becoming a precinct-level volunteer for the Democratic Party and nominee John Kerry in the 2004 election. From there, she applied for an opening on the party’s central committee in Montgomery County, a group that’s responsible for the party’s on-the-ground local efforts. Miller said it was like “drinking from a fire hose.”

When there was an opening in the House of Delegates for the 2010 election, Miller initially declined requests that she run for it. She wasn’t convinced that people would “vote for a brown woman.”

Rob Garagiola, who was a state senator at the time, was among those pressing Miller to make the jump into elected politics. Miller, he said, was a determined volunteer for the party, knocking on doors and stuffing envelopes.

“I just saw someone who was thoughtful, hard-working, heart in the right place, wanted to do good for the community, empathetic, curious and smart — all the traits I wanted to have in a public servant,” said Garagiola, who became a lobbyist after three terms in the Senate.

Garagiola said others were encouraging Miller, too, including longtime party volunteers. “Aruna was seen as a really good person that was talented in many respects,” he said.

It was Miller’s husband, David Miller, who eventually talked her into it.

“He’s talking to me and I say, ‘What if I lose?’ And he’s like, ‘What if you win?’” Miller recalled. “And that never occurred to me that I could have a moment like that because I’ve never seen anybody that looked like me that was in this role. All I could see was that I would lose.”

She didn’t lose — she made it through a contested Democratic primary and then easily won a seat in the general election.



Miller served two terms in the House of Delegates, giving up her seat in 2018 for what turned out to be an unsuccessful run for Congress that year.

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As the 2022 election season approached, Miller started weighing her options, including the possibility of another run for Congress or maybe looking for a job in President Joe Biden's administration.

Then Wes Moore's team called.

Amanda La Forge, who was the campaign's lawyer, knew Miller from serving with her on the board of Emerge Maryland, an organization that trains Democratic women for office. She recommended to Moore that he put Miller on his list of potential running mates.

First, there was a get-to-know-you meeting between the Millers and the Moores at a Baltimore restaurant. Miller came away convinced Moore would become the state's next governor.

"I've met a lot of different elected officials and candidates, but no one has ever struck me as dynamic as he is," Miller said.

There were more meetings and phone calls. Soon enough, Miller was under consideration to become Moore's running mate.

Moore has said that Miller met his most important criteria — that his running mate be capable enough to step in and run state government, should something happen to him. He's said he felt no nerves or anxiety in asking Miller to join his team — that's how certain he was.

"She's a remarkable public servant and has been for a long time," Moore said this summer.

Eventually, Miller was scheduled for what she thought was yet another Zoom meeting with Moore and others as part of the vetting process. She was surprised when Moore asked her to be his running mate.

Miller, who had forgotten that the Zoom was being recorded, reacted with pure shock.

"Oh my gosh, Wes!" [Miller said](#). "You have no idea how honored, how excited, how blessed I feel."

Miller was thrilled [to join Moore's campaign](#), but less than thrilled that the moment was turned into a campaign video that was splashed across social media.



That was one year ago — December 2021 — and in the months since, Moore and Miller crisscrossed the state, won a competitive primary election and sailed to an easy victory in the general election over Republican nominee Dan Cox.

Miller said the campaign has been rewarding, getting to meet Marylanders and hear about their concerns. Winning a coveted endorsement from the state teachers' union was a highlight; another was when Miller was a last-minute substitute for Moore at an event in a conservative part of the Eastern Shore where she was warmly welcomed.

But there also have been difficult moments.

Miller recalls telling a friend that she was joining Moore's ticket and the friend responded that it wasn't a good idea to have two people of color [Moore is Black] as running mates. "They said, 'Look, Aruna, I really like you, but I just don't think you're going to win and I can't support you,'" Miller recalled. "And this is a friend of mine."

That friend wasn't the only one who predicted Moore and Miller wouldn't win because of their skin color. But Miller found strength in Moore, who insisted that she was a boost to his chances, not a hindrance.

Moore told Miller: “Anybody that isn’t going to vote for our ticket because you’re on it was never going to vote for me in the first place.”



Once Moore and Miller celebrated their victory in a shower of confetti at a Baltimore hotel ballroom on election night, they turned to transitioning into governing.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Wes Moore raises his hand with his running mate, Aruna Miller, after declaring victory at an election night event at the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront on Nov. 8, 2022. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

Miller is the chairperson of the transition, a sprawling effort that involves dozens of advisors meeting on various committees, picking members of the administration and readying the first actions of the new administration.

Miller is also refining what her role will be as lieutenant governor, which has no legal obligations other than becoming governor should the governor die or otherwise leave office.

Recent lieutenant governors have carved out certain policy areas to focus on, often based on their past experiences in government or the private sector.

The current Republican lieutenant governor, Boyd Rutherford, has focused on reforming how state contracts are executed, combating opioid addiction and promoting state parks, among other responsibilities. When Gov. Larry Hogan was treated for cancer in 2015 and when the coronavirus pandemic first hit in 2020, Rutherford helped manage the day-to-day workings of state government.

Miller, as a transportation engineer and former state lawmaker, said she plans to work on transportation issues, particularly on projects that can help people more efficiently reach work and school, including mass transit. She also will promote science, technology, engineering and math education, an issue close to her heart as an engineer.

Access to mental health care will be another focus. “We know how mental health impacts everyone’s life from the moment we’re born to the moment we exit the earth,” she said.

Miller is keenly aware that as lieutenant governor she can be a role model for young people who may finally see someone who looks like them in high office — the representation that she never saw.

After the election, Miller was sent a picture from a Baltimore teacher who had written on the classroom whiteboard facts about Moore being elected as the state's first Black governor and Miller as the first South Asian woman as lieutenant governor.

“So the students are walking into the classroom and seeing that, and I’m thinking to myself, being an immigrant, if I had ever seen anything like that growing up, I just think how different my life would have been,” Miller said. “I would never have imagined that those options would have been available for somebody like me.”

But that can change going forward, Miller said.

“We want to make sure that these opportunities are out there for everyone,” she said. “That’s what I hope we can create with this.”

*This article has been updated to reflect that Aruna Miller will be the second woman to serve as lieutenant governor of Maryland.*

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