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CATHY WURZER: Were talking to all the Hennepin County attorney candidates this week. It's an important job in the state's most populous county, and the primary is next Tuesday, August the 9th. Joining us right now is another candidate. Saraswati Singh is a Prosecutor in Ramsey County's Attorney's office. Saraswati is with us on the line. Good afternoon.

SARASWATI SINGH: Good afternoon, Cathy. It's so exciting to be here with you.

CATHY WURZER: I'm glad you're here. Thank you. I'm curious as to why you want the job as Hennepin County Attorney.

SARASWATI SINGH: For many reasons. I care. I love it here, and I know we have problems like many places. But I think we can make a lot of changes. And if you want to get to the heart of it, why this job, my grandfather came to this country, and he worked at the UN. And even though he had that high position, there was the white water fountain and the colored water fountain. And he had to drink from the colored water fountain.

And then with my dad, after 9/11, one day he was coming home from work. He worked the night shift. Someone called the police on him saying he was a terrorist. And the officers let him go because being Brown and having facial hair doesn't make you a terrorist.

And then there's me. When I was nine years old, I had those toy water guns that you get from the 99 Cents store. I don't know if they still sell them. And I'd love squirting my siblings, I'm the oldest of four, on hot summer days like this. And one day, my parents sat me down and said I wasn't allowed to play with them anymore because a nine-year-old kid, same age as me, had been shot and killed by a police officer for playing with a toy water gun, a colorful water gun.

And so I'm running because I want to feel safe. I want to feel like the criminal justice system cares about me. And at the same time, I want police accountability. I don't want all these folks being killed and murdered that shouldn't be. I want police to have to get good training and more.

CATHY WURZER: It sounds then that you believe a path to public safety is racial equity and vice versa in a sense.

SARASWATI SINGH: My priorities are public safety, police accountability, and racial equity and all three at the same time, because I don't believe you can have safety or justice--

CATHY WURZER: Oh, goodness. This happened yesterday. We apologize. This is a technical glitch that we have in our system. This happens every so often, so very sorry. On the line with me has been Saraswati Singh.

Saraswati Singh is running for Hennepin County Attorney, one of seven candidates in the race. She's a prosecutor in the Ramsey County Attorney's office. Do we have Ms Singh with us? I'm so sorry. Thanks for hanging with us here with this technical problem that we have. You were explaining, please, about racial equity, police accountability and continue.

SARASWATI SINGH: Sure. Thank you. So my priorities are public safety, police accountability, and racial equity and all three at the same time, because I don't think you can have safety or justice without addressing all three. And frankly, all three go hand-in-hand.

So when I'm Hennepin County Attorney, I plan on moving prosecutors over from the drug unit over to the violent crime unit because we have a violent crime issue. It's been rising within the last couple of years during the pandemic, and we're still charging low level cases, including marijuana at the Hennepin County Attorney's Office.

And what is important about drugs? We have some of the highest racial disparities in the system with low level drug cases. And it's not because people of color use drugs at a higher rate. It's just the opposite. And so you can make policies that address all three at the same time and with-- oh, go ahead.

CATHY WURZER: I'm curious about-- going back to police accountability for just a moment, how will you hold police accountable?

SARASWATI SINGH: Sure. Multiple ways, one is obviously, prosecuting when a crime is committed. But frankly, I don't want things to get to that level. And so one of the things that I'd like to do is embed a Hennepin County Attorney prosecutor with the Minneapolis Police Department.

We actually just started doing that with sexual assault cases because as many people know, we weren't very good at prosecuting sexual assault cases. And having a prosecutor embedded in the police department, we started teaching officers to make sure they collected certain evidence right away, learning how to talk with folks, the people that are actually responding, collecting the evidence that actually exists so we're more likely to charge and have the evidence needed to get a conviction of the perpetrator.

And so having a prosecutor who has the experience regarding excessive force, what the law is, where the law is going, and what the standard, what we expect officers to do, I just think it's so important because I've been concerned about some of the training the Minneapolis Police Department has been receiving. And other police departments have received much better training. There's no good reason to not have that same training for the Minneapolis Police Department.

CATHY WURZER: You mentioned we have a violent crime problem, and statistics show that that is true. There's been a lot of attention on juvenile offenders because of the increase in carjackings and other crimes committed by young people.

When it comes to juveniles, you've said this specifically, "Criminal law treats juveniles differently than adults and rightfully so in part because of their brain development. I will not re-implement a quota for juvenile jails. I will prioritize keeping kids out of custody and in a manner that benefits them and does not risk public safety." But as you know as a prosecutor, there are some young kids out there who are pretty dangerous. So how would you like to deal with young people under the age of 18 who commit crimes?

SARASWATI SINGH: Yeah, that's an excellent question. So I handle carjacking, murders, sexual assaults, everything in between with adults. With juveniles, there's a wide range of cases, and carjackings are very serious. They're different from regular auto thefts, which are not good. But a carjacking in a juvenile case is when a juvenile shows up with a gun and points it at an individual or uses it in some way to commit the crime. That's far more dangerous. You can't ignore it at all, and you have to hold people accountable.

And so that piece where I said I will prioritize keeping kids out of jail but with keeping public safety in mind, I will put kids in prison or jail if they need it. And carjacking cases are cases where you may have to do it more often because you can't ignore the situation. And guns are very serious, and you don't want it to get out of hand even more so turning into someone shooting and murdering someone in the middle of a carjacking.

CATHY
WURZER: We've talked to several of the individuals you're running against for Hennepin County Attorney. And almost all of them to this point have said that something does need to be done to reform the juvenile justice system, right? And they look to re-implementing the Hennepin County home school or in Saint Paul totem town closed. What about those places for kids? Do you see a use for them, reopening them as a way to help, or is there something else you're thinking about?

SARASWATI
SINGH: I'm open to exploring all options because frankly, I want everyone to feel safe. And if there's alternatives that are better, I'm open to reopening some facilities. But frankly, when those facilities shut down, there should have been alternatives in place, and they weren't.

And so I'd like to further explore doing that and working with the police chiefs, the prosecutors within the office, all the stakeholders to figure out what we need to do so that the office is responsive and keeping everyone safe and addressing the juvenile crimes, the most serious crimes in an effective way.

CATHY
WURZER: I was looking through your resume, and you are a prosecutor, but you have a lack of management expertise and experience. What do you say to folks who might be a little worried about that? Because this is obviously a very big office with a multi-million budget.

SARASWATI
SINGH: I would disagree with that. Governor Walz appointed me to the Council of Asian-Pacific Minnesotans. I oversee a state agency. We represent about 300,000 Minnesotans. I work on policy, mission, interacting with folks, advocating at the state legislature. I was even the treasurer, so managing the finances. I've managed a government affairs department as well.

And as a prosecutor, I've recruited, trained, hired folks within my office, prosecutors. I've been president of the American Constitution Society, the nation's largest progressive legal network right here in Minnesota. I was elected to four terms. I oversaw prosecutors, defense attorneys, many lawyers and dealt with personnel issues, the things that you deal with. And some people think you need as many years of experience as possible with management. But just because you've done something for a long time doesn't mean you're good at it, and I'm a good leader.

CATHY
WURZER: I appreciate the conversation. Thank you so very much.

SARASWATI
SINGH: Thank you. I've loved hearing you driving around for the Minnesota Attorney General's office back in my last job.

CATHY
WURZER: Oh my gosh, thank you for listening. I appreciate it.

SARASWATI
SINGH: Sure thing.

CATHY

WURZER:

Saraswati Singh is a Prosecutor in the Ramsey County Attorney's office. She is running to be the next Hennepin County Attorney. As I mentioned, early voting in this race is happening right now. The primary is August the 9th. You can sign up to vote when you get to your local polling station. You can find out how to register and find out where your local polling place is by visiting hennepin.us/residents/elections.

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