WHEELING, W.Va. — When Rosemary Ketchum gets introduced as the first openly transgender person to win elective office in West Virginia, there's often a shocked look that comes across people's faces.

“Folks will be like, ‘How did that happen?’ As if it's like I won the lottery or solved a Rubik's Cube in front of them or something,” she said. "They think it’s magic."

To her, it doesn't feel like magic. But in some ways, she can understand their surprise. Out of the handful of transgender officials in the U.S., only a few were elected in similarly rural, GOP-controlled states.

Ketchum, 29, is one of them. And next week, she could be elected again — this time as mayor of [*Wheeling*](https://apnews.com/hub/wheeling), a former coal and steel production hub that's about 60 miles (97 kilometers) outside Pittsburgh.

Growing up, she said she saw businesses shutter, and people struggle to find housing and mental health support amid the opioid epidemic. Her spirit is optimistic though, and she often comes back to a memory of first encountering "the friendly city” motto of Wheeling on a welcome sign.

“I didn’t run for city council to make history — I ran to make a difference in my community," she said, of her motivation to run.

Wheeling is a city of 26,000 residents with a unique place in West Virginia history. It's nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, along the Ohio River in an area that split from Virginia and the Confederacy in 1863.

More than a century later, a group portrait hangs in Wheeling’s city hall. Ketchum is impossible to miss: Standing next to seven men in suits, she is wearing a red dress and black heels, and has platinum blonde hair. She stands out in meetings too, with her painted-red nails and laptop adorned with a Taylor Swift sticker.

At a recent council meeting, she asked questions about pending water and sewer projects, thanked city employees for their work and urged residents exposed to recent flooding to get tetanus shots at the local health department.

For Ketchum, going to college — let alone [*working in* ***politics***](https://apnews.com/general-news-be386a5ad19752a0a79ab206772357f1) — was not in the cards.

When she was in high school, a tragic house fire leveled the family's home and rendered the family homeless. They didn’t have home insurance or savings, and had to move temporarily into a neighbor's basement.

“We didn't have a backup plan,” she said. "And unfortunately, a lot of blue-collar families are in that same boat.”

After the fire, Ketchum arrived in Wheeling as a 16-year-old in the midst of a gender transition. The family received food stamps, and Ketchum worked as a bartender after high school. She later became the first in her family to graduate college — and credits being able to live in public housing for enabling her to do so.

She later served as associate director of the city's local National Alliance on Mental Illness chapter — a job that combined with her lived experience to shape the way she approaches public policy.

In 2023, Ketchum was one of only two city officials to vote against an ordinance designed to clear homeless encampments. She helped establish the city's first internal position focused on homelessness — to aid people in finding mental health support, permanent housing and employment.

Ketchum answers matter-of-factly when people ask her how she got elected as an openly transgender candidate: she put her name on the ballot, knocked on doors, made phone calls to ask residents what they care about, and then trusted them to make a decision.

“I didn’t pre-ordain or assume what they would think of me — I gave them the opportunity to think for themselves,” she said. “I didn’t walk up to a door, and say like, ‘Oh, this person has a Trump sign, they’re going to hate me.’”

Wheeling is the seat of Ohio County, where 38% of voters registered as Republicans in 2023, compared with 34% registered Democrats, according to state data. City council positions are nonpartisan.

Ketchum has some constituents who have either never met a transgender person before — or the idea of gender nonconformity makes them uncomfortable. But she sees that as a test of leadership and motivation to work harder to address the community's concerns, ranging from accessible public transit to support for small businesses.

“I think it’s fascinating that somebody might say, ’You know what, those trans people on television, on the internet — I don’t know about that, but I have to say that a trans person helped me pave my road or fill my pothole or trim the tree in my front yard or fix my sidewalk,'" she said.

Kellie Ahmad, a local artist and volunteer on Ketchum's campaign, said she greatly respects how Ketchum handles her detractors.

“She even has people who are vitriolically hateful towards her calling her and saying, ‘There’s a lot near me that needs to be mowed — can you get that done?’" Ahmad said. “Which just goes to show, ‘I might fundamentally disagree with who you are as a person, but you’re effective.'”

Dianne Ketchum, Rosemary’s mother, said it wasn’t easy to see Ketchum enter the world of ***politics***. She had seen how as a child, her daughter was bullied because of her gender identity.

But the world has changed since that time, and perceptions of transgender people in the region are starting to shift. People like Ketchum are a big part of that, Dianne Ketchum said, noting she's seen people speaking about transgender people with more tolerance and understanding since her daughter took office.

“A lot of people have changed their minds because they met my daughter,” Dianne Ketchum said.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the council made Wheeling the only city in West Virginia to declare racism a public health crisis. Then they banned conversion therapy, a powerful if symbolic move.

Ketchum said when she’s canvassing, people aren’t talking about what bathrooms they think transgender people should be able to use, or whether kids should be reading books with LGBTQ+ characters in school. People often want to talk about repaving their road or worries about how many young people are leaving the state — one of only two states where the population declined in the 2020 census.

“That gives me more respect, frankly, for my neighbors,” Ketchum said. [*GOP lawmakers’ focus*](https://apnews.com/article/west-virginia-f3cf0c3524774b5bb978af1f477cdf2e) on books bans and bathroom access may attract attention statewide and nationally, but “it doesn’t work at a local level -- it doesn’t register,” she said.

She said many people have developed an apathy or distrust of government. But she doesn't engage with cynicism. Instead, she gives constituents her personal phone number and holds regular office hours at a local market where anyone can come by to speak with her.

Ketchum talks about making streets safer for pedestrians, revitalizing the downtown area, and navigating the delicate balance between preserving and restoring the ornate but blighted structures throughout the city. She beams with pride when sharing progress on the rehabilitation of a historic suspension bridge — one leading to a city island where she worked at a family-owned bar.

“Sometimes, we call it ‘the friendly city’ and that seems like an aspiration because we’re dealing with so much tension and there’s a generational divide in some way — particularly in ***politics***,” she said. “But I see it here every day. We're getting somewhere.”