

The Salt Lake Tribune

A GOP star emerges to run for Utah's new seat in Congress

Book excerpt • Battle for Republican nomination in new district is fierce.

BY ROBERT GEHRKE
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Editor's note • This is the fifth in a series of excerpts from "Mia Love: The Rise, Stumble and Resurgence of the Next GOP Star" by Tribune reporters Matt Canham, Robert Gehrke and Thomas Burr.

Mia Love was at home on a frigid Thursday night in mid-February 2011 watching a movie with her family when a flurry of texts streamed in suggesting she run for Congress.

She waited until the next morning to call Dan McCay, a real-estate lawyer with the LDS Church and state director for FreedomWorks, a conservative lobbying group with deep ties to the tea party.

"What happened last night?" Mia asked. "Why were all of you texting me? You really think I should run?"

"Why wouldn't you?" responded McCay, who had been part of a dinner gathering of conservative party activists chatting about politics and possible candidates.

Five weeks later, Mia hosted a meeting with an inner circle of friends in the Loves' basement to kick around the idea of the Saratoga Springs mayor as congressional hopeful. It was the first of what would become regular meetings where — at various times — they talked about the way things are versus the way they should be. They discussed how a campaign would be organized and staffed and the rules for raising money. And they formulated what they viewed as reasonable positions for a candidate to stake out, along with the best way to articulate them.

Some of these early study sessions showed just how little Mia knew about the federal government and the politics of the day, leaving her friends frustrated.

One, Jennifer Scott, could understand that Mia wouldn't know the details of the Dodd-Frank banking regulation bill, a reaction to the 2008 economic collapse. But surely, she knew the chief Senate sponsor, Sen. Chris Dodd.

Mia didn't recognize his name, though the nationally prominent lawmaker had represented her home state of Connecticut since she was 5 years old.

Scott, who helped school Mia on the issues, laughs about it now. At the time she was deeply troubled.

"I didn't want anyone to know she didn't know who Chris Dodd was — that would be awful."

In one policy area after another, members of the group soon came to realize, Mia was unaware of current debates, although she was well-versed on municipal issues in Saratoga Springs.

The group also focused on accentuating Mia's talents: her magnetic personality and her ability to deliver a speech.

After Utah's Republican-dominated Legislature finished redrawing political maps that October, the new 4th Congressional District was one that worked well for Mia and for her main rival, state Rep. Carl Wimmer, R-Herriman. It included both of their hometowns and, according to the Cook Political Report, gave a built-in 14-percentage point advantage to whatever Republican emerged in the general election.

Rounding out the Republican field were state Rep. Steve Sandstrom, attorney Jay Cobb and a database administrator named Kenneth Gray, and the belief was that whoever claimed the party's nomination would have a clear path to victory.

That was before the state's only Democratic behemoth, who, according to some polls, was the most popular politician in the state, made a ground-shaking announcement.

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Road Runner • For a dozen years, Rep. Jim Matheson had played Road Runner to the Republicans' Wile E. Coyote, wriggling out of their best-laid and most elaborate traps.

Heir to the most prominent Democratic political name in the state, he draws inspiration from the memory of his father. Former Gov. Scott Matheson died in 1990 from cancer the family believes was caused by nuclear-weapons testing in neighboring Nevada. Jim Matheson also relies on counsel and wisdom from his mother, Norma Matheson, widely seen as the matriarch of Utah Democrats.

Where Matheson really excels is the campaign. He can digest poll data and pinpoint specific neighborhoods where he needs to focus.

He brought those skills to bear in deciding that he wouldn't run in the 2nd District, where he lived, but in the new 4th District. Not only was it slightly less Republican than redistricting had abruptly made the 2nd District, it also included much of the area he had represented for years.

The move was a game-changer. Utah's 4th District suddenly became one of the top congressional battlegrounds in the nation, and for Republicans that meant picking the right candidate became paramount.

On her second trip to Washington that fall of 2011, Mia Love stood amid a group of 20 well-heeled GOP donors and members of Congress at the exclusive Capitol Hill Club and shared the story that by then had become the cornerstone of her campaign.

She told of her parents fleeing Haiti with \$10 in their pockets, settling in the United States; of the sacrifices they made to give their family a better life. Then she recounted her father's counsel when he dropped her off for college: that she not be a burden on society, that she apply herself and give something back.

The group of GOP elites was rapt, and the story touched a particular chord with one prominent guest. House Speaker John Boehner, himself the son of a saloonkeeper of modest means, reached for his handkerchief.

While she was speaking, Mia heard the sniffles and spotted Boehner in the back of the room wiping teary eyes. She calls him "a teddy bear." His reaction helped her realize the power of her family story.

It was still a year from the election. But party leaders figured they had found the nominee for the new seat in Utah and, possibly, a bright new face for the national party.

Mia met with the top echelon of the GOP leadership — House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, Whip Kevin McCarthy, Budget Chairman Paul Ryan and Pete Sessions, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

"She didn't have to open her mouth. They saw her and said, 'You're it. Here's \$5,000,' " said a campaign insider.

There is no doubt that, in a party often criticized for a lack of diversity, here was the jackpot candidate — young, female, black, telegenic — just what the Republican doctor ordered.

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Double-edged sword • Within a few weeks of announcing her candidacy, dissent was brewing inside the Love campaign.

Surveys had shown that delegates liked Mia's persona, but they feared she lacked substance.

To change that perception, her direct-mail consultant, Peter Valcarce, was pushing Mia to create a pledge — to oppose any form of government-mandated health care (including Medicaid and Medicare), resist any tax increase, eliminate all earmarks, repeal Obamacare and roll back the federal budget to 2008 levels — and then challenge her opponents to sign on, as well.

Other campaign aides disagreed, reasoning that while it tied Mia to an ideology popular in the tea party, it also saddled her with stances that Matheson could use against her if she got the nomination.

But Valcarce won the argument. And it wasn't long before the campaign would double down on the pledge. It was included in several more mailers, and Mia held a news conference at the Capitol in March challenging her competitors to sign on. Heading into the convention, the campaign put together an even more audacious and specific mailer, scheduled to land in delegates' mailboxes days before they voted for a nominee.

The flier would be pure red meat, decrying the runaway spending and ballooning debt in Washington and laying out a list of federal programs Mia would seek to eliminate if elected. The laundry list — "Mia's Initial Plan" to reduce the size of government — was a bold attempt to show that she was a substantive candidate, serious and thoughtful about the issues.

These \$750 billion in cuts, cribbed heavily from the libertarian Cato Institute, included eliminating subsidies for nuclear-power plants, special-education grants and student aid, funding for transit projects and a popular conservative target, the Public Broadcasting Service.

The mailer turned out to be "awesome for the three days we needed it to be awesome," campaign adviser Steve Hunter said. "And then it was like a plague."

Ultimately, the campaign would spend months alternatively running away from the list or trying in futility to explain it as an oversimplification intended to launch a debate on the deficit.

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Moment of truth • Heading into the state Republican convention on April 26, 2012, Love's camp felt it had an ace to play: Mia had spent three weeks with adviser Dave Owen polishing her convention speech. One of the videos Owen showed her to emulate was Barack Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, not for its content, but for his delivery.

Wimmer, though, came into the convention with all the swagger of the candidate to beat. The state lawmaker had knocked on the door of or met with every delegate in the district, felt he had dominated the debates, lined up important endorsements, spent the most money and predicted going into the convention he would either clinch the nomination or, in a worst-case scenario, end up in a primary.

To counter Love's endorsement by Josh Romney, son of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, Wimmer locked up the backing of U.S. Sen. Mike Lee, a darling of the tea party, and three-term Attorney General Mark Shurtleff. A congenial guy popular with delegates and fundraisers, Shurtleff was prone to speak from his gut, something that would get him in trouble from time to time.

And this would be one of those times.

Hours into the daylong convention, Wimmer took the stage to tell the crowd that some delegates had asked if he could actually beat Matheson.

"I believe that is the wrong question. The right question is: Can Jim Matheson beat me?" he bragged.

Before long, it was Mia's turn. From the beginning of her allotted five minutes on stage, she spoke with intensity. As the speech went on, she fed off the crowd, getting louder and louder, jabbing at the air with her finger.

"I'm running because I believe this country is in real trouble and it's up to us — each one of us — to fix it before it's too late," she said. "I believe the solution's found right here in Utah's values."

She criticized Matheson, the string of white male legislators who had lost a half-dozen elections to him, and the "pundits" who preached despair and reliance on government.

"The message of the Democrats is that the American Dream is over. The government is all you have," she said. "Give up your dreams and the government will save you. The government will heal you. The government will be your hope and change. We know here in Utah none of that is true."

The crowd roared and Mia transitioned into her now-familiar personal story.

"Here's what I will tell them, not just with my words, but with my life, the lives of my parents. I will show them the American Dream is not dead," she said, driving to a second crashing wave.

The audience was in a frenzy now, leaping to its feet. Wide-eyed reporters exchanged looks; something was going on. Mia could feel that she had the crowd, and it felt surreal.

When the first round of ballots was counted, Sandstrom, Cobb and Gray were eliminated. But, in a surprise, Mia finished ahead of Wimmer, although both advanced to a second round — and a second turn on stage.

Rattled by Mia's strong showing in the initial balloting, Shurtleff and Wimmer were in a panic, trying to devise some plan that might salvage Wimmer's campaign. Earlier in the day, state Sen. Dan Liljenquist, a tea-party favorite, had gone hard after six-term U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch in his second speech and it seemed to work — Liljenquist got the primary he wanted. Maybe it was time to stop playing nice and to go straight after Love, hitting her on her inexperience.

It was agreed, and Wimmer took to the stage, backed by Shurtleff and Lee. The popular attorney general clumsily tried to contrast Wimmer's experience with that of his competitor. It backfired.

"You have to please pick a person with a proven record who can beat Jim Matheson this fall," Shurtleff implored. "Not a novelty."

There was a gasp and then a wave of boos that rose from the audience, who viewed Shurtleff's comment as a dig at Mia's race and gender.

Republican National Committeewoman Enid Mickelsen, who had been listening backstage, stormed across the hall and laid into him.

"I told him he embarrassed the state and, as the attorney general of the state, he should know better and he would be humiliated by this nationally," Mickelsen said. "It was a terrible thing to say."

Shurtleff later apologized for his "terrible choice of words," and Mia accepted his apology. He left the convention with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Mia surprised even her ardent supporters by claiming 70.4 percent of the final vote, as she won the nomination and avoided what would likely have been a costly and bitter primary fight.

The defeat sent Wimmer down a path where he would leave politics and move to a rural area, where he'd take a job as a resource officer at a public high school. He'd even join a new Christian church, giving up his Mormon religion.

Mia's campaign was jubilant with the victory and she sent a clear challenge to her Democratic rival, taking on a Wimmer-like tone of bravado.

"Jim Matheson should be pretty scared right now. We're going to send him home. It's time," she said after the convention. "He's never been up against a candidate like me."

Next • Republicans are stunned as a supposedly invincible campaign implodes on its way to election night and then a recount. "Mia Love: The Rise, Stumble and Resurgence of the Next GOP Star"

The book produced by The Salt Lake Tribune is available at Salt Lake area local bookstores, including Weller Book Works, The King's English, Eborn Book and Frost's Books, and the Brigham Young University bookstore for \$9.99. It is available as an e-book for \$6.99 from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and iTunes. For more information, please visit MiaLoveBook.com.