

One-on-one with Las Vegas mayoral candidate Kara Jenkins

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by Brett Forrest

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Las Vegas mayoral candidate Kara Jenkins.

LAS VEGAS (KSNV) — The following transcript has been slightly edited for clarity, but otherwise remains verbatim to the News 3 sit down interview with Kara Jenkins that took place on Feb. 20, 2023.

KARA JENKINS:

I'm the administrator for the Equal Rights Commission for the state of Nevada.

BRETT FORREST:

First of all, for people who don't know what that job entails, can you kind of give us a brief overview? Just kind of help us get to know what work you're doing right now?

KARA JENKINS:

Well, the work is public service. I'm a four-time gubernatorial appointee, Brett, and I currently serve under Governor Lombardo. I was employed—I was appointed by Governor Brian Sandoval in 2013 to run the Equal Rights Agency, which is a statewide agency that protects against discrimination on the basis of protected status. And it marries really well with my love of law and people. But because I have a duty to that job, I'm not going to go too deep into that because my wanting to be mayor is something that is a personal endeavor. And I have to keep that separate.

BRETT FORREST:

Okay. And then tell me why do you want to be mayor? Why did you jump into this race?

KARA JENKINS:

Public service is something that I've been doing, Brett, for over a decade. It's a decade's long career. And it's tied deeply to who I am as a person. I can't explain it other than that. I'm fed by service.

And so one of the things that I was thinking about during COVID, even though we're still kind of in COVID, but when the pandemic first happened, I had a lot of time to think about how I could apply all my skills and talents in service and helping people because I saw a very big need that wasn't being filled at the local levels.

And so public service, helping people, seeing a void in government and wanting to insert myself to execute. That's what drives me in a way that I can't explain. I'm fed by it. It's worth the long hours, the long nights, it makes me feel good as a person. And so I think blending my experience and my skills and what feeds me, to public service for the City of Las Vegas is—it's a perfect match. So now it's just getting out there and letting the voters know who I am.

BRETT FORREST:

So the needs and the voids you're mentioning in Las Vegas, what are they? And how do you want to approach and address them?

KARA JENKINS:

Well, that's a very, very good question. And I'm happy that you asked it because I'm not only a government official, I'm a neighbor. I'm a friend. I live in Ward 3. And I felt the effects of not having government be accessible in my own personal realm. And so I think a lot of people are looking for relief, relevance, energy and accessibility. And I believe I have all those traits.

BRETT FORREST:

And so something that stuck out to me when I interviewed Cedric Crear is he's self-labeling himself as the "Most qualified candidate." But why do you think you're qualified to be in this position?

KARA JENKINS:

Well, that's good for him. And it's laughable that people can self-appoint themselves as qualified. So good for him and that's his race. However, I have decades-long experience in government. I'm not a career politician, Brett, I don't do what I do because I want the photo op or the spotlight. I truly care about the needs of people. And I've been effective, and I trust my judgment. And I'll tell you this, as a female, I've also been told many times that I wasn't qualified, but I trust myself. I've got good instincts, I can execute. And I'm bipartisan. I don't polarize people. I'm someone that I think is a better face for the City of Las Vegas in the sense that I'm more relatable. And I'm not entitled to any position. I'm simply an option for people to vote next year.

BRETT FORREST:

And so you were appointed to the current position. But I mean, is this your first time jumping into an actual campaign and political race? Or have you done that before?

KARA JENKINS:

For others I have supported. I was a staffer for Governor Schwarzenegger in California, but this is my first time putting myself out there in service in the political arena, which is probably why many people haven't heard of me yet. Because I've been doing my job. I've been working and I'm very proud of the work I've done for the Equal Rights Commission. I have an amazing team of people around me. And I've leveraged so much and gleaned so much quality information on effective leadership that I can now apply at the local level. Because I have plans for the city, people who live in the city, not behind the gate. Not that there's anything wrong with living behind the gate. But people who live in this city, they want relief, they want opportunity. They want to build on their dreams, they want to build a business, they want to open a restaurant, they want to be artists, they want to be influencers. They want the city to support them where it's necessary.

Now, there are certain aspects of government, Brett, where you probably need wraparound services and more frequent contact with the public because they're unhoused or homeless folks. But for people who want to thrive in business, they want to know that if there's a pandemic, or if there's an emergency that they can rely on the government to keep sustaining services, to keep business operations open, so that their people are safe, and that they can thrive in business. People just want relief, they want to be happy, they want to have fun. And when you think of Vegas, that's what you think of. But I'm very afraid, Brett, that if we don't align ourselves with the proper leadership at the city level, we'll get left behind. We're the next big city and you need leadership to reflect that bigness.

BRETT FORREST:

And then just for my background to help kind of know you better. Where were you born and raised? When did you move to Las Vegas?

KARA JENKINS:

Oh, thank you for asking. Well, I was born and raised. Well, I was born in San Diego, California. And so I always laugh because my opponents say they're born and raised here. They're born and raised somewhere. And that's good for you. I can't control where my parents decided to give birth to me. And I'm grateful that they did.

But what's different for me is that I've chosen to call Las Vegas home. And my story is not unlike many other people that live here. We're a town of people who have come from all walks of life from different cities to choose and call Las Vegas home. And I support those people. And I'm the mayor for them, too.

BRETT FORREST:

What do you think are the biggest issues facing Las Vegas right now? As mayor, or just city council in general, need to address. Whether it's immediate, or next year, when the election happens, or in the near future?

KARA JENKINS:

I would say that there's about three things that keep coming up in conversations with folks, when I'm out there in the streets and talking to people about what their needs are. And that's affordable housing, which we all know is very tricky. But that's tied to a livable wage, which is not totally the jurisdiction of the mayor. But it's a platform that you can bring, bring other entities in and come up with creative solutions to council about how we can get folks a livable wage so that they can afford to live well, to put their kids to college, to go on vacation to to live. So I would say affordable housing, which is tied to livable wages, is a huge issue.

Also, people want to be invested in small businesses, they need that support, they need investment into their small business. And so—and I love eating downtown and meeting all the local small business owners and restaurant tours, that really have great ideas to make, you know, downtown just the restaurant row. The scene for where you can go and eat and explore and just have a really good time or great brunch. But they need investment. And so you know, capital, venture capitalists need to come here and they need to be invited into the city.

Tony Hsieh was really good at that. And again, he wasn't born and raised in Vegas, he was from the Bay Area. But he had a great idea. He planted the seed and it grew, it grew very well in Vegas. So I think attention to businesses, respecting our labor community, all of our laborers that build all these great buildings and casinos. They need to have an opportunity to be invested and given jobs in the local city and in the state to be able to say, 'Hey, I built that.

Maybe I can't afford a ticket to go to the Raiders game, but your dad built that.' And that's from one of the union members that I've spoken to. About how they felt pride in building Allegiant stadium, not in the city of Las Vegas jurisdiction, but it's like everybody wants a piece of Vegas. And so that's my accessibility platform.

So I would think wellness is the last thing I want to talk about. And that's just making sure that we have a healthy and growing workforce so that people can go to work. It's just a very interesting relationship. You want to expand business, but you can't do it without healthy and happy employees. And so balancing that need to I think that's something that's super important.

BRETT FORREST:

And I know I can look it up. But when was it you declared again officially?

KARA JENKINS:

A year ago. I was the second actually to declare.

BRETT FORREST:

Why was it you jumped in so early? What was the urgency there to declare so far out in advance?

KARA JENKINS:

One of the things I think I'm really good at doing, Brett, is unlike my opponents is I can read a room. And I know that having served in the background and government and given advice and advised really other great leaders, is that I didn't have a public forward facing presence. And that's part of my job. I'm supposed to be neutral. I'm supposed to be a mediator and help people settle discrimination complaints.

But I wanted to start early because I wanted to start asking people what their needs were. I wanted to not just assume that I would just jump on the scene and secure all these votes. I wanted to really do my research and due diligence to make sure that I was what the city needs.

And I'm really pleased to say that I believe I am. So I wanted to take my time. This is definitely the longest job interview I've ever been on. But I realized that my team tells me this is a marathon and not a sprint. And having run four marathons, I get it. But I'm learning so much. And I'm really, really excited about where this is going to take me and my team and the city.

BRETT FORREST:

And so besides your governmental work, what have you been doing since the declaration? What kind of campaigning have you been doing to kind of get your name out there?

KARA JENKINS:

Oh, I've been busy. Don't let this makeup fool you. I am tired, but happy tired. Remember when I said I'm fed by service and leading? So every opportunity I can get that's not on my state-designated time. I'm meeting with business owners, I'm talking to people, I'm visiting churches, I'm doing outreach events, I'm participating in sporting events, I'm trying to talk to people and just really get a good feel of what—and I this is what I ask—what top three things would you want from your mayor? If I could help you, what would you want to see?

And so that really, Brett, helps me craft this idea of a platform. I don't assume what people want. I want to ask them what they need. See how I can leverage all my networks to make that happen and deliver because execution is something that I really, really enjoy. It makes me happy when you can see a problem, glean your experience, pull in thought partners, execute, and fix the problem. That's like seeing the Super Bowl, for me.

BRETT FORREST:

So say you are elected. You serve for three terms. How do you envision Las Vegas looking by the end of your tenure?

KARA JENKINS:

Oh, fabulous. It's going to be a celebration, I'm going to make sure that everything that I've set out to do for the city happens. And if it doesn't happen, it's not for lack of trying. But rather, it's just I really envision a Vegas that is caught up with the times and the progress of other cities. I see myself partnering with other southwestern cities and mayors—who I have met already and asked about similar problems affecting cities—making sure our roads are good, that our parks are safe and that our kids can enjoy it. That Vegas is a place where if you're not into nightlife, that's okay. We have beautiful parks and recreation here. You're an animal lover, will cater to you to an attractive, healthy, vibrant, vibrant, booming city where people—if they work really hard, you can see your dreams realized.

And I think that's why I wanted to run for mayor because when I left 11 years ago from Sacramento, I worked really hard, Brett. And Vegas has been very, very good to me. I bought two homes here, not at the same time, I had to sell the condo and buy the other house in Ward 3. But this is a place where if you work hard, opportunities can come to you. And I want other people to feel that love too. So that's how I envision seeing my terms as mayor. And that's where the vision stops. Because that's all I can see for right now. I have no other aspirations other than to be a public servant and serve in that capacity as mayor for you.

BRETT FORREST:

And then the mayor next year is going to be the first non-Goodman in 25 years. So—

KARA JENKINS:

Maybe a black woman too.

BRETT FORREST:

Yeah. So are you intimidated by just the first name change and non-Goodman in 25 years? Do you feel like those are big shoes to fill?

KARA JENKINS:

Not really, because I feel like the Goodmans have made their impact. And they've been amazing to this town and the city for the time that they served. I feel like it's a new time now. And I feel like the city is ready to embrace new leadership and for the old guard to pass the torch to the new leaders. We've waited. We've been the understudies, we're ready to lead. We're relevant. We have the energy because you know being mayor, it's not just about photo ops. It is a grind. But it's okay. You have to make those connections. You have a platform to bring people to come to the city to lift up businesses. And it's not just about—council meetings are super important because you push policy out that way. That could be maybe best practices for state and federal levels and other areas of government, but it's not just hosting a ribbon cutting ceremony. That's not how I ever—That's not how I work or operate. I'll say it like that. It's a grind and it's something that I look forward to and you have to have the energy for it. Emotional energy. You have to have support to do it. And I've got an amazing team. You've met some of them already. And a super supportive family with[out] whom I could not do the work, and I thank God for them. I don't know how we got here. But this is how I do it. I just feel like I'm ready for the role. And I'm not intimidated. Because I feel like they did a great job. But now it's time to pass the torch.

BRETT FORREST:

Two of your opponents are already on city council. You're mentioning how you are working to get your name out there. So would you consider yourself the outsider candidate? Or what kind of label would you want to put on yourself in this race?

KARA JENKINS:

I've been called the Obama in this. I don't want to relate myself to any other candidate. Because of course, this is a nonpartisan seat, although I have a lot of respect for former President Obama. But I believe that there is a new voice. And sure, I will concede to the fact that I'm not—that I'm new to this. I'm not a career politician. And I don't want any affiliation with that label or title. I'm a public servant. I've been for a very long time. And the resume is clear. And it started when I graduated law school doing public service, pro bono work. Now to where I am at equal rights. So that can't be challenged, I would just ask voters to look at

my resume, my qualifications, and not necessarily where I was born. But where I've chosen to live and invest all of my skills and knowledge to help lift up the city so that they can feel relief, happy again, excited, and just thriving.

BRETT FORREST:

So do you feel like you have the upper hand with the other candidates?

KARA JENKINS:

I take nothing for granted. I know that everybody's motivated to win. But my motivations are clear. And I want to appeal to voters who are looking for a leader that can execute and not just talk the talk, but walk the walk. And so I'm very confident in my ability to deliver.