

Pennsylvania Lawmaker with Autism Makes Simultaneous History as First LGBTQ Woman in Statehouse

"I honestly never thought that I would run for office, because I didn't see people in elected office who were like me," Jessica Benham tells PEOPLE

By **Sean Neumann**

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Pennsylvania state Representative-elect Jessica Benham | CREDIT: COURTESY JESSICA BENHAM FOR PA

Just six years ago, Jessica Benham helped launch an advocacy group in Pittsburgh aimed at giving voice to local people with autism, like herself. Now, after being elected to the Pennsylvania statehouse this month, her voice will represent her entire state district.

Benham, who is bisexual, will make simultaneous history on Dec. 1 when she becomes the first person with autism and the first LGBTQ woman in Pennsylvania's state legislature.

"It's still sinking in, but it is the biggest honor of my life," Benham, 29, tells PEOPLE.

The state representative-elect was chosen by the 36th district to fill its vacant statehouse seat, which had been long held by state Rep. Harry Readshaw since 1995. (Readshaw, 79, a Democrat, did not seek re-election in 2020.)

Benham, also a Democrat, had campaigned throughout 2020 on issues such as bolstering healthcare coverage and increasing funding for local education. She first considered running for office a year-and-a-half ago, she says.

"I honestly never thought that I would run for office, because I didn't see people in elected office who were like me," Benham tells PEOPLE.

The newly-elected state representative is on course to become the third lawmaker with autism in U.S. history, joining recently elected New York Assemblymember Yuh-Line Niou and Texas state Rep. Briscoe Cain, according to [Them](#).

"I remember what it was like to be a little autistic girl, unsure if I would be accepted and valued for who I am," she says. "To know that my work is now inspiring others is wonderful."

"I know that the halls of power in Harrisburg have not been built to welcome me," Benham says, adding that she now has "the opportunity to represent and lift up the voices of all of my constituents" in her state district, located on Pittsburgh's south side.

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Benham co-founded the Pittsburgh Center for Autistic Advocacy in 2014 after graduating from the University of Pittsburgh with a master's degree in bioethics.

The advocacy center's central mission is to protect the right for people with autism and says "all autistic and disabled people have the right to follow their dreams and be fully involved in decisions that affect our lives."

The representative-elect says that as someone with a pre-existing condition, she hopes to work on further "legislation to protect healthcare," adding that "it is personally important to me to defend our access to affordable care."

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Benham says her husband Karl and her family have been "incredibly supportive." She tweeted after her election victory this month that she's "ready to get to work," now that she's the legislative voice for the Pennsylvania district.

"While my experiences of being ignored by those in power is similar to that of all of my constituents, I know that my win means something special to LGBTQ+ people, Autistic people, and our families," Benham says. "I'm fighting for a world where we never have to hide who we are to be seen as capable of serving our communities."



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