

How JMU students can increase participation in civic engagement

By Madeline Gallagher

HARRISONBURG - On Monday, Oct. 30 at Memorial Hall, the JMU Center for Civic Engagement held Conversations with Candidates, a forum designed for residents of the Harrisonburg/Rockingham area to learn more about their candidates for the upcoming election.

Participating candidates included Virginia's House of Delegates for District 34 and VA Senate District Two, Rockingham County Board of Supervisors and Rockingham County School Board.

Attendance at the event was low, from both candidates and community members. Mark Obenshain did not appear to represent the Senate. He has not attended any of the forums held for this race.

Across the board, numerous candidates for other local races were absent. Paula Lam was set to attend but was absent due to a medical emergency.

In-person, Memorial Hall was nearly empty; however, the livestream had 123 views according to representatives from The Breeze.

Eleanor Shaw, JMU sophomore and news editor for JMU's student newspaper, The Breeze, was the moderator for the event. Shaw covered the same forum last year as a writer and said she got involved because of her passion for politics.

With so much passion for local government and civic engagement, Shaw urges her fellow JMU students to find something they're passionate about and get involved.

"Students should be civically engaged on campus with organizations that reflect that part of themselves, whether that's Madison Equality, Young Americans for Freedom, College Republicans, College Democrats, Student Government Associations- whatever it is, there are plenty of opportunities for students to get involved with things that really speak to their personal values," said Shaw.

Her advice for students looking to get involved with civic engagement is to "Keep yourself informed, know where to look for information, know that it's okay to ask questions... [and] keep yourself up to date about information on campus."

Mya Wilcox, a public administration major, is part of the Madison Center and has played a role in executing the forums. She was responsible for fact-checking and presenting the memos of the candidates who couldn't be at the event.

Wilcox dedicates 7-9 hours a week to being a Democracy Fellow with the Madison Center for Civic Engagement, where she and other Democracy Fellows are responsible for carrying out various aspects of the center's programs, including podcasting, communications and event planning.

Wilcox shares her advice about how young people, specifically JMU students, can get involved.

"An easy way to get involved is to come vote on election day, that's something that every citizen... once you're over 18, is afforded the right to do," Wilcox said.

Wilcox acknowledged some students might think voting is "daunting" if they are uninformed about the candidates or the issues, so another small step she suggests JMU students can take is "going and reading about the candidates," in addition to attending local forums.

Emma Sellers, a sophomore Anthropology and International Affairs double major, participated as a timekeeper, notifying the candidates of the remaining time they had left to speak.

Sellers is "proud to be able to encourage civic engagement on campus," and, like her peers, encourages others to do the same.

"JMU students should care about these issues because they are directly impacted by the decisions that are made. As JMU students, we are Virginia and Harrisonburg/Rockingham County residents for about 8-9 months a year, so we obviously have to abide by laws passed in Virginia and in Harrisonburg/Rockingham County."

JMU students can vote on campus at Godwin Hall. Dukes Vote will be at the polls with President Alger, Duke Dog and games to encourage students to vote. For those who wish to vote early, early voting ends on Saturday, November 4th. In the meantime, Sellers has one message:

"I think the biggest thing JMU students can do is use their voice. Encourage your friends to vote, be open to discussing topics that may be uncomfortable while keeping an open mind, find an issue you care about, and work to make it better. Your voice is big, and your voice is important. Make sure to use it."