Sanders eager to face the hometown heat

By Stacie Hamel
Face on the Floor Committee

Symone Sanders knew as a child that she had something to say.

Standing in her family’s north Omaha home, she used a wooden spoon as a microphone to “report” as journalist “Donna Burns.”

Sanders quickly found a real mic – at 16, nearly upstaging President Bill Clinton at a Girls Inc. event – and soon a national stage. The former chief spokeswoman for Vice President Kamala Harris and recently announced host of two national television shows will be honored Feb. 24 as the Omaha Press Club’s 167th “Face on the Barroom Floor,” an honor she called humbling and unexpected.

“It means so much,” she said. “I have always thought the peak for a Nebraskan is getting your face on the barroom floor.”

As the next “Face,” Sanders will have to turn over the mic – at least briefly – to a line-up of roasters who know her well enough to turn up the heat. Her mother, Terri Sanders, will serve as emcee and the No. 1 roaster. “She knows all the deep, dark secrets,” Sanders said. “And she literally knows everyone. She’s the perfect emcee.”

The roaster lineup continues with Emily Mwaja, program director at Girls Inc.; Brenda Council, whom Sanders came to know well through her work at the Empowerment Network; and Thomas Warren, former Omaha police chief and current chief of staff for Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert. Warren led the Urban League of Nebraska while Sand-

Thank you for this privilege to serve

By Hunter Samuels
OPC President

For those who don’t know me, I am Hunter Samuels, and in my day job I’m the stewardship and communications manager at Ronald McDonald House Charities in Omaha.

I thank you all for this privilege to serve as president for 2022. I am here because a few years ago I was looking for a networking group to get involved with, and my CEO at work just so happened to be in the same Rotary Club as longtime Press Club member Todd Murphy. Todd talked to me a bit
Sanders story; continued from page 1

ers was helping to restart its defunct young professionals group. Siblings Council and Warren both are previous “Face” honorees.

While back in Omaha, Sanders also will be honored at a bridal tea. Fiancé Shawn Townsend is a principal of a public affairs group in Washington, D.C. In May, the Washington Post called Symone and Shawn “a power couple in Biden’s Washington.”

Sanders already is working for MSNBC, where she will host two shows on the network and the Peacock streaming platform’s “The Choice.”

Could that be considered a slower pace after 11 years of nonstop political and advocacy work, the last three in the White House? “Now that I’m saying it, perhaps it’s not the slower thing,” she said with a laugh. “It is slowing down for me. … I’m sleeping in, I only have one phone, life is great.”

Her activism started in Omaha with the Empowerment Network. Next, she helped then-Mayor Jim Suttle survive a 2011 recall attempt, followed by work for Chuck Hassebrook’s Nebraska gubernatorial bid. Her campaign work throughout college led her to races in many states.

By age 25, she was calming crowds at Bernie Sanders rallies as the youngest national press secretary for a presidential campaign. For the 2020 election cycle, she served as a senior adviser in the Biden campaign.

“Anybody who says that they’re not the youngest person in the room is lying,” Sanders said. “I’m not the youngest person in the room anymore. I need to elevate young people because someone did that for me. I have a lot of people in Nebraska to thank for that.”

As she fills out her MSNBC team, she’s seeking fresh voices and perspectives. “I want to be challenged, to bring people in who will push me to think differently,” she said.

In 2020, she published what could be considered a handbook for young people on how to make their voices heard: “No, You Shut Up: Speaking Truth to Power and Reclaiming America.”

“It’s like a how-to for young people or the young at heart who want to make a difference, whether they are in their community or a classroom,” she said.

Sanders said she’s ready to celebrate on Feb. 24, with no fear of what might be said. “It’s good to be able to poke fun at yourself.”

Besides, she has shut down crowds of protesters. She knows how to take control of a mic. “I’ll get the microphone,” she said. “I’ll be ready.”

Samuels story; continued from page 1

about the OPC. I needed to connect with someone involved with UNMC who had some public relations experience, and it just so happened that there was some guy named Tom O’Connor who had just a tiny bit of that to share with me.

At my first event here in the club, Tom took the time to introduce me to more people than I can even remember. He made sure I had a chance to make connections that could serve me well. I’m forever grateful to him for that, as well as to the rest of the club members I met who could have easily brushed me aside. I mean, I was just some young kid (okay, I was like 30 but still, the point stands) who didn’t know anything about anything when it came to this kind of stuff. So many people stopped what they were doing and just talked to me as if I was one of their peers.

It was that experience that sold me on the Omaha Press Club.

The last two years have been exception-
All is not lost for Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Senate to actually agree on and pass legislation, says Ben Nelson, Nebraska’s former senator and governor.

What’s needed? A handful of senators who will reach out and say generally, “We can agree on X and Y in a bill, but not Z,” Nelson said. There needs to be a willingness to work things out, authenticity and no acrimony, he said.

“Assuming positions for their own advantage, and not having a philosophy to find solutions,” is what’s not working in the last decade, Nelson told the January Noon Forum. “Hope persists,” however, he said.

Such cooperation worked for the then-innovative “Gang of 14,” set up in 2005 to consider nominations for federal judgeships. Senators from both parties – with no staffers or potential leakers present – carefully evaluated judicial nominees. (Of course, he added, the gang were all old, white, elite males, but the system still delivered well-qualified candidates ... and, for example, rejected a younger Brett Kavanaugh as “too partisan.”)


Nelson, a senator from 2001 to 2013 who was known as a moderate broker, offered these opinions as well:
• For politicians to simply switch to Independent status most likely isn’t the answer to today’s divisiveness.
• Caucus-style voting to determine candidates – used by Iowa and some other states – delivers the party leaders’ candidate, and not the people’s will.
• The current toxic division dates back to 2010 and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s vow to block the re-election of President Barack Obama.

Perhaps Nelson summed up today’s challenge best in a paragraph from the book’s introduction:

“[I want to share lessons from a time when men and women of honest good faith worked together to get things done despite their honest political differences. This was a time when principle came before politics. It was a time when ‘compromise’ was not yet a dirty word and before ‘primary’ became a verb used to scare elected officials out of doing the right things. It was a time when integrity meant something and a time which, if we are not careful, we may never see again. It was a time when the men and women who roamed the marble halls of the Capitol were truly worthy of the title Senator.”
A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

…We thank you all for helping us through a difficult year

January 20, 2021, was the club’s annual meeting. I cannot tell you all how many of my annual reports have started out as “this was the toughest of my tenure.”

I can honestly say that 2021 was the toughest of all. Christine and I made difficult decisions to do whatever work was necessary to get the club through another year with the stress of the pandemic.

We had many challenges in front of us, mostly in the kitchen. This meant working the kitchen without a chef or sous chef, both of which were previously full-time positions. At first, we did not have a person to run the dishwasher or even a machine that was working. Christine and I traded days on who would wash.

Michael became what I call my wheels. I tore my meniscus tendon in my right knee in January of 2020 and have had difficulty standing and walking during long workdays.

Christine took over the pantry. Her food keeps getting better and more consistent.

We had been building back a steady lunch crowd until the most recent mask mandate, but business slowed to a crawl after the mandate. Nevertheless, our Thursday evening prime rib special has become a busy event. We did 49 prime ribs during one Thursday evening in January.

The fourth quarter was a boost for the club. While September and October were good months, November was the busiest I can remember, and it was all in a two-week period. Our December was about half of what we usually have. We had a minimum kitchen staff, and even then, it was a challenge.

Your Omaha Press Club did close the books for 2021 in the black, which is exceptional considering the pains of Covid.

We had many successful events during 2021, including the Hall of Fame (thank you, Gary Willis), the club’s 50th anniversary celebration (thank you to Chris Christen, Angella Arndt and their committee for their above-and-beyond work), the First Amendment Night, and our “Face on the Barroom Floor” events & Winemaker Dinners. Allen Beermann was instrumental in bringing in a large group for the First Amendment Night.

Looking back at other outstanding individuals in 2021, we count our blessings for Michael Fryer, Ron Holmes, Bill Ziegmann, Bridget Weide Brooks, Dale Ervin, the entire board and all the committee workers. I also want to thank Traci and Vidal, two of the building engineers who went to great lengths to help us through the difficult year, and of course the Lauritzens.

As we welcome Hunter Samuels to the president’s position in 2022, Roger Humphries assumes the title of past president and continues in an active role as chairman of the Face on the Barroom Floor Committee. I have never had a board president work so hard in support of the restaurant. Thank you, Roger, for always stepping up to help whenever and wherever needed. You have truly become a friend.

As 2022 unfolds, we are planning on opening Friday evenings ASAP, offering a limited menu. We will monitor the business and use Fridays as a springboard to also open Saturdays if we have the demand.

Check out our monthly calendar on the OPC website and online newsletter for upcoming events -- and bring a friend. We always have something going for all our members and their guests. And remember: We welcome special requests for evening events of 10 people or more.

Respectfully,

Steve Villamonte B.S. C.E.C.
Executive Director

Reminder: two options for parking in garages

Validated parking for OPC dining and club events is available in the garage attached to the east side of the DoubleTree Hotel. Bring your parking ticket up to the Press Club for validation.

After parking, take the garage elevator to the first floor, exit by the DoubleTree lobby and proceed southwest to the bank lobby. After business hours, enter the bank building on the east side, lower level by the revolving door. Press the security access button and tell them you’re going to the Omaha Press Club. Listen for a “CLICK” and the door will be unlocked.

Additional parking (not validated) is available in the Central City Garage, located to the west of the FNBO Building, Park in any non-reserved spot. Take the garage elevator to the basement level and walk through the tunnel to the FNBO building. Press the security access button and tell them you’re going to the Omaha Press Club.

Husker volleyball story; continued from page 1

two-time All-American. She was named co-most outstanding player of the 2017 NCAA Championship with teammate Mikaela Foecke after the Huskers beat Florida in the national title match.

Hailing from Papillion, Hunter came to the program as a Husker legacy, as her mother, Lori (Melcher) Hunter, was also a setter at NU from 1977-80.

Forum lunch service begins at 11:30 a.m. for $19 per person. The program starts at noon and concludes at 1 p.m. Call 402-345-8008 for reservations. Non-Press Club members are welcome.
Thursday, Feb. 24
“Face on the Ballroom Floor”
Symone Sanders
5:30 p.m. non-host social
6:30 p.m. dinner and roast
$75 OPC members, $85 non-members

Ash Wednesday, March 2
Lent specials, continuing with
Fish Friday menu specials

Thursday, March 17
Noon Forum: Downtown
Omaha, Riverfront
Kristyna Engdahl
11:30 a.m. lunch, $19
Noon to 1 p.m. speaker
and
St. Patrick’s Day Buffet
11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., cost $18

Sunday, April 17
Easter Brunch

Thursday, April 28
“Face on the Ballroom Floor”
UNMC Chancellor Dr. Jeffrey Gold
5:30 pm non-host social
6:30 pm dinner and roast
$75 OPC members, $85 non-members

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WE’RE ONLINE! READ YOUR OPC NEWSLETTER AT OMAHAPRESSCLUB.COM

Thursday, Feb. 10
Prime Rib Night
5:30 p.m. to close

Friday, Feb. 11
Winemaker’s Dinner
6 p.m. social, 6:30 p.m. dinner
$65 OPC members, $75 non-members

Monday, Feb. 14
Valentine’s Day
5:30 p.m. start
$140 per couple

Thursday, Feb. 17
Noon Forum, Kelly Hunter
Husker volleyball assistant
11:30 a.m. lunch, $19
Noon to 1 p.m. speaker

Thursday, Feb. 17
Prime Rib Night
5:30 p.m. to close

Monday, Feb. 21
Presidents Day
Club closed

Are you looking for a perfect party setting? A lunch surrounded by brilliance?
A dinner your guests will always remember? Keep the OPC in mind.

CANCELLATION POLICY: All reservations must be cancelled 48 HOURS in advance.

OMAHA PRESS CLUB STAFF

Executive Director
Steve Villamonte ...............opcdirector@gmail.com

Restaurant and Events Manager
Christine Villamonte ..........opcchrisline@gmail.com

Office .................. 402-345-8587
Restaurant .................. 402-345-8008
Website ..................... omahapressclub.com

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