

By Clay Latimer

Heather Macre was sure her campaign was doomed from the start.

It was 2012, and the young liberal lawyer was running for a seat on the Central Arizona Water Conservation District Board, which had been controlled for years by older conservative Republican men set in their old-school ways.

“I knew when I entered the race that I was going to lose,” she said.

“But I had nothing to lose.”

Pledging to make the Board more transparent and accountable to the public, Macre pulled off a stunning victory instead, prevailing in a white-knuckle race that required a recount.

Fast-forward 12 years: After helping reshape the board and focusing attention on grave 21st-century challenges, Macre is running for a third term in 2024, determined to help alleviate Arizona’s critical water crisis.

The 15-member CAWCD board sets policies for the Central Arizona Project, which transports Colorado River water from Lake Mead to cities and farms in Maricopa, Pinal, and Pima counties. Lake Mead supplies about 40 percent of Arizona's drinking water.

Macre's accomplishments are noteworthy: increasing public engagement with the board, creating the award-winning Protect Lake Mead campaign, helping negotiate and finalize the federal and state Drought Contingency Plans, and co-chairing the Power Task Force, which planned a diversified and innovative portfolio including renewable sources.

In her day job, Macre is the director of Fennemore, P.C.'s litigation department in Phoenix where her work focuses on business litigation, healthcare, and bankruptcy.

Macre learned about grit and ambition at an early age. A top-tier student, she was forced to drop out of the University of Florida at 20 to raise her two young siblings following her mother's death. "We were completely on our own," she said.

One afternoon she took her seven-year-old brother to see Finding Nemo, the popular Disney movie.

“I was pretty upset about everything that was happening,” she said. “I wasn’t really watching it. Then the fish says ‘Just keep swimming.’ Meaning that no matter how bad it might seem, if you keep swimming, and keep going, things will improve and you’ll get through it.

“I’ll be honest, it was like a 180-degree (turn). Even now there are times when things get hard on the board. Really hard. We’re not always getting great news. But you have to keep going, you can’t let yourself get mired in the sadness in the politics and the emotional side of it.”

Marce eventually returned to college and went on to earn a degree from the University of Florida Law School, focusing on environmental law. But after moving to the Valley in 2009 her plans changed when the economy cratered, creating a demand for bankruptcy lawyers.

However, her passion for science and environmental issues found an outlet on the CAWCD board.

“I don’t have regrets. I’m in a much better situation being a lawyer. And I love working on the Board,” she

said. “In a way, I’m fulfilling my (initial) career goal. This way I get to scratch the itch.”

The stakes are high. Climate change is drying up the American West and putting fundamental resources like water at ever greater risk.

At the same time, the Valley is one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country. Tens of thousands of houses are spreading deep into the desert as water-intensive microchip companies and data centers move in.

Is it time to panic?

“We see all the doom and gloom and in some ways, I’m like, ‘that’s good,’” Macre said.”It’s raising awareness; at least people are talking about this.

“But there is a lot of nuance, too. That fact gets lost. We’ve been working on it; we’ll continue to work on it. And you know, we’ve met these challenges before. So I try to stay more positive about it.

“You have to keep swimming.”