

Former board members cast light on Danks Burke's good government PAC

By [Vaughn Golden](#)

Published August 12, 2022 at 3:56 PM EDT



[Leslie Danks Burke founded Trailblazers PAC after the 2016 election to promote candidates with ideals promoting honest government. \(Sarah Gager/WSKG\)](#)

Since founding Trailblazers in late 2016, Leslie Danks Burke has held up the organization as a testament to her support of good government and transparency, but former board members and others close to the organization say its values were tainted as she sought office.

Following a failed bid for state Senate in 2016, Danks Burke [formed Trailblazers](#), a political action committee (PAC) aimed at mentoring and financially supporting candidates who held themselves to higher standards, specifically with regards to how they raised money.

“If the 2016 election cycle was about anything, it was about people across the country waking up to what folks in New York State have seen for a while – the convergence of money and power at the top has warped our political process. It’s time for citizens to take back our democracy. Real, lasting change starts with getting people elected at the local level, where our property taxes are set, our schools are funded, and our roads are maintained,” Danks Burke wrote in a [press release](#) announcing formation of the PAC in 2017.

The organization supports both Republican and Democratic candidates and its board members consist of members of both parties as well.

“I believe in the power of local politics, and supporting good people who run for local election because those representatives are the ones closest to the people, and so that's why I got involved with trailblazers,” Denise King, a former chair of the Trailblazers executive board, told WSKG.

King served as Danks Burke’s campaign manager in 2016 and helped her found Trailblazers after the race.

Trailblazers would go on to branch out to serve candidates nationwide. Since its formation, the organization has mentored 300 candidates. It “paused” its activity in early 2022.

Trailblazers changes ahead of 2020

In the fall of 2019, Danks Burke had decided to launch another bid for state Senate. At the same time, she remained as president of Trailblazers, despite protests from some board members that doing so was ethically questionable given the PAC’s non-partisan nature. Former board members, including King, said they encouraged her to temporarily step down as she campaigned.

Danks Burke said she doesn’t see an issue with a political candidate running a non-partisan organization.

“Everybody who was on the Trailblazers board was involved in politics in some form or another,” Danks Burke said. “It is a nonpartisan organization because it works with candidates across the political spectrum. We had other

people on the board who also were running for office. We had Democrats, Republicans, people from all political stripes on that board.”

King said Danks Burke told board members she planned to align the PAC with her campaign in 2020, touting its standards of transparency alongside her own messaging.

“I felt like the alignment of the PAC and the campaign discredited the PAC,” Rachel Barbour, another former executive board member, said.

Additionally, the organization would cut back on mentoring candidates, training workshops and other educational aspects.

“The things that made Trailblazers important to me, the training workshops, the mentoring, the selection of candidates who really represented, you know, honest government was all being put on hold and I did not see the organization, it was not going to be the organization that I helped found and the organization that I believed in, so I resigned in December of 2019,” King said.

Barbour followed suit shortly after.

“I wasn’t even sure, pardon me, what the hell was left of Trailblazers,” Georgia Reynolds, another former board member said.

Reynolds had also been involved since the founding of the organization, mentoring candidates and helping fundraise. She also stepped down and distanced herself from the organization as Danks Burke launched her 2020 bid.

Reynolds said she and others, including candidates she’d helped mentor, received fundraising solicitations asking to contribute to Danks Burke state Senate campaign. She believes they were sent out using Trailblazers’ mailing list.

In a [copy of a letter](#) obtained by WSKG dated Oct. 14, 2020, Amory Houghton III, a Trailblazers board member, touts the PAC’s activity and asks for contributions to Danks Burke’s campaign.

“I have known Leslie for many years and worked with her to promote honest, transparent campaigns for local and regional office. The non-partisan organization she founded, Trailblazers PAC, encourages young local-level

leaders to roll up their sleeves and be part of the solution,” the letter reads in part.

Danks Burke denied her campaign solicited mailing lists from Trailblazers.

King, Barbour and Reynolds have all contributed to Danks Burke’s primary opponent, Lea Webb, though they say their reasons for speaking out about Trailblazers are not politically motivated.

“We wish that this had gotten traction a year and a half ago when this happened, but it didn’t, but it is now because of the primary, but that’s not that’s not on us,” Barbour said. “We’ve been talking about this from the beginning.”

Endorsement of anti-government sheriff

In October of 2020, Trailblazers announced its endorsement of Scott Nichols, a candidate for sheriff in Franklin County, Maine.

“Scott is setting a precedent in his community that voters should be the loudest voices in the room. Even during these difficult times, he is going above and beyond what the law requires by taking measurable action for honest government, right now,” Trailblazers’ then executive Director Alli Woodard wrote in a [press release](#) announcing the endorsement.

Earlier that year, Nichols had been named “sheriff of the year” by the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, a group the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) and [Anti-Defamation League](#) describe as an extremist anti-government organization. The group also has ties to the Oathkeepers, an [extremist militia group](#) involved with the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

The CSPOA and [conservative media](#) lauded Nichols’ [refusal to enforce](#) COVID-19 emergency orders by the Governor of Maine. Nichols posted to Facebook about his award from the CSPOA in September which was noted by the [Maine Beacon](#) a week before Trailblazers announced its endorsement. Nichols’ campaign Facebook page has since been deleted or removed.

Reynolds and others close to Trailblazers who asked not to be identified said they were shocked by the endorsement of Nichols and immediately asked Danks Burke and other members of the PAC’s board to reverse its decision.

“I, honest to god, was horrified,” Reynolds said.

Trailblazers PAC also [contributed](#) \$850 to Nichols’ campaign according to his campaign’s financial disclosures to Maine’s election authority. (WSKG reviewed Trailblazers’ campaign finance disclosures and could not find any record of the contribution on its filings. The Trailblazers PAC’s federal arm [was terminated in February 2021](#) after failing to file disclosure reports per the FEC.)

Danks Burke maintains that Nichols met the PAC’s “objective criteria” for endorsement.

“What Trailblazers PAC does is set policy views aside and look scrupulously at whether the candidate is demonstrating through active work, through actually filing financial filings and through actually garnering donations from fully disclosed sources, that they are walking the talk on honesty in government,” Danks Burke said. “And when a candidate does that, and earns the Trailblazers endorsement, but then after the fact, does something that shows that they did not fully have that commitment, then Trailblazers PAC has rescinded that endorsement.”

Barbour said Nichols’ ties to the CSPOA were clear and would’ve shown up on a Google Search of his name. She also disagrees with the assessment that Nichols’ anti-government record should be considered a view on policy, and therefore should’ve immediately disqualified him from consideration by the Trailblazers board in the first place.

“Extremist ideology isn’t partisan,” Barbour said.

In February of 2021, almost four months after making the endorsement, Trailblazers [released a statement](#) rescinding it, citing Nichols support of the CSPOA in the wake of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

“This is a dishonest attack from a desperate campaign, but let’s stick to the facts,” Danks Burke’s campaign manager Kierra Powell wrote in a statement to WSKG. “Trailblazers was created as a non-partisan organization to encourage transparency across the political spectrum, not just from those candidates we agree with. It had clear and objective criteria for candidates to meet to earn an endorsement. The Trailblazers board followed those criteria, and Leslie did not inject her partisanship and progressive beliefs into the Trailblazers decision-making process. When candidates later took actions that

went against the pro-democracy principles that Trailblazers adhered to, they rescinded the endorsement.”