

Herkimer County Democrats Shine Bright for Democracy at Annual Dinner

NEWPORT, NY — The Barn at Miner’s Village provided a beautiful backdrop and perfect venue for an evening filled with energy and optimism as the Herkimer County Democratic Committee hosted its annual “Shine Bright for Democracy” dinner. The event brought together candidates, elected officials, committee members, and a group of bi-partisan supporters from across the Mohawk Valley to celebrate public service, recognize outstanding volunteers, and look ahead to November’s elections.

Candidates in attendance included:

- **Blake Gendebien** — U.S. Congress, 21st Congressional District
- **Judge Joseph Zavaglia** — NYS Supreme Court, 5th Judicial District
- **Cassie Robbins-Forbus** — NYS Senate, 49th District
- **Mandi Drake** — NYS Senate, 53rd District
- **Colleen Maxwell** — NYS Assembly, 118th District
- **Ihor Semko** — NYS Assembly, 122nd District

“There's something powerful about bringing so many people together who genuinely believe in the future of our communities,” said **Dan Casler**, Committee Vice Chair and Little Falls Town Supervisor. “The energy in that room wasn't about political titles or party labels. It was about people who care enough to show up and do the work. Voters deserve leaders who listen, who understand the challenges facing everyday families, and who remember that public service is about serving the public, not themselves. That's the kind of leadership we saw represented tonight.”

The committee also presented its annual awards, recognizing four individuals for their exceptional service and contributions:

- **Nina Pietrafesa of Little Falls** and **Bill Markey of Herkimer**, recognized for their dedicated service and tireless work supporting committee events and activities.
- **Tom Gehrig**, newly elected Vice Chair of the Oneida County Democratic Committee, recognized for his collaboration and leadership in coordinating Democratic organizing efforts across county lines.
- **Carli Rightmier**, Mohawk Valley Regional Representative for Governor Kathy Hochul's Office, recognized for her continued support, accessibility, and commitment to the region.

“These four individuals represent the very best of what makes a grassroots organization work,” said **Elizabeth Briggs**, Committee Co-Chair. “Nina and Bill are the anchors of our events, always stepping up and making sure things run smoothly. Tom has been a tremendous partner, particularly during petition season, mobilizing the Town of Trenton committee and working alongside us on judicial petitions. We congratulate him on becoming Vice Chair of the Oneida County Democratic Committee and look forward to continuing that partnership. And Carli has been a wonderful resource as we rebuild and strengthen our committee. We are fortunate to have someone as dedicated, accessible, and committed to the Mohawk Valley as she is. Each of them reminds us that meaningful change starts with people willing to put in the work.”

The evening underscored the committee's commitment to strengthening its organization, building relationships across the region, and encouraging greater participation in the democratic process.

The committee's next monthly meeting will be held Tuesday, October 20, 2026, at 6:00 PM. All registered Democrats are welcome to attend. Meeting details and additional information are available at herkimerdemocrats.com or by emailing HerkDems@gmail.com.

“Democracy is not a spectator sport.”

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Photo submitted:



Left to Right: Mandi Drake, Cassie Robbins-Forbus, Ihor Semko, Colleen Maxwell, Elizabeth Briggs, Judge Joeeph Zavaglia, and Blake Gendebien