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Kamala Harris

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About this Person

Born: October 20, 1964 in Oakland, California, United States

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Other Names: Harris, Kamala D.; Harris, Kamala Devi

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Kamala Harris was named vice president-elect of the United States in 2020, alongside her running mate Joe Biden. With the win, she became the first woman, first African American, and first South Asian American to serve as vice president-elect. She first learned about working for social justice while she was still riding in a stroller, pushed by her parents through the many protest marches in Berkeley, California, during the mid-1960s. The passion to protect civil liberties that had been ignited in her as a small child led Harris to choose a career in law and eventually to become the first African-American woman to be elected to the position of district attorney in the state of California. Though Harris' decision to enter the criminal justice system as a prosecutor at first shocked her progressive family, she was confident that she had made the right choice. "I saw the discretion the district attorney has," she explained to Joan Walsh of *San Francisco Magazine*, "Who to prosecute, what to charge, how to run a courtroom, and I realized it was important that people who care about social justice work on that side." In 2020, Harris was chosen as Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's running mate and the pair went on to win the election.

Though an experienced prosecutor, Harris was a relative newcomer to the California political scene when she was elected to the post of district attorney of San Francisco in 2003. However, her hard work, respectful leadership style, and sincere concern for the most vulnerable members of society introduced an atmosphere of integrity and positive social change to an office that had often been controversial. In August of 2007, Harris announced that she would run for a second term as San Francisco's DA. She eventually won this election. In 2010 Harris made history when she became the first woman and African American elected to the office of attorney general of California. In January of 2016, Harris became only the second African American woman to be elected to the US Senate. Just three years later, Harris announced her intention to run for president in 2020. However, in December of 2019, Harris dropped out of the race. In August of 2020, Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden announced his selection of Harris as his running mate.

Learned Strength from Family

Kamala Devi Harris was born in 1964 in Oakland, California, in San Francisco's Bay Area, one of two daughters of Shyamala Gopalan, an immigrant from India, and Donald Harris, a Jamaican American. Kamala, which means "lotus flower" in the sacred Indian language of Sanskrit, spent her early years in nearby Berkeley, where her parents attended college and worked in the civil rights movement. Gopalan would become a nationally respected doctor, specializing in breast cancer research, and Donald Harris would teach economics at Stanford University.

When she was seven, her parents divorced; young Kamala and her sister Maya Lakshmi were then raised by their mother. Though Harris would most often be identified as African American, she also highly valued her Indian heritage, especially the tradition of strong, courageous women she saw personified in her feminist mother and in her grandmother, who she saw on family visits to the Indian city of Chennai. Gopalan's family was Brahmin, India's highest social class, with a tradition of higher education and service to the community. She expressed these principles in her own career choice as a research scientist and passed them on to her daughters, teaching them the importance of fairness and social responsibility.

Harris won her first fight against discrimination when she was twelve years old. That year the family moved to the Canadian city of Montreal, Quebec, where they lived in an apartment complex with a courtyard. Though the courtyard was an inviting place to play, children were forbidden there. Undaunted, Harris organized a protest, and convinced the building management to change the policy.

Began Legal Career

After graduating from high school in Montreal, Harris returned to the United States to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C. She earned her bachelor's degree in political science and economics in 1986, then returned to the Bay Area to enter the University of California Hastings College of the Law. She received her law degree in 1989 and went to work as a law clerk in the district attorney's office in Alameda County, which includes most of the East Bay area near San Francisco.

Working in the DA's office gave Harris an intimate look at the power of prosecutors to shape the way crime is defined and charged. Though her family expected her to choose a profession such as public defender, where she would represent defendants who could not afford a lawyer, Harris began to feel that she could work more effectively to create a more just legal system from within the prosecutor's office. In 1990 she took a job as deputy district attorney for Alameda County.

As a new deputy district attorney, Harris was often assigned difficult cases. She worked hard to prove herself, frequently winning seemingly hopeless cases and earning a reputation as a skilled and compassionate lawyer. Over the next eight years, she worked her way up to become one of Alameda's most successful and valued prosecutors. During this time, as she prosecuted many cases of rape and other violent sex crimes, Harris developed strong feelings of empathy and commitment to the victims of such crimes, especially young women and children. She showed this commitment in many practical ways, not only by winning as many cases as she could, but also by such acts as rounding up volunteers to redecorate the bleak hospital room where she interviewed many rape victims. Throughout her career, Harris would prioritize the rights and welfare of young people.

Took Progressive Approach to Law

In 1998 Harris left the Alameda County DA's office to take a job managing the Career Criminal Unit for the San Francisco District Attorney's Office. There, she worked hard to combat recidivism, which means the tendency of convicted criminals to continue committing criminal acts after their release from prison, often resulting in their rapid and frequent return to prison. Along with her sympathy for the victims of crime, Harris also had understanding and compassion for the poverty and despair that often leads young people to break the law. She became convinced that part of law enforcement was to create options that gave hope to those trapped in a cycle of criminal behavior. Along with vigorously prosecuting those who committed crimes, she worked to establish effective rehabilitation programs to offer them a real chance to build a new life.

After two years in the Career Crime Unit, Harris took a new job in the office of the San Francisco City Attorney, as chief of the Community and Neighborhood Division, where she continued to work for the safety and welfare of young people. She developed a special interest in combating the devastating problem of human trafficking. Human trafficking involves groups of people who lure or abduct vulnerable people and force them into hard labor or prostitution. Sometimes called sex slavery, human trafficking for prostitution often victimizes young people. Determined to bring this horrific practice into public awareness and to fight its spread, Harris founded a community group to work against human trafficking. The Coalition to End the Exploitation of Kids (CEEK), founded during the early 2000s, brought together many community groups concerned with this threat to children around the world.

As the child of a mixed-race marriage, Harris had begun learning about building bridges at an early age, and her work in Alameda County and San Francisco had developed these skills. She began to feel that she could build enough community support to win the position of district attorney in San Francisco. From that office she felt she could work even more effectively to lessen crime and increase safety for all members of the community, while carefully protecting the civil rights of all. She announced her candidacy, running under the slogan, "Smart on Crime," which expressed her conviction that the DA's office did not need to be seen as "hard" or "soft" on crime, but to approach the problem with intelligence and innovation.

Elected District Attorney

Before the November 2003 election, polls showed that the little-known challenger Kamala Harris had the support of only 19 percent of voters. However, she won 33.65 percent on election day, eliminating another challenger, Bill Fazio, who got only 30.3 percent, and qualifying for a runoff election against the current DA, Terence Hallinan. Harris won the runoff with more than 56 percent of the vote, becoming the first woman district attorney in San Francisco, the first African American woman DA in California, and the first Indian American DA in the United States. One of her first acts in office was to create a special team to prosecute all child sexual assault cases.

Only three months after her election, Harris received an intense challenge to her authority, when a man named David Hill was charged with the murder of a San Francisco police officer named Isaac Espinoza. The killing of a police officer is always a highly emotional issue for both members of the police department and the larger community. Many called for the district attorney's office to ask that the defendant receive the death penalty. However, Harris had strong convictions against the death penalty and had promised during her campaign that she would not seek it. Even though she was new at her job, she withstood considerable pressure to go back on her promise and asked instead that Hill be sentenced to life in prison without parole. Though many police and their supporters were angered by Harris' decision, many others respected her integrity. Even State Attorney Bill Lockyer, who opposed Harris' decision and reviewed the case himself was forced to admit that the new DA had done nothing improper.

Throughout her first term in the DA's office, Harris has continued her campaign of being "smart on crime," citing climbing conviction rates, a stronger witness protection program, and continuing programs to help offenders break the cycle of violence. In 2004 she helped found the Safe Home and School for sexually exploited youth, the first such safe house in San Francisco and one of only a few in entire country. In August of 2007, Harris announced her intention to run for a second term of office as district attorney of San Francisco. Her bid went unchallenged--an occurrence that had not happened in San Francisco since 1991--and Harris won her

second four-year term in November of 2007.

Served as State Attorney General and Senator

For the next four years, Harris continued the work she had begun in his first term, earning even greater positive attention. In 2010 she campaigned to be elected as attorney general of California. The contest between Harris and her Republican opponent, Steve Cooley, was close. On the night of the November 2 election, Cooley in fact announced his victory when it appeared he had earned more popular votes. However, more than two million ballots had not yet been counted. The full results that began to be reported on the morning of November 3 ultimately showed Harris as the winner. She was sworn in as attorney general in January of 2011, becoming the first woman and first African American to assume the position.

Harris worked on a variety of issues as attorney general. One was combatting international trafficking of drugs, weapons, and people through California. Another was bringing data technology to California law enforcement to help police investigate crimes more efficiently. Harris also created the California Department of Justice Division of Recidivism Reduction and Re-entry to help convicted criminals reform their lives and become productive members of society.

In January of 2016 Harris officially announced that she would seek election to the U.S. Senate in the 2016 election. She had been planning to enter the race since 2015, when Democratic U.S. Senator from California Barbara Boxer announced she would retire when her current term expired in January of 2017. In a test of California's top two primary system--wherein the two candidates with the most votes move to the election, regardless of party affiliation--Harris faced a fellow Democrat, Representative Loretta Sanchez. Harris won handily with over 60% of the vote to become the first African American to represent the state of California--and only the second black woman--to be elected to the Senate. In addition, Harris became the country's first Indian-American senator. In 2018, Harris led the passage of a bill that made lynching a federal crime. Harris' bill made lynching a crime in addition to any other crimes committed, such as assault or murder. Although other senators attempted to pass similar laws in the past, none succeeded prior to Harris.

In January of 2019, Harris officially announced that she would run for president in the 2020 election. By the time she announced her intention to seek the Democratic nomination, Harris was already the third U.S. senator to enter the presidential race. Some of her fellow Democratic challengers included Senators Elizabeth Warren, Kirsten Gillibrand, Bernie Sanders, Cory Booker, and Joe Biden. Harris campaigned heavily, earning endorsements from Delegate Stacey Plaskett and Representative Salud Carbajal. However, she failed to raise as much money as more established contenders, such as Sanders and Biden. Harris resigned from the presidential race on December 3, 2019.

After Harris' withdrawal, Biden worked his way to the top of the list of challengers and eventually would formally receive the Democratic nomination. As his primacy among the challengers became clear, many observers wondered whom he would pick for a running mate. On August 11, 2020, he answered them with a choice that surprised some: his former competitor, Harris.

Harris, then 55, made headlines for a number of firsts, including becoming the first African American woman and the first person of any gender of Indian descent to be nominated by a major party for a federal post. She is also the fourth woman in the United States to become a major presidential-ticket nominee. Harris brought a harder-hitting style of debate and diplomacy than Biden and drew new interest to his race against incumbent Republican President Donald Trump. After a very close election with vote counts that stretched several days past election night, Biden was elected president, making Harris the latest vice president. On November 7, Harris delivered a moving victory speech as the first female, first African American, and first South Asian American Vice President-Elect ever. Offering thanks to supporters, she declared, "You chose hope and unity, decency, science, and yes, truth!" She continued: "But while I may be the first woman in this office, I will not be the last. Because every little girl watching tonight sees that this is a country of possibilities and to the children of our country regardless of your gender, our country has sent you a clear message: Dream with ambition, lead with conviction, and see yourselves in a way that others may not simply because they've never seen it before."

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born Kamala Devi Harris, October 20, 1964, in Oakland, CA; daughter of Donald Harris (an economist) and Shyamala Gopalan Harris (a research scientist); married Douglas Emhoff (an attorney), August 22, 2014. **Education:** Howard University, BA, political science and economics, 1986; University of California Hastings College of the Law, JD, 1989. **Addresses:** Office--P.O. Box 78393, San Francisco, CA 94107.

CAREER:

Office of Alameda County District Attorney, Deputy District Attorney, 1990-98; Office of San Francisco District Attorney, Career Criminal Unit, Managing Attorney, 1998-2000; Office of the San Francisco City Attorney, Community and Neighborhood Division, Chief, 2000-03; San Francisco District Attorney, 2004-2011; attorney general of California, 2011-2016; U.S. Senator, 2016--; ran for presidency of United States, 2019; dropped out of presidential race, 2019; selected as vice presidential running mate for Joe Biden, 2020; elected vice president of the United States, 2020. Member: National District Attorneys Association, board of directors; California District Attorneys Association.

AWARDS:

San Francisco Child Abuse Prevention Council, Child Advocate of the Year, 2004; National Urban League, "Woman of Power," 2004; National Black Prosecutors Association, Thurgood Marshall Award, 2005; Howard University, Most Distinguished Alumni, 2006; *Ebony Magazine*, 100 Most Influential Black Americans, 2007.

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