

## POLITICS

# Lucy Lang Vies for Progressive Mantle in Manhattan District Attorney Race

The former prosecutor has emerged as the problem-solving candidate in a field of eight Democrats

By [Deanna Paul](#) / Photographs by Caitlin Ochs for *The Wall Street Journal*

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As a Manhattan prosecutor in 2017, Lucy Lang secured murder convictions against two masked shooters who opened fire on a crowded street, killing Yvonne Graham's 28-year-old son.

The morning after the verdict, Ms. Graham told Ms. Lang that she had slept all night for the first time since her son died—but that when she woke up, she was worried about the mothers of the two young men going to prison.

“I lost my son to the streets, and they lost their sons to the criminal-justice system,” Ms. Graham said in an interview last week. “There’s no winning here.”

Ms. Lang said her experience with Ms. Graham and others directly affected by law enforcement has informed her campaign to lead the Manhattan district attorney's office. She has pledged to take seriously the perspectives of crime victims, offenders and their families.

Ms. Lang, 40 years old, has emerged from the field of eight Democratic candidates as a problem solver with prosecutorial skills, laying out a series of ideas that she said will make prosecutions fairer and more equitable. Her plans are drawn from more than 12 years in the Manhattan office and two years at a criminal-justice organization where she gained national attention as a policy expert advising prosecutors across the country.



Lucy Lang campaigning in Union Square earlier this month.

More than a dozen progressive prosecutors have endorsed Ms. Lang, marking the first time a contender for the job has been backed by elected prosecutors across the country. If elected, Ms. Lang would join the growing ranks of prosecutors whose goals include incarcerating fewer people, tackling the root causes of crime and lessening racial inequities in the justice system.

Ms. Lang, who grew up in the West Village, began working as a prosecutor in the Manhattan district attorney's office after graduating from Columbia Law School in 2006. She handled some of the most serious offenses, including homicides, violent crime and domestic-violence cases. Many of these carried lengthy prison terms.

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Ms. Lang said she also worked to help the office evolve, organizing training on topics such as obstacles to prisoners re-entering society. Her interest in revamping the criminal-justice system crystallized in 2017 when she taught a college-level course inside a New York state prison. Putting a group of 10 Manhattan, mostly white prosecutors and 10

mostly Black and brown inmates in a room together, Ms. Lang led roundtable discussions with the students, who then drafted proposals for change.

William Darrow, a former bureau chief at the Manhattan district attorney's office who participated in the course at minimum-security Lincoln Correctional Facility, said the class showed the human side of people who have been prosecuted.

"People didn't have any illusions about what prison was like, but this gave us a firsthand view of how grim prison could be and the degradation that goes on," he said.

A University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology study showed that prosecutors were more likely to seek lower sentences as a result of taking the class. It also led to innovative policies, such as the creation of an Internet-accessible computer lab for Queensboro Correctional Facility inmates to search for jobs and send out resumes.



Lucy Lang says she has worked to help the Manhattan district attorney's office evolve.

Ms. Lang left the district attorney's office in 2018 to become executive director of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice's Institute for Innovation in Prosecution, where she advocated ending laws that mandate life in prison after three violent offenses.

She organized a yearlong effort to create a guide for the prosecution of police officers accused of violence, a type of case that has long proved challenging for district attorneys. The policy recommendations were drawn up by prosecutors, law-enforcement experts and family and community members of people killed by police officers.

"To have true justice reform, we really need to listen to, empower and share power with impacted communities," said John Choi, the top prosecutor in Ramsey County, Minn.,

outside Minneapolis, and a member of the working group that created the police prosecution guide. “Lucy is going to do that, as she’s done her entire career.” Mr. Choi is among the prosecutors endorsing Ms. Lang.

## ‘The reforms I’ve implemented aren’t sitting in a policy paper—they’re transforming the system today.’

— Lucy Lang

Ms. Lang has also earned endorsements from a host of people who aren’t politicians or in public life, like Ms. Graham and other crime victims as well as former prisoners.

As a Manhattan district attorney candidate, Ms. Lang has drawn criticism for pushing policy changes and writing articles from the sidelines at a think tank. Assemblyman Dan Quart, a candidate who has minimal experience in a criminal courtroom, has told voters that they will never see true reform of the office if they elect a former prosecutor. Ms. Lang rejects that notion.

“The reforms I’ve implemented aren’t sitting in a policy paper—they’re transforming the system today,” said Ms. Lang, noting that some of the nation’s most successful progressive district attorneys, including Chicago’s Kim Foxx and Brooklyn’s Eric Gonzalez, are also people who served in the offices they now lead. “They know the functioning of the system that they are seeking to transform, and as a result have been able to implement transformational change.”



Education is at the core of Lucy Lang’s platform.

Ms. Lang has raised less money than candidates like Tali Farhadian Weinstein and Alvin Bragg. Ms. Lang said she avoided taking money from groups who could compromise the office's integrity or create even the appearance of favoritism or unfair influence. Her first policy proposal centered on equal access and ending private meetings between senior management and defense lawyers.

At the core of her platform is education, including keeping children out of the criminal-justice system, working with local organizations wherever possible and investing in programs that help people be successful when they are released from prison.

Ms. Lang plans to combat rising citywide violence by creating a specialized gun court staffed with attorneys who are trained to identify the root causes of gun violence. She said she would address domestic violence, which has been on the rise since the pandemic, by creating a community-based way for victims to feel less afraid to report. She also wants to change the city's approach to substance abuse by focusing on treatment and rehabilitation.

"The system creates blinders for the people who operate it," said Ms. Lang. It is the district attorney's job to bring in people "who value the need for progressive change and who believe it was possible to do from the inside," she said.

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Write to Deanna Paul at [deanna.paul@wsj.com](mailto:deanna.paul@wsj.com)

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