

—Slug:.....COMM-0867.bratt.Aly\_Richards\_intrvw  
—Contributor.....Joyce Marcel  
—Contributor email.....joyrand@sover.net  
—For section..... News  
—Format..... News - byline and dateline  
—Dateline..... Brattleboro  
—Article Number:.....43671



**Notes from editor (not for publication):**



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 'Pragmatic optimist' Richards runs for governor

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 The architect of the state's universal childcare program  
3 seeks the Democratic nomination with agenda focused on  
4 solutions

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 The woman responsible for comprehensive childcare in  
7 Vermont now wants to be the state's next governor.  
8 Gubernatorial candidate Aly Richards, 40, the longtime  
9 CEO of the nonprofit Let's Grow Kids, will be facing another  
10 Democrat, Burlington resident Amanda Janoo, in the Democratic  
11 primary on Tuesday, Aug. 11.

12 The thought of a competitive primary does not faze  
13 Richards. If anything, it energizes her.

14 “It’s amazing that we have a primary,” she said. “We  
15 need more women putting themselves out there, fighting for  
16 what’s right.

17 “The truth is, we’ve got to be fighting,” Richards said of  
18 the competition between her and Janoo, the co-founder of the  
19 Wellbeing Economy Alliance of Vermont. “We have to believe  
20 that we can do better. It’s amazing that we have a friendly  
21 primary, and I think Amanda and I are going to show something  
22 really great here: two women putting themselves out there with  
23 good ideas, having a reasonable debate, putting a choice out for  
24 the voter, and not tearing each other down. I think that’s going to  
25 be a great model for unity and democracy.”

26 Richards was eager to explain how Let’s Grow Kids  
27 helped create and pass the 2023 Child Care Bill (Act 76), the first  
28 of its kind in the nation.

29 The bill, which passed the House and Senate with  
30 overwhelming support, entitles all children — from the ages of 3  
31 to 5 and who are not yet in kindergarten — up to 10 free hours  
32 per week of publicly funded pre-K for 35 weeks of the academic  
33 year. It is paid for by a small payroll tax.

34 The bill was vetoed by Republican Gov. Phil Scott but  
35 became law after a veto override.

36 Speaking to *The Commons* a few weeks ago, outgoing  
37 Brattleboro Rep. Mollie Burke of District 8 talked about the  
38 success of the law.

39 “It gives more subsidies to people,” Burke said. “More  
40 people can afford child care. It’s helped child care workers get  
41 more pay, which has been a big issue, and it’s helped child care  
42 centers open more spaces. It’s been an economic benefit. More  
43 people are able to go to work.

44 “This tax is leading to economic growth, better pay for  
45 child care workers, and the ability of anybody who used to stay at  
46 home with a child and who can now go to work,” she continued.

47 Richards, 40, is married to James Pepper, the chair of the  
48 Vermont Cannabis Control Board — another growth industry in  
49 Vermont. The couple have identical twin boys who are 7½ years  
50 old.

51 “It’s funny, but I wrote a paper in eighth grade about why  
52 you should legalize marijuana,” Richards said. “I joke about this  
53 to my husband, who does this job from a pure policy  
54 perspective.”

## 55 **‘Who am I kidding? The world** 56 **is on fire.’**

57 Vermont is becoming less and less affordable, and  
58 people who admired Richards’ work on child care began urging  
59 her to run for governor.

60 She anticipates that she, should she win the Democratic  
61 Party nomination in the primary, will face Scott, who polls as the  
62 most popular governor in the United States. He is expected to  
63 announce if he will run for an unprecedented sixth term once the  
64 Legislature finishes its session.

65 People from the Let’s Grow Kids campaign said they  
66 wanted a candidate who could let them be “part of something  
67 bigger than ourselves” and who could give “a reason to hope”  
68 and someone who would fight for working families.

69 “I started getting those calls, along with some from  
70 business folks and from folks in the Legislature,” said Richards,  
71 adding that she “willfully ignored” the suggestions to run for all  
72 of 24 hours.

73 “And then I said to my husband, ‘Who am I kidding?’”  
74 she said. “The world is on fire, starting right here in Vermont. If I  
75 have an opportunity to put a positive vision forward for the state  
76 of Vermont, a place that I love, where I know we can do things  
77 because we still talk to each other, that I have to do it.”

78 Then Scott gave his annual budget address to the  
79 Legislature. Richards listened to him and then read his speech

80 carefully. She thought it was similar to most of Scott's addresses  
81 over the last 10 years.

82 "It was a diagnosis of the problems, correctly," Richards  
83 said. "We all agree on the problems. The question remains, 'What  
84 are we going to do about it?' He offers no solutions. He does a lot  
85 of finger wagging."

86 She describes the governor as "very successful blaming  
87 things on the Legislature. That's not delivering results. When you  
88 are blaming, you are not leading."

89 For example, Richards said, "I am relentlessly focused on  
90 delivering results like childcare. We need a governor who cares  
91 about delivering results and doesn't care about who makes the  
92 political win."

93 In other words, she said, "we need to see the solutions  
94 for housing and healthcare. We need an executive branch who is  
95 going to have real plans and use the staff of the administration to  
96 energetically be out in communities helping to solve problems."

## 97 **Looking toward durable** 98 **change**

99 Scott has advanced one solution, in the arena of the ever-  
100 higher costs of public education. He asked the Legislature for a  
101 mandate to regroup all of Vermont's school districts into five. His  
102 idea became immediately controversial; the Legislature appears  
103 to be looking to a voluntary unification instead of a mandated  
104 one.

105 "When I say solutions, I mean real workable strategic  
106 solutions," Richards said. "There was this idea of five districts,  
107 and, elegantly, there were five listening sessions. That's not real  
108 stakeholder engagement."

109 Since Richards began campaigning, she has been hearing  
110 people agree that change is needed.

111 "For example, they'll say, 'This small school doesn't have  
112 enough students in it,'" Richards said. "Or, 'This elementary

113 school is small, but it's really highly functional. We don't need to  
114 make a change here.'

115 "We just don't want to be bullied," she said. "We want to  
116 be part of the solution."

117 Richards believes that "some data would be helpful.  
118 Maybe some modeling to say, 'If we make the hard decision, it's  
119 actually going to work in the way we want it to.' And maybe a  
120 little bit of money as an incentive to repurpose a closed school as  
121 a community center, which we've seen happen in a couple of  
122 places really well."

123 Scott never issued real plans for his proposal, Richards  
124 pointed out.

125 "He is leaving the Legislature to have to do the detail  
126 work, part-time and without staff," Richards said. "It's really a  
127 setup. It's not fair, and the conversation is tearing our  
128 communities apart. So even if it's correct, the change won't be  
129 durable. The change will not be successful."

130 Blaming the Legislature for the high cost of living in  
131 Vermont, as Scott did during the last election cycle, might be  
132 successful as an election-year scare tactic, but it does not come  
133 close to solving Vermont's problems, Richards said.

134 "For 10 years, we have not had a vision or a plan that  
135 actually led to a result. Look at Scott's veto of the childcare bill,  
136 right? We worked to solve this deeply entrenched crisis and  
137 overrode the governor's veto with all the Dems, all the Progs, a  
138 handful of Republicans, a handful of independents, and the sole  
139 Libertarian in that building."

140 She described the process as "a real Vermont  
141 conversation with a real solution that's working."

142 "That's how you truly have a Vermont conversation," she  
143 said. "Put the people most impacted in the driver's seat and get  
144 real change. So that's what we have to do for housing; that's what  
145 we have to do for healthcare."

## Politics came early

Richards was raised in Vermont “because my parents thought Vermont was the best place to raise a family,” and she discovered her affinity of politics as a force for change very early.

“When I was in eighth grade, one student in a school could shadow their representative in the Legislature,” Richards said. “And I was asked. So I went to the State House to shadow my representative, Al Stevens, D-Newbury.”

She described Stevens, who died in 2005, as “an incredible guy.”

“He lost his seat because he voted for civil unions [in 2000], but this was right before that happened. They were doing a bill to decide if they would put a student representative on the state Board of Education. And I was shadowing him as an eighth grader, and that was my first experience in the State House, seeing how all this worked.

“Then Al pulled me aside and said, ‘Look, they’re debating this bill on the floor today. They’re definitely going to pass it. And you should be the student on the state Board of Education one day.’”

The bill did pass. And as it happened, current Brattleboro Selectboard member Issac Evans-Frantz was the first student ever appointed. But two terms later, when Richards was old enough to apply, she was appointed by then-Gov. Howard Dean and became the third student to sit on the state Board of Education. She was 15.

“It was because of my job shadowing that my whole brain opened up,” Richards said. “I saw myself at a table having some value to add to a conversation.”

As a part of the experience, Richards learned to handle media attention. The *Valley News* did a profile of her, and a columnist raged about her “not being old enough to even drive herself to a meeting, so how dare she be on the state Board of Education.” (“And don’t worry, by the time I’m actually a voting

180 member, I'll be able to drive myself to meetings and home  
181 again," Richards responded in a letter to the editor.)  
182 "I thought, 'Wow, I'm getting my first mud-slinging  
183 experience at the ripe old age of 15,'" Richards said. "I thought,  
184 'Well, maybe he's right. What do I have to offer?' But then I  
185 thought, 'Oh, the adults have this under control.' And I realized,  
186 'Oops, no, they don't.'

187 "And that's a dangerous thing to think," she said. "A lot of  
188 them didn't know anything about education."

189 "So here I was as a student, and the most critical part of  
190 education is that interaction between the teacher and the student,  
191 and just my presence changed the conversation," Richards  
192 continued. "Then I grew confidence and started piping in."

## 193 **Growing up in the Upper**

## 194 **Valley**

195 Richards grew up in Vermont with a deep sense of  
196 community and the idea that "we can do anything when we put  
197 aside our differences and work together."

198 Her father was a teacher at Oxbow High School in  
199 Bradford. He taught history and English. One year, Richards was  
200 in his classes. Then she left the state for college and worked on  
201 Barack Obama's first campaign in 2008. She followed him to  
202 Washington but soon was discouraged that Vermont values did  
203 not translate into D.C. behavior.

204 "As much as I believed in Barack Obama's leadership,  
205 people who don't agree with each other don't speak to each  
206 other in Washington, D.C.," Richards said. "That was 2008. I  
207 know enough to know that change can't happen that way. You  
208 must speak to each other. You have to have reasonable  
209 disagreement and debate. So I ran home to Vermont as fast as I  
210 could."

211 Richards then started working for Gov. Peter Shumlin.

212 “I didn’t know him at all, but he was talking about  
213 climate change and early childhood education,” Richards said. “I  
214 started talking to lots of Vermonters, understanding what they  
215 cared about, and the problems were so overwhelming. Then I  
216 said to myself, ‘How are you, one human, going to fix this?’”

217 She decided to “go upstream to these root cause issues  
218 that you actually can change,” and discovered that early  
219 childhood education was key.

220 “That became my project for the governor,” Richards  
221 said. “We passed universal pre-K. We put all these pieces in  
222 place, and then it became my life, because I was recruited to run  
223 Let’s Grow Kids.”

224 Richards was CEO of Let’s Grow Kids for 10 years.  
225 During that time, she helped write, testify, defend, and ultimately  
226 pass the Child Care Act. Once the bill was passed, Let’s Grow  
227 Kids deliberately went out of business.

228 “I said, ‘Let’s put a deadline. Let’s hold ourselves  
229 accountable. Let’s hold our feet to the fire. Let’s create urgency,  
230 and do it,’” Richards said. “We passed the most significant child  
231 care bill in the country with bipartisan support, and it is doing  
232 exactly what we hoped it would do.”

## 233 **Running for governor**

234 Affordability is going to define the next election, both  
235 across the country as well as in Vermont, Richards said.

236 “I’m relentlessly focused on outcomes,” Richards said,  
237 describing herself as “an optimistic pragmatist.”

238 “So, the day that the governor gave his budget address  
239 was so distressing because again — correct with the problems,  
240 very light on the solutions,” she said.

241 That same day, *The New York Times* came to Vermont and  
242 interviewed Richards for a story about her childcare work.

243 “They wanted to talk to someone who has actually done  
244 something in the United States to make life more affordable for  
245 humans,” Richards said. “And they did this beautiful four-minute

246 video journalistic piece that just summarized our decade of  
247 effort. It was one of those moments where I said, ‘Well, darn it, I  
248 think I have to run.’”

## 249 **Fixing root causes of problems**

250 Housing and health care are Richards’ top two priorities,  
251 “because, like childcare, they are root causes that will truly help  
252 us rebuild the fabric of our communities,” she said.

253 Vermont has 11 hospitals that are deeply in financial  
254 trouble. Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, for example, is fighting a  
255 \$14.5 million budget shortfall.

256 Richards wants to implement the plan offered in 2024 to  
257 the Green Mountain Care Board by hired consultant Oliver  
258 Wyman.

259 “Almost all of our hospitals are on the verge of  
260 bankruptcy,” Richards said. “This is an amazing place where the  
261 government must act. Two years ago we had a report that  
262 explained the situation perfectly. We have to coordinate the  
263 hospitals and decide who’s doing hips and who’s doing hearts.  
264 You decide the specialty, and you become a focus center. And  
265 then we decide what are the basic needs in every hospital, like  
266 access to an emergency room, basic healthcare needs. So we  
267 preserve all of that everywhere, and then we do the specialty  
268 services in different places.”

269 The governor must facilitate the conversation of  
270 regionalization and specialization, Richards said.

271 “There are anti-monopoly and antitrust laws that actually  
272 stop the hospitals from going into a room and doing it  
273 themselves,” she said. “It requires the government to do the  
274 work.”

275 In the two years since that report “they had a consultant,  
276 they fired the consultant, then they had a new consultant. I’m  
277 sorry, but this is an emergency. Get the best facilitator the world  
278 has ever seen, prioritize, get the hospitals in the room, do the  
279 sprint, specialize, do the regionalization.

280 “The lack of vision from the state on health care has set  
281 us back very, very badly for 10 years, and we need to regrow that  
282 planning arm in state government,” Richards said.

## 283 **Untangling housing and** 284 **affordability**

285 On the issue of housing, one program that is working  
286 right now is the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community  
287 Development’s Community and Housing Infrastructure Program  
288 (CHIP), she said.

289 “It’s a new program and a great idea, democratizing  
290 financing instruments,” Richards said. “But many people don’t  
291 know how to navigate it. So, we build this great idea, and then  
292 the government doesn’t do the next most important step, which is  
293 technical assistance to allow people to actually use the tool we  
294 built.

295 She also described “things happening in Brattleboro that  
296 are actually quite great bright spots.”

297 “I mean, Chloe Learey is working her tail off up there at  
298 Winston Prouty and making it work through every barrier,”  
299 Richards said of the nonprofit’s plans to build hundreds of  
300 affordable housing units on the former campus of the Austine  
301 School for the Deaf. She also cited the redevelopment of the  
302 Brooks House after a devastating fire in 2011 as “another great  
303 example.”

304 Taxing second homes is an idea that needs a lot of  
305 discussion, and the Legislature is looking at it right now, she said.

306 “How do we use it well to put housing back in the  
307 primary residence market, and then use the revenue to actually  
308 give us some capital to do development?” Richards asked.

309 Numerous studies list an urgent need in the state for  
310 young people move to the state, join communities, and grow the  
311 economy. There is not a great deal of housing for them.

312 Meanwhile, elders are stuck in large houses they no longer need  
313 because also, there is no place for them to go and scale down.

314 “You have aging Vermonters who are saying, ‘Please,  
315 how do we get out of our big drafty houses with 15 bedrooms,  
316 leave them for another family, and go to a turnkey condo where  
317 we can age?’” Richards said. “There’s a huge demand for that.  
318 Why aren’t we building that?”

319 For the candidate, “housing is one of these things where  
320 if you build the housing in the right way, for the communities, it  
321 actually balances our environment. You’re building a Grand List.  
322 Then our property taxes come down, and then you have more  
323 young people who can stay because there’s a home for them, and  
324 then our income taxes come down because there’s more payers.”

325 The current war with Iran is driving up prices  
326 everywhere.

327 “Everyone is saying, ‘We can’t survive this,’” Richards  
328 said. “It’s the most vulnerable Vermonters getting stuck at the  
329 pump, getting stuck at home with these crazy bills because they  
330 didn’t have the upfront capital to go to the pellet stove, to go to  
331 the heat pump. This is insanity.”

332 Vermont needs political will to solve the affordable  
333 energy problem.

334 “We need to have creative access to upfront capital for  
335 vulnerable Vermonters to make that one time investment that will  
336 save them money the rest of their lives,” Richards said. “It can be  
337 done.

338 “And think about it,” she continued. “Allowing folks to  
339 move on to cheaper, cleaner energy is great for the planet. And it  
340 creates this energy independence for us in Vermont, so we are  
341 not the whims of whatever this president is going to do next.”

342 Richards is looking forward to the primary debates.

343 “I’m about transformative change,” she said. “I’m about  
344 delivering big ideas, showing the opportunity window, showing  
345 it’s possible. So I’m excited to have a lively debate in the primary.  
346 I think it’ll be good.”

347           And then, when she or Janoo gets to debate Scott prior to  
348 the general election, "I think we have a real conversation," she  
349 said. "This is a moment in this country where we have an echo of  
350 hope and change."

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

351

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

*LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:*

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

352

0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

353

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

354

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

355

####END LOGLINE####