

Power Women

You Want To Run For Office. Now What?

Heidi Brown, 07.10.09, 3:45 PM ET

Lesia Liss never thought of going into politics. She worked in health care for 23 years, but after spending 13 years as a registered nurse in the emergency rooms of the Henry Ford Medical Center in Warren, Mich., she had a change of heart.

To Liss, 42, her patients seemed to be a mirror of the souring economy, since Michigan had been hit harder by falling home prices, and unemployment had long been an issue as car industry slowly deteriorated. "[My patients] were like economic indicators," she explains. "In the ER, I could see everything that was wrong with society. I was at ground zero."

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Seeing this succession of suffering, Liss wondered whether she might be able to help people in a broader way. "I thought, 'I love being a nurse, but could I do something more?'"

Her husband, Mark, an assistant attorney for the City of Royal Oak and a councilman for the City of Warren, suggested she try running for public office. Liss' initial response? Like so many women who dare to imagine themselves in politics, it was self-doubt. "I took one poly-sci class in nursing school," she says.

Beyond her lack of expertise and confidence, the statistics weren't encouraging. Of 110 state representatives in the Michigan legislature, only 20 are women. Nationally, the proportion of women in state legislatures is slightly higher, at 24%. Nevertheless, last November Liss beat the odds and won a seat in the Michigan House of Representatives.

Liss is part of a broader trend in this country: Women of all races--especially those under 35--have been stepping up in greater numbers to have a louder voice in politics. And two prominent politicians in particular have spurred this new phenomenon.

"Hillary and Obama have inspired an enormous number of women to run for office," says Marie Wilson, the president and founder of the White House Project, a nonprofit organization which helps women run for office and attain leadership positions.

Still, there's a long way to go before women reach parity in political office in the U.S. The Center for American Women and Politics reports that women hold 17% of the seats in the U.S. Congress. That's 17% of the seats in the Senate and 16.8% of seats in the House of Representatives. And currently, six states are run by woman governors, now that Sarah Palin has resigned from the post.

Sparked by her husband's encouragement, Liss began to think about how she could get started. While pursuing a women's studies degree part-time at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, Liss heard about the White House Project and, on a lark, signed up for a free training session. She says the information she got there helped her win.

The first night of the training, other female state legislators from Michigan spoke of their experiences. "They said all the bad things that happened in the campaigning, with doors being slammed in their faces and negative comments from people who didn't think it was a woman's place to run for office."

After completing the program, which is free and generally lasts two days and covers the basics of community building, fundraising and public speaking, she got busy. The most important part of any campaign, Liss and the Project agree, is that a candidate should spend the majority of her time knocking on doors and talking to future constituents. "You have to walk," says Liss, who is proud that she ran only two ads--one in a local paper and the second in a program for a theater group. "People appreciate the opportunity to meet a candidate face to face. For a year that was my life."

She found that the biggest hurdle was raising money. There were six other Democrats in the primary; some had held office before. The previous holder of the seat, who was also a nurse practitioner, held a fundraiser for Liss in nearby Lansing, and the speaker of the State House stopped by another party. All in all, Liss raised \$24,313 on her own, and the Democratic Party contributed \$18,350.

In the end, Liss believes it may have been the robo-calls (from the *opposing* camp) that secured her seat. The call messages accused Liss of not having relevant experience; voters told Liss they assumed she was doing well since she was the target of the calls.

In the general election, Liss won 70% of the votes in her 64% Democratic district. Since taking office, Liss has already sponsored legislation that extended unemployment benefits in Michigan for another seven weeks; it was signed into law in April by the governor. She continues to support health care issues, whether it's access to contraception, elderly abuse or mental-health parity.

Liss has already recruited three more women to run for open Michigan State senate seats in the 2010 election.

It wasn't always an upward trajectory to victory. Along the way, says Liss, she lost some friends who were resentful of her ambition or were frustrated that she no longer had free time. But the fulfillment she gets from watching her priorities become laws motivates her to continue. She's already begun the next campaign. And if the opportunity arose to reach for a higher office? "I won't say no," says the former nurse.

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