

Interview details:

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Interviewer: Barbara Alvarez

Interviewee: Betty Ackley

Transcription:

**Barbara**

Can you say and spell your name?

**Betty**

Sure. It's Betty Ackley. B-E-T-T-Y A-C-K-L-E-Y.

**Barbara**

All right. Thanks for joining me, Betty. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your connection to local office?

**Betty**

Okay, so I'm the district four alderperson. I have been in that position since March of 2019.

**Barbara**

So who or what inspired you to run for office?

**Betty**

So my mother-in-law once ran for mayor in the 1970's. She did not win, but that was one of the reasons why I thought it might be interesting to get involved in local government. If she could do it, maybe I could too. So I thought that it was also a way to manage mental illness. I have social anxiety, so for me, speaking in crowds or talking to strangers was something that would cause me to completely shut down.

So that was why I thought that this would be a way to actually work through that and learn how to function in society and deal with strangers and learn how to communicate with people better instead of trying to just, you know, hide in my little bubble. So that was my reason for trying to run initially.

**Barbara**

Wow. And so when did you initially run for office?

**Betty**

So that happened in March of 2019. There was an opening.

My predecessor had resigned, so this is only a term of one year. So I thought that if I got the position, if I was chosen, then it would be a great trial run to see if it was something I would actually be interested in continuing to do. So what I had to do was I had to go before the Common Council, the current nine members that were there. I brought a prepared statement, and I told them the reasons why I wanted to do it, because I wanted to be supportive and be a collective voice for my neighbors.

And I did explain to them, "I have anxiety. I'm really nervous." But I still pushed through it. And I did have an opponent at that time, another gentleman that lives in the neighborhood that was also interested. And so he provided a really unique perspective, and I enjoyed hearing his side and his reasonings as well. So our reasons were different for why we wanted to run, but eventually it was done by private ballot. Each alderperson had a piece of paper.

They wrote down the name. The city clerk determined who had the most votes, that happened to be me. So it was baptism by fire. As soon as they decided that I had enough votes that I was the one, they brought me up there, swore me in, and I had to start voting that night.

**Barbara**

Wow.

**Betty**

Totally nuts.

**Barbara**

Wow. So what was going through your mind during that process?

**Betty**

I thought, "Oh, my goodness. Here I'm talking to a whole bunch of strangers. I want to die inside." I was not feeling good. I was super anxious. But I was also really excited because this is a new opportunity.

It was something I'd never done. It was something I didn't really know a whole lot about. And so it was all brand new, and so it was an exciting adventure.

**Barbara**

Wow.

**Betty**

Kind of standing at a precipice going, wow, what am I doing? Where am I going to go? What's going to happen next?

**Barbara**

Yeah. And then after you're sworn in, you got right to work.

**Betty**

I have to vote right away, and I don't know what I was doing. And so I had to go through alderperson training and learn what I was doing. It was a wild experience.

**Barbara**

What does it take, do you think, to run a campaign or to decide to put your hat in the ring and go for one of these positions?

**Betty**

I think it's a desire for helping others. I think that's what it boiled down to, for me anyway, and I think it does for the other alders as well, is that everybody wants to make a difference and help the community to continue grow, to continue to make Sheboygan a great

place to live. Whether it's bringing in businesses, whether it's taking care of our precious resources, all of those things are things that matter to everybody.

And so for myself, I feel like I'm able to be that collective voice for my neighbors. If my people in my district are saying, "We don't like something," and then it's my job to go out there and figure out, who do we need to talk to? Is it the mayor? Is that the city administrator? Who do we need to talk to that's going to help us resolve this problem to make things better for everybody?

**Barbara**

So what have you learned about yourself and the community and being in this role?

**Betty**

I've learned that I can do something if I put my mind to it. I've learned that when it comes to the social anxiety I got over that, I've learned how to kind of fake it till you make it. It was really, really difficult for me to speak, especially like in committee meetings, knowing that it's recorded, even if it's only five people watching it or less, it would make me really nervous. And so I had to learn. I learned how to communicate better. I learned more about the city, how the city operates.

I learned about when we complain about how terrible our roads are and all these potholes. I'm realizing now, okay, but there's a budget, and that budget is so finite, but it's really hard to take care of things. And for like, 15 years, no roads were fixed. So now we're trying to play catch up. And that's why it seems like our roads are really bad here, even though the city is trying to put in as much money as possible into fixing those things.

So I feel like we get a little bit of a more clear understanding than we would get as a regular citizen would. Unless they go out and they ask. If they ask, they're going to get the answers. But I think that those are sometimes things that I know I, as a private citizen, have complained to high heaven about potholes. And now I understand, okay, so we can only do so much road, but we're trying and we're playing catch up from all these years before. This makes sense. And the same with property taxes and anything else.

We're just trying to make do with what we have.

**Barbara**

Yeah. So it kind of connected those puzzle pieces together.

**Betty**

For me, I feel like I understand how the function is a little bit better now versus before. So I try to share that with my neighbors. And when I say neighbors, I mean people in my district, whoever calls.

**Barbara**

And how long is your term for?

**Betty** So my term is two years. The last time I ran was in 2020. I had to do it and then 2022.

**Barbara** And so did you actually run a campaign in 2020?

**Betty** 2020 I did not, because I was running unopposed. In 2022, I did.

**Barbara** And what was that like, to go from these different ways of being appointed or being unopposed to running a campaign?

**Betty** So I think that each one was unique. Obviously, baptism by fire. The first time was pretty scary. The second time, we were also dealing with the pandemic, so everything was a little bit crazy. It was all unfolding. We couldn't vote properly, couldn't go in and get sworn in at city hall.

I mean, it's just all weird. So I can understand why that was unopposed. I feel like it's great to see that citizens are activated. And so having an opponent was a great experience for me. I'm trying to figure out how to say this. I went to every debate that was set up by the League of Women Voters, and some other places had set up debates. However, my opponent chose not to participate.

And then the newspaper asked a bunch of questions from interviews, which we had to just write our written reply to those interview questions. And my opponent chose not to participate. And so for me, I felt like I was throwing myself out there, and I had wished that she would have done the same. But obviously it was her choice, the way that she ran hers versus the way I ran mine. But I did try to get out, talked to neighbors, make sure people knew I was running again.

I tried to demonstrate some of the things I had done already.

**Barbara** And did you knock on doors?

**Betty** I did knock on several doors.

**Barbara** What was that experience like for you?

**Betty** So people would say, I'm not interested in politics, and then I'd have to try and explain we are nonpartisan. So to me, I don't care if you're left, right, in-the-middle. That doesn't matter to me.

What matters to me is, like, let me hear your complaints, let me hear your praises, let me hear the things that most concern you. Because

those things may or may not be on the radar of the city, and so they need to be brought up. And so that was one way that I kind of built relationships with people was by talking to them about their issues. In 2020 I did go door to door a little bit in January explaining we were bringing in some new things with Public Works through their website and stuff.

So that was a way to talk to people and make that connection.

**Barbara**

And was there anything you learned about the community by knocking on doors and having those conversations?

**Betty**

So, having conversations I found that the things that people are most worried about are, like, animals, especially dog bites. That was something that has been an ongoing issue. People are pretty unaware of, like that we have neighborhood associations, at least in my area, people didn't realize that there are neighborhood meetings that they can go to where the police are available to talk to them.

It's really nice because city representatives can come out and talk to people. So you might have Streets and Sanitation come in and give a little presentation about something that they do. So, you can learn about different departments through your neighborhood association. And that's something that most people don't know about. So it was a nice way to educate, but also become educated.

**Barbara**

What would you say to another woman who is thinking about running for office? Maybe they're not certain if they should, what would you tell them?

**Betty**

So I would encourage anybody to run, but especially women, because I feel like we need to have that representation. We need to have that diversity. I think it's really important that we also have a voice.

**Barbara**

And what do you think is the future of women in politics? Whether it's on a local level, state, national level?

**Betty**

Well, I believe that more of us have become activated and motivated to become involved.

I think that teaching our children that there should be an interest. Like, I always bring my daughter, and well I did, during the school year I always bring her to every single meeting, and she loves them. She's growing up in an environment where we talk about political things at home, maybe local or national or state. We have those conversations. And so we're trying to teach her it's okay to have these conversations. They don't have to be heated and ugly. If people don't agree, that's okay. But we're still having that political discussion.

**Barbara**

It's really interesting because you mentioned your mother-in-law who had run...so it's like this generational interest in activation and politics.

**Betty**

Yeah. So I'm hoping maybe my daughter would be interested in doing something someday when she's older.

**Barbara**

That's awesome. And now that you have been an elected official for three years, why do you think people should be involved on a local level?

**Betty**

I feel like people need to become involved because they learn more about the community, they learn more about themselves, and they learn that this is a much bigger, complex puzzle than what you think it is as a regular citizen without this knowledge or without finding out, it's a totally different thing. Because I used to get upset because I think, "Oh, my gosh, my property taxes are going up."

Those kinds of things bothered me, but I didn't realize, okay, the reason why is because the state controls how much the city is able to raise their taxes, and this funding got cut from one place or another, and the grant money is drying up. And so you're finding out the resources that are available to the city. They're running on a super lean budget, but yet they're doing amazing stuff. But I don't think that we realize that when we're not involved in politics or we're not involved at the local level. We don't really have that knowledge or we don't really know where to go or who to ask.

**Barbara**

Thank you so much for meeting with me. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the conversation?

**Betty**

I don't think so, but thank you.

**Barbara**

Thank you.