

Interview details:

Date: August 5, 2022

Interviewer: Barbara Alvarez

Interviewee: Katheen Donovan

Transcription:

**Barbara**

If you can say and spell your name.

**Kathleen**

Sure. My name is Kathleen Donovan. K-A-T-H-L-E-E-N. Donovan.  
D-O-N-O-V-A-N.

**Barbara**

Alright, Kathleen, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your connection to being an elected official?

**Katheen**

Absolutely. So, my husband John and I moved here in 2014. John is retired military and service is an important part of giving back to each community that we live in, since we usually moved every two to three years.

And when our youngest, we were living in Missouri and Kentucky at the time, doing two separate jobs. Our youngest decided to go to University of Minnesota instead of University of Missouri like his brother. We didn't want him up here by himself with no family, and so we decided to stop having other people tell us where we could live and pick a spot that met both our needs and was close enough to him.

And so a friend suggested Sheboygan as we had lived in Milwaukee about 30 years ago, our oldest son was actually born in Milwaukee. So moved to Sheboygan, quit our jobs, sold our house, and moved up to Sheboygan in 2014 and had been working at different—I worked for an electrician as an office manager and a project assistant. John continued working as an IT project manager for Schneider and then working for a local company here as a CFO and an HR director.

And we just kind of were doing our thing. And when our youngest graduated from college, John decided to open his own consulting business, which I helped a little bit with, but he and I both started getting involved with Bookworm Gardens. And so I started working at Bookworm and becoming more involved in the community and just kind of living and doing our thing.

And last November, our neighbor behind us, who was our county supervisor, moved out of the district and they were looking for someone to fulfill the last part of her term, and then you would then have to turn around and run for office. And so myself and five other people applied for the position, and I interviewed and was chosen out of the six and then had to turn around and file papers.

But basically becoming a part of the community and giving service back to the community is what really inspired me to run with this vacant position. I didn't want the ballot to be empty and not have somebody representing our district on the County Board of Supervisors.

**Barbara**

So what year was that?

**Kathleen**

That was November of 2021. So we'd been living here for about seven years. Very active in our church, very active. John and I both work as— John is a chief inspector and I'm a poll worker.

So we're both very active in the election process and making sure that that is available for everyone and becoming a member of the League of Women Voters and then becoming a board member. I started to just become more aware of things going on in the community and how important it is at our local level to have folks representing their community at the county and the city level.

And so I was asked by a couple of neighbors because they were concerned that the ballot would be blank and would I consider running for this position or applying for it to fulfill the unexpired term? And so I said, "Sure." And was very pleasantly surprised that there were five other people applying for it, five other people that also care very much about our community and was very honored to be chosen to fulfill the unexpired portion of her term.

**Barbara**

So you kind of talked about what led you to going for this position. Had you ever thought you would be an elected official?

**Kathleen**

Never in my life. I've been married for 33 years, and my husband was in the military, and so it was very much I kind of ran the household, and John was out working, and I was home raising our children.

And I never in my wildest dreams thought that this would be something that I would do. I'm very quiet. I am very introverted, so this is completely outside my comfort zone. But we have a saying in our family that we use with both of our sons, "Be comfortable being uncomfortable."

And so I wanted to show our sons, who are 26 and 29 now, that even though I was 53 at the time this happened, that even though I was 53, there's always something new that you can be learning and stretching yourself. And so I wanted not only to serve my community, but also to be an example for our sons, that life doesn't stop when you become a certain age, that there are still opportunities out there to learn and grow.

**Barbara**

Wow. So you said you're an introvert. And that you hadn't seen yourself doing this before. So what was the process like? What does it take to have a campaign and to go for a public position?

**Kathleen**

You have to not be afraid to knock on doors, and you have to be not afraid that people are not going to agree with what you're saying or what you represent. I had to knock on doors to get signatures to be on the ballot, and I needed to get 100 signatures, so I knocked on a lot of doors.

And even though it's a nonpartisan position on the county board, people want it to be, you know, they have their own ideas, and so they would ask questions, and if they didn't like the answer, I'm going to give you what I believe. I'm not going to try and mold myself to be whatever you want me to be. I am myself, and that's who you're electing as me. And so I had a few doors slammed in my face, and that was humbling.

And it's not just easy, it's a lot of work. And then once I was on the ballot, then having to ask folks if you would be willing to put a sign in your yard. I self financed, so we didn't have to worry about donations from anybody. We just did it ourselves. And for me, it was getting to know my neighbors.

I know my neighbors very well on either side of our house, but getting to know your neighbors within your district and knocking on doors and talking to people and just having conversations. And I think for me, there's a persona that I took on when John was in the army, he was an officer, and there were certain functions you went to.

And it's almost like being a politician's life where you understand how to make small talk and you have this —people think you're an extrovert, and it's like, no, I'd much rather be at home reading a book and not. But it's just something that you kind of have to overcome. And so this was just another way to kind of overcome that shyness and introvertedness.

And it was really a cool experience because I didn't realize, I think, for myself, how many people I already knew to get signatures, and then how many people came out and rallied for me and talked to their friends in the district about me. And it was really, to me, very cool because I don't think of myself as I don't even want to say a popular person, but I know people.

But it's like when they all come out and they come in force and they're posting on Facebook on voting election day, "I voted for Kathleen" or whatever, it makes you feel really good. And what a wonderful community I live in and what great people live in my district.

**Barbara**

So what was the outcome of that election?

**Kathleen**

I won. I'm trying to think. I think I got 65% of the vote.

**Barbara**

Wow. That's a pretty sizable margin.

**Kathleen**

I was very surprised. It was funny because on election night, we texted both of our sons, because our youngest is in Minneapolis, so of course he can't vote. But our youngest, oldest rather lives in our district, so he was really but yeah, our oldest already had the results. He was on the county website. He had already posted the results to his brother because I just said, "Mom won. Thankfully, it's all done now the hard work begins."

And so our youngest said, "Whoa, Alex just sent me the margin. Mom, you did awesome." But yeah, so we did two mailings. I also had a primary— I forgot about that. I had a primary. So two of the folks that had applied for the vacancy decided that they were also going to run.

So because there were three, we had to have a primary. Well, I was the only primary in February before the April elections. So we didn't do signs until the general election. But we did a mailing and just kind of and then knocked on doors, I think for the general, I can't remember if it was the primary, the general, but we did like a thousand door hangers, and John and I walked the entire weekend and—

**Barbara**

You got your steps in.

**Kathleen**

We got our steps, and it was for the primary, we did 1,000 door hangers and we just knocked it out and did it. And then for the general election, we just did two postcard size mailings, just with two different messages and always wanting to inform because our polling place where we vote used to be the library. They moved it to Fountain Park. So we wanted to make sure people knew where to vote, what days to vote, and how to go online to get registered.

And so it was very educational, informational on the front and then on the back, it was just a little bit about me and my background and how much I want to serve the community. And I'm a consensus builder. I work with anybody and everybody. We work together for what's best for the county.

**Barbara**

And how long is your appointment?

**Kathleen**

Two years. So I was appointed in November to serve until April, and then I was elected in April 2022.

And then I'll run again. I'll start turning in papers in January of 2024.

**Barbara**

Okay.

**Kathleen**

So two years.

**Barbara**

You kind of touched on this already about what the experience was like for you. But I'll ask you again, what did this whole experience of

running for office and being an elected official mean? What have you learned about yourself and also about the community?

**Kathleen**

I think for myself, I've learned that I have more strength inside me than I give myself credit for.

There are certain things that you know you can do. My husband was deployed, so he was gone for a year and a half, and I knew that "I can handle this, it's fine." This was something completely different. It wasn't like a new job where you're interviewing. You're interviewing your whole community. And so I think it taught me to not be afraid and to just, if you believe in yourself, others are going to believe in you too, and just have that strength to be able to not be afraid to approach people, knock on doors, talk to folks.

We walked. It was kind of nice when the election was done that we could just walk our seven mile walk around the lake. And not have to think, "Okay, oh, that's a good corner for a sign." But for me, it was knowing that I could do this. I didn't think I could, but I did. And so now going forward, when re-election time comes, I know that I know I can get out there and knock on doors and ask for signatures and maybe get more signatures this time instead of, even though you only need 100 - set it at 150.

And just keep setting your goals higher and meeting more people.

**Barbara**

And what did you learn about the community from knocking on all those doors?

**Kathleen**

I learned that everyone has an opinion. We have progressive people, we have conservative folks.

But I managed to even some of the more conservative folks, just being myself and talking with them, they signed to have me on the ballot. And as long as I could communicate that I'm not here to serve one party or the other, I'm here to serve you as a member of my district. And I want to make sure that the decisions I'm making are taking your opinion and your neighbor's opinion into account.

And so I think people really appreciated that. We may not agree on everything, but we agree on enough things that we want money spent wisely, we want services, if services are needed for community members, to have those available. And so I'm socially liberal and fiscally conservative. I want to make sure that there are programs out there for folks that need them.

But at the same time, we have to understand our budget and can we afford to do this or can we not? And if we can't, how can we adjust the budget?

**Barbara**

And so what would you say to another woman who perhaps is in a similar situation to you? People are like, "There's going to be a spot

open and this woman has never thought that she would ever run for office." What would you say to them?

**Kathleen**

I would say if you have a passion and you want to serve your community, you need to do it and know that maybe you might not be successful, but you have to at least give it a try. And we are all stronger than we think we are. And I think for myself, I would just tell them straight out, I am an introvert, this is not my normal cup of tea.

But at the same time, I saw that there was a need and I wanted to make sure that our community was represented and don't be afraid.

**Barbara**

And what do you think is the future of women in politics?

**Kathleen**

I hope, and I always like to have hope, and I hope that it continues to get brighter because I think we now have a woman vice-president and hopefully in another election cycle we can have a woman president.

We're one of the few countries in the world that has never had a woman as their leader. We've had very high up in the cabinet level positions, but it has to start at the local level because those are the decisions that affect you every day. And that's why I think local elections are so important. And I think if we get enough women, we could solve a lot of problems.

**Barbara**

And the last question, you mentioned how you and your husband have always been really community minded and involved. So what would you say to people that perhaps aren't really involved on a local level but are thinking about it. Why should they get involved?

**Kathleen**

I think they should get involved on a local level because you look at the county, and more specifically those of us who live in the city, you go to the city first. The city paves your streets, they take care of your water.

All the things that you need to survive are done at the city and the county level on a day-to-day basis. And I think as much as we want to worry about what's going on at a national level, it doesn't, in very few cases, doesn't affect your day to day. And by working at our local grassroots level, I think you are involved in your community. You see where things need to change and you can be the change.

And then from there, then it's almost like building blocks. And once you have built yourself in your community, you can go further and further if you want to at a state level or a national level. But I think starting at the community level at your local city or county municipality, that is just so important in this day and age. With all of the noise and chatter that's out there that is trying to take things away.

Rights away. We need to start at the local level and make sure that our foundation at the local level is strong and then we can move on to state and national.

**Barbara**

Well, thank you so much for speaking with me. Is there anything you'd like to add to this conversation?

**Kathleen**

I don't think so.

**Barbara**

Thank you.

**Kathleen**

This was an awesome opportunity, so I really appreciate it.

**Barbara**

Thanks for being part of it.

**Kathleen**

You're very welcome.