

Transcription details:

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Interviewer: Barbara Alvarez

Interviewee: Leslie Laster

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**Barbara** Okay, well, thank you so much for joining me, Leslie. Before we get started, can you just say and spell your name?

**Leslie** Sure. My name is Leslie Laster, L-E-S-L-I-E. Last name L-A-S-T-E-R.

**Barbara** Okay, great. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your connection to being an elected official?

**Leslie** It's a very interesting journey that I had. So I worked in education for over 20 years.

As far as history and politics, I think in the beginning and early years of my life, I didn't really find it to be as important. I don't think I've heard anybody really explain it well to me either. And so I'm a voter. I vote, I believe as a minority, it's very important, but I don't think I really understood it until the seat opened up.

As our current mayor left that seat, and several people reached out to me and said, "Hey, you should do this." And I was like, "No, I should not do this." Because I really felt like this should be for someone who's so actively involved, right? Like, that really wasn't me. And so I actually ran into our current mayor on a walk, and he just kind of said, like, you know, "I think I heard you were thinking about it. If you have any questions, please reach out to learn more."

I like to be prepared and fully knowledgeable of things that I do, and so I didn't feel that I was. And so I had a lot of conversations with very close friends, women that I respect highly. They are mentors for me, saying, "Is this something that I should tackle?" And they were like, "It came to you for a reason. All you're doing is putting your name in the hat. Right?" Like, how did I know there were six people that day? And so I did my research, I wrote my letter, and that's how it all happened.

**Barbara** And can you clarify what the position was for?

**Leslie** Yes. So I was one of six that put themselves up for nomination for the District Eight Common Council seat. There were six people, and I believe two women, four men. If a woman was going to get in — either way, if a woman got in, which obviously I did, it would have made history. Because then the Common Council was predominantly female, but then it also made history because I'm also a person of color.

**Barbara** And when was this? What was the date that you put your hat in the ring?

**Leslie** Would have been May of '21. Right. Because we're in '22. Yeah, May of '21. So the process is you submit basically, like, a letter of interest, your resume, why you want to be on the Common Council, and then you present a speech. Basically, you had, I don't know, maybe like, three minutes, five minutes, to give your speech on why you should be the next elected official.

And that's what I did. And then they vote right there in front of you. I really didn't know how this is. And then you are literally sworn in on the spot and take an active role in voting that night, even though you have no idea what's going on.

**Barbara** So what was this whole process like for you after you're like, "Okay, I'm going to put my hat in the ring, let's do this." What was it like to craft that letter, to do the speech, to wait for the results to be sworn in?

**Leslie** So, writing the letter was fairly easy. I work in diversity, equity and inclusion. I feel like I've been a voice for the voiceless my entire life. And so reading the mission basically, of the Common Council and their purpose statement really fits in line with who I am and my life's work. And so that part was really easy. I do a lot of public speaking. I was very nervous that day.

It was a different feeling to have the current Common Council, the mayor and all of the fire chief and the police, all the other officials in the room, plus other people that just go to the meeting. So I had more nerves about me. But I also am very convicted in what I do. And so based on what it says on the website and what the Common Council is there to do, right, be a voice for the people. I felt like, "Well, this does really fit with who I am."

And so I listened to everybody else's speech, I gave my speech and then they vote. And so you're just kind of waiting. And of course this wasn't like if I didn't get it, I felt like I put my best foot forward. So it is what it is. I will say I did call each current council member prior to that day and just kind of said who I was and the things that I would be really passionate about, like more affordable housing, things of that nature.

So that was helpful. And then, yeah, but it didn't take long. And then they said, "Okay, we have"- not a unanimous it wasn't unanimous- "but we have a majority vote." And so they said my name and everybody kind of clapped and I just kind of sat there and they're like, "Well, no, you got to come up now." I was like, "Oh, okay." And so then, yeah, you get sworn in by the city clerk and you repeat - I don't remember what I repeated, obviously, but I rose my right hand and I took that very seriously.

Even though I'm not elected by the people, I am chosen by the current Common Council members. And so I didn't realize at the time that it was as big of a deal for a woman and then a person of color 'til afterwards. And so I'm thankful that I did it. It was a really, really good experience, and it's not as intimidating, I think, as people think it is.

**Barbara** And how long was your term?

**Leslie** So I served one year, because that would have fulfilled the mayor's previous Common Council term, and then I could have ran for reelection. Honestly, I don't work in the county, I have young kids who are very active in sports, and I spent a year missing games and things like that. It's not something I would never do again.

It's definitely something I'm much more interested in, but at this time in my life, I thought, "Okay, I did it." I learned a lot. I know what to tell people now when they have questions or complaints. But I needed to give it to someone that had more time to designate because people call you. And so I think I did a really good job responding immediately to my constituents' calls and concerns. However they needed, in my opinion, someone who could do an even better job.

**Barbara**

So you mentioned that during that time you learned a lot and it also demystified the process of what it's like to be an elected official in Sheboygan County on a local level. So can you tell a little bit about what you learned, perhaps about yourself and about the community?

**Leslie**

Well, what I think is really interesting is we do live in a very polarized country right now, and so what I discovered is even more so, which I already knew this, right?

But really listening to the issue and figuring out not what is —and that's what I would tell people. I'm not sitting in the seat to do what's best for me, I'm in the seat to do what's best for Sheboygan. Right? I'm a voice for the people in my district, but what is best for Sheboygan? And so it taught me one, we have a bigger voice than we realize locally.

Voting locally is so important, and I don't think people understand that because, I don't know that it's been expressed well. Like I said, in my K-12 education —I'm not from Wisconsin. And I'm not throwing stones at it. But I don't feel like anybody, even in college, sat down with me and said. "Man when you turn 18 you need to vote like you're a member of that community. And you don't have to march for everything.

You don't have to go to every meeting. But you should be informed of what's going on. And you should be an active voter. Right? You should know those things."

So I really started to understand that as I was sitting there, and I was listening to all these different issues and hearing the phone calls that I would get right from constituents and thinking this position, it's not a big deal, like, intimidating wise, but it is a bigger deal than people realize.

Like, if you're in that seat, you need to take it very seriously, and you need to be the voice for those people. And so if anybody ever watched when I was in office, I didn't talk a lot. I'm a processor by nature. But when I did speak, it was because I really was like, "Okay, hold on a second, right?" And we would have closed session things. And sometimes those were the times where I really made sure, "All right, we have to think about this population. We have to think about this."

And I think when I decided not to rerun, that was one of the things some of the other council members like, "Gosh, we're going to really miss that." But as a DEI person, I know how important it is that I can't be the only person that holds that space. Right? Those issues have to be on the front of every council member's minds, because you're representing all the people.

**Barbara**

And you mentioned that several people, you talked to several people, people that you really trust, women that you really trust to get insight if you should go forward with this. What would you say if a woman came up to you and was like, "You know what? The current mayor —just ran into him on my walk, or him or her on my walk, and they think I should throw my hat in the ring." What would you say to somebody interested?

**Leslie**

I would say "Do it." I would say do it, even if it is just for a term, whether it's two years, three years, one year, if you're filling a spot. I would also tell them, though, to do your research. Read through— which I didn't get a chance to do because mine was in a very short time to make the decision and turn my stuff in.

But I would encourage people to go back and look at the minutes, look at the agendas, because they're public, look at the things that are being addressed, because when you come in, some of those things are going to still exist. Are you prepared to make that vote - like everything's public? Right. But if you have a passion for it, then do it. We need more people that are passionate about helping the community, not picking a side, just helping the community.

**Barbara**

And what do you see is the future of women in politics, whether it's on a local level, a state, or a national level? Because you mentioned that if you were to be selected, it would have made history for having majority of women and also the first time that a woman, person of color, perhaps any person of color on the Common Council. So what do you see as the future of that?

**Leslie**

Well, the demographics in Sheboygan have dramatically changed. The 2022 census that just came out in the press showed us that the minority population, especially Hispanic, Black, I think multiracial was the other category they had, those areas have almost doubled, if not tripled, compared to the white population.

Is that something to be nervous about? No, I think it's exciting. Someone who's lived here as long as I have. But I think then we have to have elected officials that represent the community. It's supposed to be a 10% match, right? And so while I was sitting there, we had Hispanic, Latinx population, we had men, we had women, we had different ages, so we were pretty diverse, which was great, but it has to continue.

And so one of the biggest things I've learned is how do I now use my experience and my influence to get into the minority community, parts of our community here, to explain to them why they should take an active role, right? Because there is a stigma that it's not for us, it's not about us, that they don't care. And I understand that perspective, but now I feel like I have a responsibility. How do I change that?

**Barbara**

And speaking of that, of getting involved on a local level and how you want to connect with the community and encourage people to get involved, what would you tell them about why they should get involved on a local level?

**Leslie**

Because you live here. I know it sounds like a really simple answer, but you live here.

So the policies, the laws, whether I'm thinking of the things I had, like snow parking regulations, which to some can seem trivial. If the snowplow forgot to plow a street, seems like not a big deal until it's your street. Right? And so when you get involved, you know who to contact, right? You know what's going on. New businesses are coming up or new developments in your neighborhood. Those are things that you can have a say in. If you're involved in what's going on and if you're voting for the people that might represent the same viewpoints and opinions as you.

It's just so important that everyone — it's hard to say everyone, right? But that you're at least aware and you have that background knowledge. And I think it starts in middle school at the latest, to tell kids, like, your vote does matter.

I think we focus so much on the national elections that we don't understand. We think it comes down to electoral votes, so it didn't really matter. Right? That people think that's how it is, state and local. We got to fix that somehow, right? I mean, it's going to take a lot, but I think we can.

**Barbara**

Well, thank you so much, Leslie. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this conversation?

**Leslie**

I guess just anybody listening: Don't think it's not for you. Talk to people that currently sit in those seats or have sat in those seats. Do your research. And again, if your passion is for helping people in that type of venue, in that way, then put your name in the hat. We need more people that don't think they're "political" in quotation marks, because I don't consider myself a political person, but I care about people, and I care about this community. And so I think those are the kind of people we need to be involved.

**Barbara**

Thank you so much, Leslie. It is such a treat to speak to you.

**Leslie**

Thank you.