

Interview details:

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Interviewer: Barbara Alvarez

Interviewee: Mary Lynne Donohue

Transcription:

Mary Lynne: My name is Mary Lynne Donohue. M-A-R-Y L-Y-N-N-E D-O-N-O-H-U-E.

Barbara: Thank you for meeting with me, Mary Lynne. Let's get started by - if you could tell me a little bit about yourself and your history running for office and being an elected official.

Mary Lynne: Okay. I basically grew up in Sheboygan. I left when I was 17 and did a lot of education, including a wonderful year in Italy.

Then after traveling around the US in an old Volkswagen van with my dear friend Sally, I came back after I finished law school, and so I moved back home in 1981. I worked as a legal services lawyer for quite a while and then went into private practice. And I retired from full time practice way back in 2012.

Recently I've been doing pro bono work with a renter's eviction defense project, which is keeping me busier than I want to be. In terms of running for office, I've been thinking about it, and the first time I ran for office was 8th grade class president at St. Clement's School. And I think that would have been in probably 1963, and there were four of us running and I came in fourth.

I even remember the dress I was wearing that day. It was just, "Oh, I lost", and I quickly got over it. But then I ran for senior class president at North High School and I won. Girls, quote, unquote, "didn't run for president and vice president in those days, but we certainly ran for secretary," so I did that. That was my first real campaign.

My friend Paula did wonderful signs for me. She did lovely calligraphy. So we had hand-lettered signs and we were beginning at that time to understand what the political process is, how you persuade people and how you get your message out. The next time I ran for an office was in 2003.

It was for a circuit court judge position that had opened up and my dear friend Maeve Quinn became my campaign manager. And we ran a good campaign, but it became very contentious and very bitter, and I was surprised at the vitriol that was directed at me.

And it was the first glimmer I had that my reputation, I guess I would call it, I don't know, as a progressive, was put out into the public and it was a really difficult and grim experience, not only for me but for my family.

And I learned a lot, but it was painful. There's just no doubt about it. As these things go in life, it was a good thing I lost because the things that were happening in my life probably would not have lined up very well with full time judicial responsibilities. And so it was funny because people would say "You can't have two judges in a family."

So this is this quintessential sexist thought. Do you think that my decisions would be governed by my husband? Really? Do you really think that if you know me or any

woman really? But I think that was a touchstone that led to... was also a pretty serious talking point. So that was tough.

So that was in 2003 and I really did not think about running for any political office until just before the primary election in 2011 for nonpartisan offices. So it was a February election and there were three people in our district running for alderperson.

And in those days the Sheboygan press would cover local elections pretty thoroughly. And I'll never forget it was a Saturday morning and I was reading the newspaper and reading who these three people were running for alderperson in this district. The first fella had been convicted of a felony in the 90s, which automatically made him ineligible to run.

The second person had had, I believe, a really checkered driving history, multiple OWIs— operating while intoxicated —and then the third person who was quite young, had an injunction against him because he had been sexting against his girlfriend. So she had gotten harassment injunction.

And I think the headline was something like “Candidates Have a Checkered Past.” I looked at Tim and I said, “Well this can't be.” And I called Maeve. So I talked to Tim and I said, “I could jump in as a write-in candidate. It's kind of crazy. I'm sure it wouldn't make any difference, but I could do that. How would you feel about it?”

Because the judicial race really was very damaging to the family. It took my husband and the kids and me really a long time to recover from that without going into any detail. It was just pretty tough and I didn't want to ever get involved, involve my family. But by 2012 my kids were long gone and Tim was elected and he was fine.

And he said, “Sure, go for it.” And then I called Maeve, who is always my “do this, don't do this person.” She's just, her political sense is just so sharp. I said, “Maeve, I'm thinking of running as a write-in.” And she said, “Oh absolutely.” So I registered as a write-in. And those were the beginning days, at least for me, of social media.

So one of the fellows in the neighborhood put up a Facebook page for me. I had email groups and I said, “Even if you don't live in this district, if you have friends in my district, let them know.” And there was just an amazing response. It was like boom. And the election was Tuesday and I came in second as the write-in only eleven votes between me and the front runner who was convicted of a felony.

So his name was on the ballot, my name was on the ballot. He could not have taken office and I won. And so it was really a pretty funny story. So I was on the council for nine years and I really liked it. I learned so much. Oh, I forgot to mention, I ran for school board. Oh, let's go back to the way back machine.

1996, My brother, Jim Van Akkeren, was leaving the school board and things were in pretty bad shape with the people on the board, and there were just a bunch of issues, and my kids were early in the school process at that point. So I ran for school board, and it was a contested election, and I came in first and then the second time, and I ran for another term.

And that's when I persuaded Maeve Quinn to run with me. And Maeve and I were the two top vote getters, and we pushed out an incumbent who, in my opinion, had not done a good job for the district. So there was all of that. And my friend David Galliantti was the Sheboygan press reporter at that time, in '96, and I recruited him to run as well.

And he's still on the school board. This was after he left the press. The headline was “Donahue Dominates.” In those days, people would cut out articles in the newspaper and send them to you as a congratulations. You'd get just tons of them. It was just

something that it was a custom here in Sheboygan, and I still have all that stuff. It's really kind of fun. Yeah.

I totally forgot about the school board because when I left the council in 2021. Nine years is a long time to serve. I think people who serve many, many, many years, sometimes it's okay, but for me it's not. I get bored one thing or another. And then I ran for school board this past April. So that would be April of '21, right?

No, April '22, because I've just been on it for a short period of time and I ran against the police chief, and I worked very hard and I won and nicely. There was a nice difference between us. And then in my first meeting, I was elected president of the board. That's a whole separate story that we don't go into. So I am currently serving as the president of the school board.

Barbara:

And you also ran for office in 2020.

Mary Lynne:

All those things we forget about. Yes, the assembly race. So that was an interesting story as well. So what Maeve and I really focus on is recruiting people to run for office. And it's damnably difficult and will get more difficult as gerrymandering makes running for office certainly less rewarding, although it can make you freer because you don't have to worry about winning.

And there's such a decline in civility and in discussion of genuine issues. So that all leads to the demise of democracy. On the other hand, getting good people to run for office, getting women to run for office, although men or women, I don't care. Really keeps uplifting the system.

So currently, here we are in 2022. We have a good candidate in the 26th assembly and a good one in the 27th assembly. Their chances of winning are slim to none. I mean, you never know, but I would say slim to none. And yet by them being out and talking to people, they really represent that people run government and elected officials should be good people.

So that's good. All right. And that's, of course, why I ran for school board this time, too, is I couldn't find anybody. I had somebody on the line. I thought it was going to work. She would have been terrific. And at the last minute, she kind of said, like, and I understand. I mean, it's being on the school board these days can be pretty tough duty. I'm going to take you back now to May of 2020.

And we had been looking for people to run. Rebecca Clarke had run twice in the 26th, and she had won her, good for her, had won her county board seat, and so she was not going to run again. And I thought, "What the hell? Let's just try it." And Maeve was enthusiastic, and my dear spouse was okay with it. And again, my kids live in Milwaukee. There would be no family harm.

I filed my declaration, I think, on May 15th. And mind you, this is in the midst of COVID and no vaccines, so how do you get to 400 signatures on nomination papers in ten days? So again, using social media and we were more sophisticated, obviously.

Years later, we put it out, and I got 550 signatures in ten days. It was wild. I would open up my front door and envelopes would just fall in on me, and it'd be often they were just two signatures per page. We just said I've sent out letters and all this kind of stuff, so that was great fun.

I have to tell you that this amazing group of people just coalesced as the kitchen cabinet, young people, so I was clearly the oldest person. And then I went down to

about 40, and then it was in twenties and thirties. So we met via Zoom every Tuesday morning. They were wonderful.

And we did interesting — because of the pandemic, we had to do all the usual kinds of things you do, like coffees and fundraisers at people's houses and that sort of thing, and even knocking on doors we couldn't do. So I did one outside coffee deal with Janet Ross' in her driveway with her wild and crazy group of older women.

So much fun. I played my bagpipes with them. We did a drive-through barbecue in September. My kids are both in the restaurant biz and made a ton of money and had so much fun. We served like 200 people driving through, great fundraiser. Oh, my God, we really did very well. And the other thing that I did in that, which was interesting, and I said to Maeve, I said, "I'm happy to do this, this will be fun. We'll give the incumbent a run for his money."

It's not that we gave him a run for his money, but there were actually sightings of him knocking on doors in Oostburg, so we thought maybe he was just a little bit worried. And I said, "I'm not making phone calls for money, I'm just not going to do it." But I did letters and the campaign altogether, we brought in \$88,000.

Now, some of that was the local Democratic Party was very supportive, bless their hearts. I got a little bit of money from the state Dems. They were working on saving the veto and some in kind contributions, but honest to goodness, the money just rolled in. And I finally had to print thank you postcards because I couldn't keep up with writing little notes to people thanking them.

So given the pandemic, the amount of money that was raised, the interesting things that we did, the videos that we did on the Facebook page, we had an early vote parade, and I think we had 20 or 30 people marching from the Dem headquarters down to City. Well, we didn't go to City Hall, but we went to the library with signs and dogs and it was just a whole lot of fun.

So it was a good campaign. Now, I got 41% of the vote, in spite of all of that, and that's what the 2011 gerrymander had set up. And really good candidates get about 41% of the vote. I think you might be able to stay home and do nothing and get 41% of the vote. It's just one of those things.

We do believe, though, that and when I say we, I mean mostly Maeve and me, but also my wonderful kitchen cabinet friends, we helped the up ticket, we helped turn people out, and we can take responsibility a little bit for the Biden win. And so for that reason, it was all completely worth it. So that's my electoral history in 67,000 words or less.

Barbara:

So you have run for office several times, several times ever since grade school. And what is it that inspires you or keeps you wanting to run for office?

Mary Lynne:

And I've been thinking about that because I can't tell you why I wanted to run for senior class or class president in 8th grade. I have no memory of what was in my head or why I thought I should do that. And even the senior class secretary business, I wasn't one of the popular kids.

So I can't really tell you. Right now, I would say, since with the school board, city council, the assembly, I know this is high minded, but it's to preserve democracy. If you don't have good people running for office, democracy is greatly weakened.

And I think the democratic form of government, as flawed as it is, is better, way better, way way way better than any other system. And I've always had a fairly intense sense of what's fair and what's not fair.

When I was a legal services lawyer, I had a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon on my bulletin board at the office, and Calvin has his fist in the air, and he's yelling into the heavens "It's not fair." And that's really one of the reasons I was a legal services lawyer, is that poor people often do not get treated fairly. And so I think those two things running together, things should be fair, and people should have a voice.

And then if good people aren't running, there is no democracy. You know we're in a fragile state right now. And so I think getting —either doing it yourself or recruiting good people to do it and supporting them while they're doing it locally.

So I have to say my focus has always been pretty local, and I appreciate the people who run for statewide office or national office, but, wow, that's more of a business than an avocation, I guess.

Barbara:

You've talked quite a bit about what it was like to run these campaigns, having the kitchen cabinet, raising funds, hosting events. Is there anything else that you feel people should know about, about what it takes to run a good campaign?

Mary Lynne:

Oh, there are a lot of things. First of all, you really do have to have some enthusiasm for it. So it doesn't really pay for us to work hard to sign up a candidate whose ho-hum.

So a person who's running for office needs energy. There's just no doubt in my mind. I also want to say, and I've already said it, but a person needs a good team around him or her. It's not something that you can do alone. I learned that in 12th grade.

So I think a person needs to be conversant with the issues. Now. Boy, that's big. So when I ran for school board last time, my younger son graduated from North in, I think, 2007, and my last year on the school board was 2002.

I really had no idea what was going on in the school district. So really learning about the issues that the school district is facing in the public education in the state, and then in general, candidates have got to want to learn, and they've got to be, like I said, conversant with the issues.

So I think that those are key components to a good candidate.

Barbara:

And you mentioned wanting to learn. I wonder, what did you learn about yourself or about the community in all these times that you've run for office?

Mary Lynne:

I have a really thin skin. Even all these campaigns that I've been in, it hasn't really gotten much thicker.

That would be a candidate who's really smart, really energetic, knows the issues, or wants to learn the issues and has a thick skin. Oh, boy, then you should run for president. So I learned that I have a thin skin. I learned in the judicial race that a candidate really needs to think through what running for office means. I didn't do that.

I just thought I would do a good job and that I would learn on the job. But I didn't consider my family and what it might have meant to my family. And so I learned that you need to be really thoughtful about a decision to run for office because it does have implications.

It is insanely time consuming. To me that was the major lesson. Otherwise, I'd always known that I was a pretty good speaker. I'm no genius at all, but I'm bright enough to pick things up and to understand things.

And I learned that your campaign manager is just really an extension of yourself. I cannot say how important Maeve has been to me in all of these campaigns. She's astonishing. And I just know that from my personal experience. I think, I'm not a deeply introspective person, but I think that's what I would say that I learned about myself.

Barbara:

They say...I believe I've heard this before, that it takes women about seven asks to decide to run for office. What would you say to a woman who is considering running for office one day?

Mary Lynne:

So there's a great program out of Rutgers University called CAWP. The center... I forget what it stands for, but it does a lot of research on women running for office.

When I first started doing it, it was like, "when women run, women win." I don't think that's necessarily the case anymore. I think enough women are running that just the fact that you are a woman does not confer any special status. To me, it's so critically important that women be in power in government.

But as to what to say, I think it's really important to be honest with people as to what's involved in running. I wish I had a bunch of women coming to me and saying, "Gee, I'd like to run for office and tell me about it." And that's really not the case. Recruitment is an ongoing and aggressive part of being in the political world.

One of my best political mentors, Fred Kessler, said, your most important job as an elected official is recruitment. It is just so important. So when I was on the school board the first time I recruited Maeve, Dirk Zylman, and David Gallianetti won each year to run, and it made a world of difference on the school board.

So what I would say is, this is your best self. This is what your civic duty is, your civic responsibility, but your civic opportunity. Wow, You're contributing to the preservation of democracy. We do recruit people, and I don't know if it takes seven taps.

I have never had that experience. So I don't know.

Barbara:

What do you think is the future of women running for office?

Mary Lynne:

Oh, I think it's good. First of all, you're not an outlier. When I ran for judge in 2003, of course there were no women on the bench here, none.

No woman had ever run for judge, and now, 20 years later, three out of the five judges are women in Sheboygan County. Six out of seven justices on the Wisconsin Supreme Court are women. So it's not the unusual piece that it used to be. And I think that's really good. Numbers of women running for office continue to grow.

It's certainly not at parity by any stretch at this point. Women have a second shift. They have their first shift and then their second shift. The first shift is often work, and

then the second shift is family. And keeping all of that together and then to add a third shift is really very, very tough.

And so I was extremely lucky to have —my husband is just the most patient and endearing person on the planet. He had to be married to me all these years. You have to have a fair level of energy, frankly. And I think women have more responsibilities typically not universally, but typically, than men at home.

And that all has to be factored in.

Barbara:

My last question is, why do you think people should get involved on a local level, whether it's running for office or supporting a campaign or voting or just being aware of what's going on on a local level, why do you think that's so important?

Mary Lynne:

I love local politics and local government, and it's because you literally can make a difference. You really, really, really can make a difference.

And I think in a gerrymandered legislature, no, you can't. I mean, it's important that we have strong people of the opposing party in a gerrymandered legislature, but if you're in the minority, you don't get much done. You can cry to the heavens, you can bring good legislation forward, but basically not much is going to change at a local level.

Wow. I mean, I learned that in the school board. We made huge changes, and it was because of the school board and because of the leadership and getting good people in that position. Wow. There are a lot of things that I'm proud of on the city council, and they're even structural things. We had 16 alders, which was very difficult.

My partners in the first... and I can't tell you how many years I can't remember when we changed from 16 down to ten. But that has greatly strengthened the council. I take responsibility for really restructuring the licensing, regulation, and public safety committee.

We restructured the committee structure so that it's much more efficient and streamlined. We hired a good city administrator. So I think at the city level. Just even by myself. I accomplished quite a bit. And we'll see at the school board level now. I'm brand new. And although, Like I say, the agendas are in the same font that they were in when I was there in 2002.

Although that, boy, our school district has so dramatically changed. It's just astonishing to me how different it is in 20 years. That difference is boom. So at a local level, and that's the pitch you can make to people when you're trying to recruit them: You literally can make a difference.

You learn the rules, you attend, you do your homework, you make friends, you understand how things begin to work, and you can change when it's a good idea to change. In the last years of my life, I'm focusing on local stuff because, number one, I love it. And number two it's a place where you can make a difference.

Barbara:

Well, thank you so much for speaking with me. Is there anything else that you feel the need to share or need to talk about?

Mary Lynne:

No, I think I spoke about 500,000 words.

Barbara:

Thank you, Mary Lynne.

It was a pleasure. Thank you.

Mary Lynne: