

Transcription details:

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Interviewer: Barbara Alvarez

Interviewee: Roberta Filicky-Peneski

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**Roberta** I am Roberta Filicky-Peneski. R-O-B-E-R-T-A F-I-L-I-C-K-Y- hyphen P-E-N-E-S-K-I.

**Barbara** OK. So Roberta, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your connection to being an elected official?

**Roberta** Oh, my goodness. Well, I was born in Youngstown, Ohio and went to school, went to undergrad school in Madison, Wisconsin, and that's where I met my husband.

We married, moved to the East Coast and then eventually moved back to the Midwest and we ended up here in Sheboygan. We've got two kids, both adults. One daughter lives in California with her family. We have twin granddaughters and our son lives in Denver. He is an airline pilot.

I first got interested in elected office when I was in college and I ran for —this was back in the 1960s in Madison. So you can imagine the environment at the time.

But I ran for the Illinois-Wisconsin region representative for the National Student Association. And represented Edgewood, went to school at Edgewood, represented Edgewood there with another woman, and really enjoyed it because of that position. I was also on the student governing board in the college, and that's really where I learned all the basics, Robert's Rules of Order, et cetera, et cetera.

Yeah, that's kind of where it all started. Ironically, just in the last month or so, I was asking colleagues on the Sheboygan Common Council how they got started, and there are at least three and maybe four, I can't remember right now, who also started in student government. So if you want a career in politics, start in student government.

**Barbara** And so who or what inspired you to run for office? Whether it was in Edgewood or also when you ran for public office?

**Roberta** No one in my family of origin was politically involved, so it didn't come from there. I think probably the biggest influence was college.

And because it was the Vietnam War era, I think that's where I began to realize that politics and political decision making were really important. But when I ran for public office, the first time, elected public office in 1976, I had been involved in emergency medical services planning, and I have been on a lot of boards and nonprofit boards, foundation boards.

That's where my education, I think, continued about governance and governing. But I was recruited. There was a big hospital controversy because back in the '70s, hospitals couldn't just build where they wanted and do what they wanted. There was

something called Certificate of Need, and the two hospitals here both wanted to add on, add more things, build a new hospital.

And I was the one person on a regional board. I was the consumer on a regional board. And at that time we set down rules for what each hospital could use. And it was a huge controversy in the community. So I was pretty high profile for a number of months.

And I remember calling the hospital administrator at Memorial saying, "I need to talk to you because I'm on this board, and I go to Green Bay for meetings. And I happen to know that you told people, you told your employees, you told people to not say anything. And meanwhile, St. Nicholas Hospital has all the headlines in the newspapers.

So when I go and say 'no, there's another side of the story, I don't have that story.'" So I met with them, and it was R. P. Honald, who was a businessman, and Mr. Hyson, who was a businessman, who were on the president and vice president of the board of directors. So the administrator exited the room, and I was left with the other two. And they said,

"Well, Mrs. Peneski, what are you doing? What are you thinking?" And I had only lived in the community about five years, and I explained my position and said, "You've got to let the public know what you're thinking and why you're approaching this way." And I will never forget it was

Mr. Honald who said, "You're new here, and there is no way that we are going to divide this community the way it was divided during the Kohler strikes in the '50's." And I nodded and I said, "I appreciate that. And Mr. Honald, this community is already divided, and you are sitting on half of the information."

**Barbara**

What a moment.

**Roberta**

Well, and I remember at that point, one of the two men took out a piece of paper, and I think it was Mr. Hyson, went over to the administrator desk, took out a piece of paper and said, "Mrs. Peneski, what would you suggest?" And I said, "one, two, three, this is what I suggest." And they did.

**Barbara**

Wow.

**Roberta**

So again, it was really high profile locally.

It was also high profile statewide because it was kind of a test case. And I got to be known as somebody who speaks her mind in a meeting and go get the data and do stuff like that. It was also the first time we moved here, and my son was six months old, and it was also the first time that I got involved in a political campaign to campaign, and it was George McGovern for president.

And I remember going into Democratic headquarters saying, "I'm here to volunteer. What can I do?" And this woman looked at me and said, "Deliver peanut butter sandwiches to the people who are poll watching." I said, "Got it." So my job was to deliver peanut butter sandwiches. That was my very first "do something active" in a campaign. Then the rest is history, I think. The rest is history.

The years that I was on the hospital rate review board statewide, I got my master's degree in 1977, and I used part of that as my master's program. I used medical planning as part of my master's degree.

**Barbara** When did you first run for public office?

**Roberta** 1976.

**Barbara** Okay.

**Roberta** I was in the middle of my graduate degree. I was hired by the Emergency Medical Services Council in northeastern Wisconsin to do public education and information. And these were the years before there was a 911 system, before there were EMTs, and before there were paramedics.

And it's kind of hard to perceive that now, but we were part of the— it was a national program. A lot of it was sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; Johnson and Johnson Band-Aids. And they knew that we were losing a lot of people who were in accidents, and because they knew in Vietnam, the save rate for Vietnam veterans was much higher than any other war.

And part of it was they used their medics, which are basically EMTs and paramedics. They used their medics in the field immediately before they loaded everybody on a plane or a helicopter to get them off the field. And they came back home, and some of those physicians who were there said, "We're not doing a very good job. We need to do more." So I was hired by the EMS council to do community education.

So I got all around northeastern Wisconsin, and I just think my profile kept getting higher. And I was approached by two senators from, well, Madison. Katie Morrison was from—Katie Morrison, bless her heart. Katie Morrison was the only female senator in the Senate. She was the first.

This is back in 1976. There were no women's bathrooms on the legislative floor because it was unheard of. Okay. So Katie came with, I'm not going to remember his name, but Katie and one of her colleagues came and said, "We've seen you do so much. Why don't you run against Ernie Kepler?" Ernie Kepler was a Republican.

He was in office for 16 years when I ran against him. And the area then was Sheboygan County and Ozaukee County. Sheboygan was very Democrat. Ozaukee was very Republican. So they recruited me. I didn't make the decision to run for the November election until June of 1976, and I ran for election.

I had a primary.

**Barbara** And what was the seat you were running for?

**Roberta** Wisconsin State Senate.

**Barbara** Okay.

**Roberta**

Ed Jose put his name on the ballot for everything. Ed Jose ran against me in a primary, and so I had a primary, which basically helped with the higher profile, but it also meant I had two campaigns.

I had to get the primary, and then I found the primary to the general, but I got 44.4% of the vote. And it was very interesting. At one point, a labor leader, after the votes came in, a labor leader came up to me and said, "If we had known you were going to do so well, we really would have gotten behind you."

Another thing in that campaign, a higher elected official said, "The best thing that they could do for you is to drop the 'A' in your name when it got to the ballot." My first name is Roberta.

**Barbara**

Interesting.

**Roberta**

There were many incidents like that back then.

Because it was unheard of. I also had, at the time, I had a three year-old and an eight year-old, so I also got, "I don't believe in what you're doing. You should be home with your children."

And one time my husband was with me, Tom, and we were out at an event, and a woman came up to me and just shook her hands, and she just shook her fingers and said, "You shouldn't be doing this." And Tom was next to me. Her husband said, "Now, mother." But Tom could see that the steam was rising off of my head.

And he said, "Well, you know, in the Bible it says you shouldn't hide your light under a bushel." I thought it was brilliant because he blessed it with the Bible, and he made it very clear that I was talented. And I didn't say anything. I just smiled and walked onto the next handshake. But those were tough years, and it was a very tough campaign.

It was exhausting. I had been ready to graduate. I was going to do a summer school and graduate in August with my master's degree from UW-Green Bay. And one of my professors on my graduate committee was a political science professor. And to this day, we are still friends, the political science professor. And he encouraged me also.

He said, "You'd be so good at this. Just go for it." But he realized that I was getting exhausted, and he said, "Would you like a graduate student for an intern?" So I had a live-in-the-basement graduate student who did everything from getting my kids dressed for Halloween that year to make sure I had a peanut butter sandwich when we were going off to campaign to make sure that we had newspaper coverage.

I mean, she did everything. Her name was Ellen, and my daughter's name was Ellen. So my Ellen was three years-old. So we took to calling our daughter "Little Ellen" and her "Big Ellen." To this day, she is known as Big Ellen in our family, and she will introduce me to her cadre of friends as "This is Little Ellen's mother."

So that has stuck ever since. So along the way, there are some light-hearted stories and some really long-term relationships that are built from doing what you do.

**Barbara**

When you were tapped to run for this position, as you said, there was only one woman. Did you have hesitation about running? Were you scared? How did you feel?

**Roberta**

I remember not being scared because I was too naive to be scared.

I thought it would be a great challenge, and I was always up for, “Oh, this sounds like fun. Let's do this. That sounds like something I could do.” The slogging through was very difficult, and probably back then, two little kids, a professor husband, and the professors don't earn that much.

I didn't have a job, and we couldn't throw very much money into the campaign ourselves, so I had to fundraise and none of —I was on the Democratic Party ticket. And because I had a primary, they would not provide me— nobody in the Democratic Party would provide me with money.

Now, I asked on my own, my own friends and relatives. A little segue: I asked my godmother back in Ohio for a contribution. She wrote me a letter and said that she was appalled that I was going into government and Ohio politics had been fraught with fraud as long as I can remember. The only thing my mother ever said about voting— she always voted.

My father always voted. But I remember my mother coming home one day and saying, “I never vote for the same person twice, because once they get in there, they're on graft, they're taking money. They're taking money under the table.” So that was kind of Ohio politics. But anyway, the dollars were significant. And I kept getting coached and mentored and pressured, too.

You got to do more. You got to get your literature out there. You got to do this, that, and the next thing. And I remember regrettably, but I remember bursting into tears one day in front of a potential donor who also had access to other donors. And he said, “Okay, I get it.” And I thought, “Well, good. I'm pleased you got it.”

So I did get an influx of some cash earlier on. And back then, remember, these are 1976 dollars, I raised \$12,000 in five months, which was this sizable amount, and spent every last red cent of it for literature and what else? Radio ads.

I had friends cutting radio ads for me. I had friends writing radio ads for me. My kitchen table was the campaign office. And then the Democratic Party did open up an office after the primaries. So I moved a lot of stuff. I remember silk screening my lawn signs because I had my own silk screen. So we made our own lawn signs out of plywood.

And I did that at headquarters, had the paint, silk screened all of them. And my husband and some new friend that we met in Ozaukee County, the two men would just go around the county, around both counties, and look for wonderful places to put a yard sign. And they would knock on the door and introduce themselves and introduce my literature and say, “May we put a sign in your yard?”

Later on, we send them a thank you note and a letter on the care and the feeding of lawn signs because they get vandalized or they get damaged by the wind where the paint would flow off.

**Barbara**

So how did it feel when that campaign was over?

**Roberta**

Exhausting. And then I got angry. I got angry at well, I gave you a couple of examples. "Drop the A in your name."

"You have no business doing this." And several things like that. And I started writing to get rid of all that angst. I started writing poetry and I have a little booklet called *Political Consequences*, and it is a compendium of all that angst.

And what happened to me, I think, is that —there was one poem called *Lost Illusions*. And I think that's when I lost all of my naivete about public office, about who I was or how people approached me or how the world ran or how the world didn't run.

Yeah, I was angry for a long time, and luckily the campaign was in November and I climbed right back into graduate school in January. I finished my classwork in January, finished writing my thesis, and graduated the following June.

So I think that was probably my saving grace because I couldn't wallow around in it. I had kids to raise and a thesis to write. So climbed right back up, right back in. And like I said, I still have friends from that era and we still see each other, so that's very nice, but I was angry.

**Barbara**

So since then, what positions have you run for?

**Roberta**

In a little segue, I ran and lost in 1976, and the Senate terms are four years here. And two years into it, the man that I ran against retired from his seat. And I got a call from the two senators who had originally given me the call, and they said, "Time is right, get in the saddle, run again."

One, I was exhausted, and two, I had a job in Green Bay with the Emergency Medical Services Council by then, and I was commuting to Green Bay every day for work. And this was before I-43 was there. So hour and 15 minutes to work, hour and 15 minutes back, and I still had two little kids. And I said, "No, wrong time for me. Might be the right time, but it's the wrong time for me."

So I did not ante up again. I often think about that's the road not traveled. I think about what would have happened. I don't regret that now because I was home with my kids and I would have been a full-time mother, but only there part of the time, so that's okay with me. I figured that one out pretty fast.

So that was from '76, and the next time I ran for public office was 1990, and I ran for the county board. Again, the gentleman that I was opposing was elderly, had been there for a long time. I went door-to-door. I did not win. I also looked for some of my literature from back then and I couldn't find any. So either I handed every little last piece out or I didn't have any.

And I hardly believe that I didn't have any. I think I probably did. So then it was 1990, I got a job as a stockbroker. I was a stockbroker for 20 years with Robert Baird. And then my kids were off to college and I had been appointed.

Little segue: My husband was a common council person. He was an alderman in the city of Sheboygan, and he ran for alderman two years after I ran for the state senate.

And we had a little bit of a fight in our household because he wanted to put up my lawn sign, because we share the last name.

And I said "My lawn signs are my logo, and you may not." Which created a little bit of a kerfuffle. But he changed the color to yellow and black. He put on a capital letter, took off the small letter 'P', and I was happier with that, but he won. He was an alderperson for 14 years, so it's not like I wasn't politically connected for all those years.

Our household lived and breathed politics. Our children laugh—And to this day, how many years later? 40 for both of them, at least. When we are on the road and are going home and take a different route, they will say, "Are we on an alderman tour?"

Because Tom would be driving and want to see where the incinerator was, or want to see where the constituent lived and what he was complaining about because of the neighbor's weeds. So to this day, we talk about going on alderman tours, and as I'm driving around town, I will now say to my spouse, "Okay, I have to do an alderman tour. I need to go past this house." So we still do that.

So in the intervening years, between '76 and '90, he was on common council. I was appointed by Mayor Schneider to the redevelopment authority.

**Barbara**

When was that?

**Roberta**

It was probably in the early '90s... '92, maybe. I was already a broker.

So '92, '93, somewhere around there, and I am still on the redevelopment authority. So I have always been since then, I personally have been engaged in what's been going on in the city. So far I've served under five mayors, and each mayor gets an appointment.

They get to appoint. I finally said to the development office and this current mayor, "I'm getting a little long in the tooth here, maybe we ought to get some other folks to get engaged." And I said, "But I'm not ready yet to give it up. However, we need to think about succession planning here."

Because part of what I realized is there is an advantage to I have a lot of information locked in my head, and I have a lot of history locked in my head, and I can say "The reason that was done back in 1998 was because of this.

It made sense back then, it's not making sense today, but that's why it was done." So I do a lot of that with development especially, and in the years that I've been on there. I mean, when I started, we had a coal pile where South Pier is. So I've seen a lot come and go, and that's still probably my dear love, I still really like redevelopment.

So I was on redevelopment and I had been asked a couple of times to run against somebody for common council. And over those years the districts have changed too, because every time there's a census, they redraw maps. So I've seen a lot of map redrawing and the districts have changed.

But there was one time I was asked, and the district went, we lived on Fifth Street and then we moved to North Point. And the district was one great big long strip that ran almost to the far edge of the city, but not quite. And I basically said, "I do not want to represent that district because I'm not part of what their daily life is like and who they are. I don't feel like I can represent that."

So I was asked a couple of times and then a couple of years ago, Todd Wolf, who was the predecessor for District Two in the city of Sheboygan, Todd Wolf was tapped to be the city administrator. Oh, I forgot, a race— mayor. I had mayor in between there.

I was on the redevelopment authority, and as I said, I've been there under five mayors. We had one mayor who was significantly problematic, and that was Mayor Ryan, nationally, significantly problematic. And I remember one day he strode into the redevelopment authority and said, "We're going to sue Walmart."

And I said, "Oh, we are?" And he said, "Yep, we're going to sue Walmart. They're sitting on that building up (in what is now Taylor Heights.) They're sitting on that building and we've got a developer and we really want them to get off that building and they haven't. And we've tried and we've offered them money and we're just going to sue them." So I clerked and said, "Okay, and there are seven people on the authority. And I said, let's talk about this."

So we did. And the then city attorney said, "If we sue, we need to hire someone who is... We need to hire somebody else to do that. We need to hire somebody out of Milwaukee who knows how to do this." So we did. We sued Walmart and they backed down. So we ended up purchasing for less than we had originally done.

And we used a couple of tactics. One was public embarrassment. I remember we were in the old council chambers and all we did was put up the numbers and the photos from the police calls and the fire calls on the empty building. And there were numerous ones, and some creative people had broken into the back and flooded the interior so they could have an interior ice skating ring and not have snow on it.

Multiple dumpster, fires, neighbors complaints, rodents. I mean it was blighted. And the redevelopment authority had to prove that it was blighted in order to condemn it, in order to get the purchase. So eventually we bought it from Walmart and the rest is history. We've got grocery store there and other developments in now.

But it was during the Ryan years when I was inside the city enough to know all of the problems. Not all, many of the problems. And I'm sure there were many I didn't know about. But I was inside enough to know many of the problems and kept saying to myself when I got home, "I can run this city better than he can. I can run this city better than he can."

And then I thought, "Well why not?" So I remember one day I went in to take out my papers and Mayor Ryan was coming down the stairwell and he said, "Oh, what are you doing here? You have a meeting?" And I said, "Well actually it's good that I ran into you because I am taking my papers out because I am going to challenge you." And he was on a recall.

There were so many issues that there was a recall petition and it was a special election, so special election, real short time frame, two months or less. And I remember walking into, after I took my papers out, I walked into the Sheboygan Press and that's when we still had an editor and a press floor here, reporter floor.

I remember walking in and he knew me, editor knew me and I said, "Hi, I just came to tell you that I am taking out my papers to run against Mayor Ryan and I will have a press conference." And he said "Forget the press conference, we aren't going to do those anymore. But tell me more and this is going to be very interesting." Because there was already one challenger, so he knew that there would be three of us in the primary.



So I took out papers and by the time taking out papers issue was over, there were, I believe seven of us, maybe nine, seven or nine of us that were going to challenge the seated mayor. And we all ran at once, including the incumbent mayor. And I assumed it was a given.

A lot of what happened in that election was there were a lot of people who didn't think we should have a recall, they thought we should let the mayor serve out his additional two years and not be recalled. So there was a lot of pushback in that election about that.

When it all came down to it, I came in third out of the whole and the top three vote getters got more votes than all of the rest of the candidates all put together. And then it was just the top two move on. Mayor Ryan was challenged by Terry Van Akron, who had been our state assembly person.

So the two very well known names won, but again I came in third. I was very pleased.

**Barbara**

Did that process also involve knocking on doors, literature?

**Roberta**

Absolutely, and raising money. And I got a new photo, but I ended up using, adding the Filicky, because by then, professionally, I was using Filicky.

So I used Filicky-Peneski and went again with black and white, wore my black and white, black and white clothes when I campaigned, knocked on doors. I have photos of people sitting in my living room, different thing from 1976, everybody brought their own cell phones, everybody's on their cell phone calling people. Raised a considerable amount of money, again, from friends and family, bless their hearts, and just really it was exhausting.

The other thing is, it was in the dead of winter, so from December till February we were out knocking on doors. Luckily there was not a whole lot of snow, but it was very cold. But I had billboards and lawn signs, the whole nine yards. If you're going to do it, you go all in and you do it. So that's what I did.

Came in third, so I didn't get to run off against the mayor. And the incumbent mayor was unelected and replaced by Mr. Van Akron. And he served out those two years and he did not win another reelection, he served for just two years. So that was a lot of political turmoil in a very short time frame, but that was exciting.

Again, exhausting. I gave a speech to one of the local Rotary Clubs post-election, and I started with "This was an eleven pound election." I lost 11 pounds campaigning, and it's probably a combination of being too busy to eat and doing all the walking.

So yeah, and I have statistics somewhere about how many billboards, how many lawn signs, how many phone calls, how many pieces of literature we put out. Again, very compressed timeframe. So that was pretty exciting. So I got again, politically a higher profile at that point.

And it was after that several people said "Just run for Common Council, and then run for mayor again, run for Common Council." And when I eventually only umpty-ump years and several decades later my first elected political office, I was elected by the Common Council.

And then in 2020 to serve out a term, I had to stand for election. It's a two year term, but I had to stand for election in 2021 because the electorate then could elect me or not elect me if you want. I was challenged, I held the challenge.

I got, I want to say, 72% of the vote, and then again I had to run a year later, so I had to run in 2022. I was challenged by the same person who challenged me the year before, and I lost a few percentage points, but I still won fairly handedly. So that's it.

**Barbara** How long is your current term?

**Roberta** My term will last until 2024 in April.

**Barbara** And you're an alderperson.

**Roberta** I'm an alderperson.

**Barbara** So what have you learned about yourself and about the community from all of these experiences?

**Roberta** I think that the biggest learning came with that very first race.

Which was, I'm pretty sturdy. I'm pretty verbal. Not everybody likes me. Not everybody has to like me. There is value in community.

In all of my elections, all of my races, I was constantly amazed and surprised about people who came forward that I didn't even know who were working like crazy to elect me. Back in '76, I remember going into a kitchen at a fundraiser, thanking all the workers. I knew no one at all.

So the other thing was, there were some friends that I thought I could rely on to do backstopping of some sort, and they were nowhere around until the election day party. That always surprised me. So that was one thing.

And I probably learned that not everybody is built like me or wants to do what I do. Just recently, somebody came up to me. I forget that I'm on TV, so they recognize my face, and I forget that. But someone came up to me just recently and said, "Thank you for your service." And I immediately looked over my shoulder to see somebody in a military uniform, and he said, "No, you."

And I said, "Wow, gee, you're welcome." And he said, "Somebody has to do it, and it can't be easy." And I was reclaimed at that point. It was like, wow. And I don't think about that, because I don't think about that. But it is nice every once in a while when somebody recognizes. Another one was, I was at a public meeting, public hearing.

It's fairly contentious in the council chambers, I don't know, 40, 50 people. Everybody had a different idea about how the meeting should work and how it should go, and the city was taking it in the neck for something. And this woman, elderly woman, stood up and said, "I just want to set the record straight. They did come and talk to us. The city had a meeting with every property owner adjacent to...It's affixed for the lakefront. And they talked to every one of us, so they did come and talk to us."

And at which point, the tension in the room kind of broke, and the meeting rearranged itself. And I went up to her afterwards, and I said, "I just want to thank you for saying that, for getting up and saying what you said, because I knew that the city had talked to them, but I'm an alderperson, so I didn't want to say that. So thank you very much."

And I got a delightful surprised note that she sent to city hall. It was on my desk, and I opened it, and she said, "I just want to thank you for thanking me." And she said, "I'm an introvert. I don't usually do that, but God bless. I'll pray for you. I'll pray for you and thank you."

And it's like, okay, I can keep doing this. Those are the people I can keep doing this for. And I do enjoy helping my constituents, and sometimes it's just as easy as saying, "Oh, the person you need to talk to is" or "Give me your name and your number and I will talk to you. I will talk to you. I'll find out." So that's been rewarding.

**Barbara**

And you mentioned when you were tapped to run for state Senate, there was only one woman in the Senate, and you got a lot of comments about if they just took the 'A' off your name or how dare you run. What would you say to women now who want to run for office?

**Roberta**

I'd say, do it and I'd say run. And know that it's going to take a lot of energy. It also takes structure.

So have somebody on your we call it the kitchen cabinet. Have somebody on your team who's done it before, who knows, who knows the political climate, who's a skilled communicator that can help with all the materials. But be prepared. It will take time. It will take money. The campaign will take over your life for however long the campaign lasts.

So much so that you almost have to put up guardrails to keep yourself sane. My live-in campaign aid every once in a while would say, "Get in the car. " And I'd say, "Well, Ellen, where are we going?" She said, "Just get in the car." So I'd get in the car, and she'd drive me to Milwaukee to have dinner because it wasn't in my district. And I thought, yeah.

**Barbara**

Big Ellen was a great asset.

**Roberta**

She was. Wasn't in my district. So I appreciated that. And then she'd also do some funny kind of stuff, and every once in a while, hand me my lipstick when I got out of the car and said, it's smudgy. Put some more on. So there's got to be somebody which you can rely on like that.

The couple of things that somebody said, what does it take? It takes grit. It takes time. It takes money, takes energy. It takes networks. And you got to have them all into varying degrees and also to varying degrees at various times in the campaign itself, the money tends to follow the winners.

So you're struggling in the beginning, and then when you've already spent as much as you can spend, all of a sudden people realize that maybe you could win, and then they start sending you money. But it's not ever too late. But it's too late for that particular campaign.

**Barbara**

So what do you see as the future of women in politics?

**Roberta**

I think there's going to be more and more.

Back when I had a PR and marketing firm, I was doing a history of a not-for-profit, and I went through their archives, and I wrote out the history, and part of that history was who was on their board of directors. And this particular nonprofit was funded by two, founded by two women, and their early boards were primarily women.

When they got to be successful, their boards were primarily men. When things got tough, boards were primarily women. And I looked at that and thought "That's because women are used to rolling up their sleeves, digging in, and making it work." Men are used to, dare I say, pontificating and pointing out that somebody should do that.

Now, that's a great overstatement because I know many men who will roll up their sleeves, and I know many women who will point. But in general, that's kind of what I thought. Also in my years of being a financial advisor, I would look at corporate reports, and one of the first things I'd go to is how many women were on their boards of directors.

And many studies have been done, sociological studies, psychology studies, many that say if you have decision makers, if you have men and women at the table, the decisions are sturdier and they're more thought out than if you just have one or the other. So I'm a believer in that.

And I was a broker for many stock clubs, and I used to say to the women, "I don't want to hear you don't know numbers. You don't need to know a lot about numbers. You need to understand how an annual report —so open it and how many women are on your boards?" And I pass out a dozen annual reports, and they go, "One, None."

And I say, "Okay, if you're going to put your money there, is that what you want to do?" And it was kind of fun. So I think given the state of politics today, 2022, I think we're going to see more women because I think we have a lot of messes out there right now.

I think things are solvable, and I think we need to start thinking about real people and real implications and real things. I just think we do.

**Barbara**

And my last question is, why do you think people should get involved on a local level?

**Roberta**

Well, first, if you're involved on the local level, you have a greater impact. The impact can be huge.

I had coffee yesterday morning with a constituent who wrote me an email and said, "Hi, I'm one of your constituents. I have concerns about 1-2-3-4." And it was a well

thought out note. And there were several things, and I emailed her back and said, "All good questions, all good issues, lots of words. Let's meet for coffee."

And we did. Again, I forget because I'm on the inside stuff that for me is every day, every day isn't necessarily out there in the public. It's every day. It can be. But we sometimes don't do really well with communication.

So I just relayed what I knew and said, "I will send you links. I will send you people's names. But yes, here's what I know so far." And I said — she said, "You know, I just moved here five or six years ago, and there are a lot of people my age who really want to be involved, who really like the community."

And I said "Well, for heaven's sake, motivate them, mobilize them, because we're willing." And it's sometimes hard to find people. And I said, "Volunteer to sit on a board, volunteer to sit on a committee, that's how you get involved and that's how you know what's going on." And that's all local, whatever school board, PTA, and it builds your networks.

When I moved to town, one of my first boards of directors was what was then called the Rehabilitation Center and is now RCS Empowers. I was on that board for probably nine years; three three-year terms. And from that board, other people saw me on that board and asked me to be on the American Cancer Society board was another one.

And then from there it was the Women's Health Initiative board. And those are your networks, those are your buddies, those are the people that enrich our community and enrich our own lives. So I just think it's easier to get involved locally. And if you don't know the answer in the smaller community, I'm sure you will know somebody who knows the answer and somebody doesn't know the answer, then there's somebody they know that knows the answer.

So it's easier. You got to be willing to pony up, though. You can't join a board and then not show up at board meetings. When you're asked to do something, if it's anywhere in your wheelhouse, do it. That's one of my big things. If I asked somebody, I rarely in fact, I was on the Junior Achievement Board for a number of years and chaired it.

And I remember asking one of the board members to do something, and he said "No." And I was very startled and said, "Okay," backed off. And probably a year later I went back to him and I said, "I just have to share with you that in all my years on all my boards, you were the only one who told me 'no'."

His eyes got really big. He said, "Well, yeah, but I" and I said, "I just rest my case. You have been the only board member who's ever said 'no'." And part of that is asking the right person to do the right thing and make sure that it's in their wheelhouse, that they know how to do it. It's like watching a professional bricklayer, layer bricks versus somebody who's never laid bricks before.

I mean, one of them will make a huge mess, and the other one will have the wall three-fourths built and be elegant about it. So I think that's one of the keys, one of the keys to doing it.

What a story, what a history. And thank you for taking the time to share it.

**Barbara**

**Roberta**

You're quite welcome.

**Barbara**

Is there anything else you'd like to add to this conversation?

**Roberta**

Well, I can't think of anything now, but I'll probably get home and think of about a half a dozen more.

But I'm just pleased that somebody has thought about doing this, because there's a wealth of knowledge out there. When I was commuting to Green Bay to go to work, I had young kids at home. It was an automatic 20 more hours a week because of the commute. And the thing that gave were my girlfriends. And I realized that I wasn't going to last very long without my girlfriends.

So I started having what I call "strong women dinner parties" on Sunday night, because rarely are there meetings on Sunday night. And if you get your kids peanut butter, they can get put to bed and you can come. I've had those for years. I started those in the '70s, so I've had those for years.

And it's just a joyful thing to have strong, involved women support each other, help each other. So I'm hoping that this kind of project keeps that sort of thing going, because I think it's important.

**Barbara**

Thank you so much.

**Roberta**

You're welcome.