

Interview details:

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Interviewer: Barbara Alvarez

Interviewee: Rebecca Clarke

Transcription:

Barbara

If you can say and spell your name.

Rebecca

My name is Rebecca Clarke. R-E-B-E-C-C-A C-L-A-R-K-E.

Barbara

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

Rebecca

Sure. Well, interestingly, my background is not political at all. My background is in natural resources and environmental education. So I have my master's degree and my bachelor's in natural resources.

And I loved it because I got to teach outside for 20 years. Everyone from little preschoolers all the way up to senior groups coming out. And it was a really great job. And for ten of those years, I worked at Maywood Environmental Park. I worked for the City of Sheboygan as the park naturalist. It was great. So I worked with all the different school groups, scout groups, you name it. Everybody loves Maywood.

But my position was actually eliminated due to budget cuts in 2015. So I was kind of stuck in a way because I couldn't really move too much because my husband is here. He has his law firm here. So moving to Milwaukee or Madison or even another state just wasn't really possible. So I was kind of looking for things to do when a political angle came up.

Barbara

So what or who inspired you to run for office for that first time?

Rebecca

It's a funny story. So it wasn't something I aspired to do. I wasn't even on student council. This was like, Wow. But I was going to Madison a lot for natural resources issues: funding environmental education, funding our soil and conservation staff on a county level. I was really concerned about air pollution and air quality in Sheboygan.

So I was tired of driving to Madison, but I enjoy it. Public speaking is what I was doing for a living, so I was comfortable with that, comfortable with the topic. And I would always reach out to a couple of legislators, not necessarily ones representing us in this area, but just someone I thought were really champions of natural resources and conservation and —can I mentioned a name?

Barbara

Mmhmm.

Rebecca

Okay. So one of them was Peter Barca, and I got to know his office really well because I just wanted to stop in and say, "Hey, thanks for that vote. I appreciate it." And I saw him and this has been for years, not even before 2015, 2016. So I saw him in an event, I think in 2016, in the winter or something, and he said to me, "Hey, Rebecca, why don't you run for office?" And I said, "Well, Peter? What? That's not really how —what?"

And he said, "Well, you can't win if you don't run." So I thought about it, and he introduced me to a couple of other women legislators in the state assembly. And I went home, talked to my husband the whole ride home, and started talking to my friends, saying, what do you think of this? Is this nuts? Like park naturalist to state representative?

Is that weird? And nobody said "No". Everyone said, "Rebecca, we're kind of sick of you talking about this stuff. So, yes, go to Madison." The reason I was interested in Madison, too, I was going to city council meetings, I was going to school board meetings, but the problem really wasn't here, from what I could see. The problem really was, to my opinion, Madison. And we need to get more local control back to our counties, to our schools, to our municipalities.

It seems like a jump, right? Why not go for school board? Why not city council? But I really thought Madison was kind of the right step for me. Interestingly, one of the statistics I've heard from one of the women who was in office is that most women have to be asked seven times to run for office. That wasn't me. I was asked once, and I knew I had a kind of a short timeline there because it's already February, January, so we kind of had to get going.

So it was time to hit the ground running.

Barbara

So what was the first position that you ran for?

Rebecca

I ran for state assembly, and state assembly is kind of like the Congress on the state level. So you've got state assembly, which runs every two years, and then you got your senate, which is every four years. Assembly was up. I was interested. And so I ran in 2016 for that. I ran in 2018 again, and then in 2020, I was asked to run for the county board, and I did run for the county board, and I won that election.

Barbara

So now that you've done three campaigns, three pretty big campaigns, what does it take to run a campaign?

Rebecca

I think for me, just early on, knowing, why are you running? I'm not going to be able to change everything. I'm not an expert on health care. I know a bit about education, but there's a lot of topics I don't know about.

But I was very comfortable in the conservation area, and that's what I wanted to run on. So then I think the next step is you really need to sit down and figure out who is that kitchen cabinet. So who are those people? And they say "kitchen cabinet" because it's literally sitting around your kitchen table. Who are those people? You've got to think of the things you're going to need. You're going to need campaign manager, someone that you trust, that knows you and can also reign you in when you're doing dumb stuff.

You need someone to help with volunteers, getting people excited, training people to get out in the doors, someone that can handle your data. How is it going, how is your messaging? This isn't working. So who are those people that I can sit down with once a week and really make a plan? Then you need to write the plan. So you actually have to do some homework and you write up a campaign plan. Basically, this is your deep dive into the community.

So I felt pretty comfortable about the city of Sheboygan, but now I have to learn about Oostburg and I have to learn about Cedar Grove, and that requires a little bit of research, but it's really interesting stuff. So like, what's the medium education? Who's the number one employer? How many farms are out there? How many kids are in that school district? And those kinds of things. So you really kind of can figure out that messaging as you're going to the different areas.

Once you have your cabinet and your plan, figure out your budget. And this is where it got kind of interesting, because if you're getting help from outside groups like Emerge or like this group Vote Run Lead, they'll tell you the average you need to make for State Assembly is \$60 to \$100,000. And I was like, for what? For what? We don't even have TV here. You got to be kidding me.

So sit down and really think about how much literature you're going to need, how many parades you're going to be in, how many events you're going to have, how many mailers do you want to do lawn signs? And then do the fundraising. It's a very step by step thing. Once you look at that calendar and you look at that date in November, you go backwards and try to plug in all these other things, and then you just go. It's kind of fun.

Barbara

Interesting.

Rebecca

Yeah.

Barbara

And what was the outcome of these three different campaigns?

Rebecca

So 2016, again, was the first time I ever run for anything, so we were not expecting to do very well. The toughest thing is to get your name out there. I was lucky. Some people did remember me from Maywood, so that helped a little bit. But we got about 40% of the vote, and we were really excited about that. And it's a loss, but it was way better than we were supposed to do.

We ran again in 2018, and that's kind of interesting because then you're looking at presidential versus non-presidential, and then we did a little bit better, actually. We got 41% of the vote. At that time I decided to get a little break because my volunteers and everybody would just need a little bit of a break. But then I was asked to run for County Board by someone that held the seat that I'm in right now, and I had a lot of respect for him.

I didn't want to run right away in 2020, and I did have an opponent, and that's a spring elections. It's a very tight timeline, but we were able to run and win, and I forget the numbers, but we did very well.

Barbara

Did it feel really different or really similar to run a campaign for State Assembly and campaign for County Board?

Rebecca

Yeah, a lot of it is similar and interestingly being on County Board, and I've been trying to recruit other folks to run. We need some more diversity. We need some more, different voices, different perspectives on the county board. And people were very intimidated. And I think to say, "Look, you're looking at 1,000 votes for county board." That's how many people show up in April. I'm not proud of that, but that's where we are. Okay.

Versus I needed 16,000 votes to win for state assembly. So it's a much easier thing to do. You just got to get out there and talk to your neighbors. And it's tough because it's like January, February, March. I don't know why they call it spring elections, but it is similar. You want to have a plan, you want to have a message. You want to get your face out there, get a picture, talk to people, make phone calls. It was tricky during the pandemic.

So it's a lot more of that phone time, which I don't like as much as the doors. But yeah, I think once people get into that rhythm, it's really doable.

Barbara

And I imagine a lot of people remembered you from previous campaigns, from you getting your face out there for so many years.

Rebecca

Yup, I think there was a lot of "Oh, it's you, I remember you." And that's good. I don't want it to get to the point where people feel like you're just doing this to do this. I genuinely find this interesting. I am trying to make a difference.

When I feel like I'm not anymore, then there's other stuff I can do. I'd still like to be a park naturalist, ya know, if anyone is hiring.

Barbara

in the three different campaigns that you did, you mentioned the different strategic planning you did, getting your name out there. What is it that you learned about yourself and about the community through these processes?

Rebecca

I think what I learned is that, and I hope other people really think about this, the transition from park naturalist to politics wasn't really that radical. And I'd like other people, especially women, to think about this. I would like to see more teachers. I'd like to see more nurses. And if it feels a little like, "I don't know politics," but you do know that area, and we need that representation.

So I think I learned it wasn't that big of a switch. I think I learned I'm more resilient than I thought. It's tough. Nobody likes to lose. And I think it was very powerful to be offering people a choice, because part of the thing that happens is a lot of times, and not just assembly or county board, I mean sheriff or clerk or clerk of courts.

People don't run. We have no opposition. And that was always frustrating for me to go into the ballot box and look, and you only have one choice. So I think people really appreciated having a choice. Whether you agree with my politics or not, I always got "Thank you for running." That was really powerful.

Barbara

Wow, that is pretty powerful. What would you say to other women who perhaps get tapped just like you did? Somebody said "You should run for office." and you mentioned that it didn't take you seven taps.

Rebecca

No, right.

Barbara

What would you say to other women who maybe are more reluctant but are curious about running for office?

Rebecca

Yeah, just don't say no. If you're worried about the time because you have kids or a job, you can schedule this. I didn't do it 24 hours a day, and I know I'm lucky enough in my position to not have a job, and I was able to do this, but I didn't do it every day.

Just don't say 'no.' Talk to your friends. Really think about why? What do I want to do? You can't change everything. Don't expect you to be an expert on everything. If you ever look at a bill as it comes through from Madison and you're reading, like, "What is this?" Politicians don't write that. There's staff that does that. Attorneys do that. I think go to some meetings, attend a county board meeting, go to a school board meeting.

Read the minutes. Talk to someone on the board. Talk to staff in the school district. Talk to, look at that power map. Talk to other community leaders and say, "I'm thinking about this. What do you think the biggest challenges are? Or what would be a challenge for me?" It's in the shirt I'm wearing right now. But run as you are. I've known you for a while, Barbara. I am not like a power suit wearing kinda girl.

I'm much more comfortable in hiking boots, jeans, a flannel shirt, and that's what I wore, and that's who I was. Because I think if you try to become something that you see on TV right? On CSPAN or something, it's not authentic, and people are sick of it. They want to

be able to relate to you. Be yourself. If you like your hair in a ponytail, go for it. If you've got pink hair, I love it. You have to be yourself, because otherwise people will see right through it.

Barbara

And what did you learn about the community through this process and also being on county board?

Rebecca

Interestingly, I think people don't vote enough and, like, knocking on doors, "Well what's state assembly?" And that's kind of like, "Okay, back up a little bit here." "What does the county board do? Can you fix my street?" "Well, you live in the city. We don't do city street."

There's just a lot that people don't know about the levels of government. So getting out there, I think, was good. We knocked thousands of doors, and just to say, "Well, state assembly is in office for two years, and I'd be representing you in Madison on the schools." And I think that was that kind of education. And being the actual candidate at the door was like, "Huh, okay, who's representing us now?" And then getting people educated on how to vote, where to vote.

I think especially during the pandemic, I probably spent more time doing that than talking about myself. This community is very diverse. There are areas of this community that really need some help and to get connected to resources that already exist. And we are urban and we are rural and I like that. I think that's kind of cool. We've got a lot of great schools, we've got amazing parks.

There's a lot to feel good about. And ultimately too, if you knock on the door, we agree on more than we disagree. I know that sounds Pollyannaish, but it is so true. If I'm talking about the deer herd, if I'm talking about air quality, lead in the drinking water, "Yeah, fix that." That's what government should be doing. We agree on that. So once you're out there and you're talking to people, it's a lot better than what you see online.

Barbara

And that brings me to my next question. Why do you think people should get involved on a local level the way that you have, and also just from those conversations from people about learning about who their representatives are, what the city government can and cannot do?

Rebecca

Well, I think it's important to get involved in a local level because sometimes local electeds are people that have been in office for a long time and I don't think they always know their neighborhood anymore. And so they're getting their agendas.

They're looking at... they're listening to department heads or the staff or whatever, but they need to hear from constituents about, "Hey, seriously, this tree is going to fall or this park is crumbling. Why can't we fund this?" And a lot of people tell you a lot of times what your local government will tell you is "It's not us, it's the state." But what we are in the county level is like a conduit to the state.

So we meet with our state legislators and we can say to them, “We have a mental health crisis.” We are mandated by law to take care of people in mental health crisis, but nobody's funding it. So they need to hear from constituents what's going on in your neighborhood, what's the real crisis, what's good and what's going well? Because otherwise it could just be businesses as usual, blinders on, just meeting, gavel in, gavel out.

And I think people would find it interesting. Some of it is pretty “ugh,” but it's actually kind of interesting. So I encourage everyone to get involved.

Barbara

My last question is what do you see as the future of women in politics, either on a local level, state level, or national level?

Rebecca

It is definitely picking up and that's great. Although who knows?

When I ran in '16, that was supposed to be the year of the woman and it wasn't. When I ran in 2018, I know 49 women that ran. It was all time high of women running for office, not all of them were successful. There's more programs out there to get women trained, specifically women. And it doesn't matter your party affiliation necessarily, but we would like to see more women representation at the table.

So I think it is going to improve. We have to keep asking each other, though, and we have to keep supporting each other. So if you don't want to run, I get it. But if you know someone that is running, like myself, and they ask for help, help. It's a great way to get involved, to learn about your community, to hear what the issues are. And it's so much more empowering than saying, “Everything sucks, nobody's listening,” and you just kind of get involved.

So I'm excited to see the women that are getting involved. I think it's going to make some changes.

Barbara

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

Rebecca

No. Just make sure everyone goes votes.

Barbara

Thank you, Rebecca.

Rebecca

Thank you.