

Interview with Barbara Carlson
Wellesley Magazine
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Alumni in Politics

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Having been involved in politics for literally, all of my adult lifetime, I do think that there are more challenges to a woman being involved in politics, running for elective office, then there are to a man. I think the way that our system works, where a candidate has to raise a lot of money, that's something that a lot of women have little or no experience with and really have to discipline themselves to do effectively. I believe there are lots of women who would make excellent elected officials who don't like the negativity that's associated with political life today and so take themselves out of running and that there are, as in any professional endeavor, oftentimes different standards by which women are judged than men. I just came from a Democratic Senate Campaign Committee luncheon where one of the elected democratic women senators that, you know, can give the best speech of my life and if I have a run in my pantyhose then that's all anybody remembers. I think that there are some different ways that women still today are viewed which affect what people expect of women running for and holding office.

It's hard to generalize. I expect that the acronyms would be some do and some don't. Clearly the media attention paid to what women wear, or what their hairstyle is... I've just come to accept it. It's all part of the climate but I think that many women candidates and office-holders feel that it's a double standard.

Well, that's not what I find as I travel around New York. I'm very encouraged and pleased, that as a first-time candidate, which is what I am, that I am doing as well as I am at this point and I expect that the campaign will only get better and better. But I also have an obligation to go out and convince New Yorkers why I should be their senator. That includes men and women voters, and that's what this campaign will be about.

I think that, less than fortunate, but nevertheless realistic, of our political life today, so that any of who enters into seeking public office has to know that that may very well happen and you have to believe that what you're doing is worth it, that you could make a difference, that the issues you care about are ones worth fighting for and if you believe all of that, that provides with the armor that enables you to keep going.

So, for me, it's a question of reminding myself every day why I believe it's important to be in politics and public life and the work that a senator can do that would help people in New York and around our country, and after awhile, you just realize it's one of the prices you pay for being willing to enter the political process.

I do or I wouldn't be doing it. For me, having watched how important the votes in the Senate have been over the last seven years, it's very clear that nearly everything I care about will be affected directly or indirectly by votes that are taken in the Senate. When I think back about the President's economic plan in 1993 that passed with one vote in each, the House and the Senate, with not a single Republican vote, I think it was good for the country and there are a lot of other votes like that where it came down to a handful of senators who agreed with what the President did, or who lost what I thought should've been done.

I do think it's worth it. I've thought long and hard about making this decision and I considered other options that would have certainly been attractive and interesting to me, but the more I thought about the issues that I worked on for over 30 years, issues affecting children and families and women's rights, public education and healthcare, I realize that I would be in a position of advocating for changes that I thought would be important, but the person who actually held the vote would be the final arbiter of whether something I believed in went forward.

I actually like it, I like most of it – I really like the opportunity to meet people, to talk about the issues that I think are important. It is exhausting – physically, it's just a marathon, but every day, I'm so glad I'm doing it and I'm happy to be going back out there. So I think it would be a terrible burden if you were doing it and did not enjoy it. I cannot imagine. But if you enjoy it, as I do, then the physical – sometimes you're so tired you can hardly hold your head up – but you know, as soon as you get a little sleep, you're ready to go back out again.

I think that in our country today, the way we get information out to people requires us to use a whole lot of different media sources, whether it's entertainment shows on TV or the internet or news shows or online chats – I mean, we just have so many ways of communicating with people and because of the explosion of information sources, if you don't utilize all of them then you're not going to be able to meet people. It's not like when I was growing up and you had three major networks on TV and the country basically was given the same information. Now you've got this multiplicity of information sources and outlets and I don't think that you can expect to communicate with as broad a group of Americans, or in my case, New Yorkers, as possible unless you take advantage of these different opportunities.

I'm in a different role. I'm out there on my own. It's similar to, in my view, what the Vice President went through. He certainly entered the presidential election year as a very experienced campaigner and office holder, but for seven years, everyone who has been part of the administration team has really had one goal in mind, and that has been supporting and promoting the President's agenda. So there really wasn't much of an opportunity to be out there on our own and I watched as he, you know, make the transition from being on the team to being out on his own and telling the country what he would do as president while I've had a similar experience.

Oh, absolutely. When I announced at Senator Moynihan's farm that I was going to explore this, I said it would be a listening and learning experience and it has been both.

I don't know how anybody does something for the first time and doesn't learn a lot. I certainly have learned a lot. I think that anytime you're embarking on a new challenge and you've never done it before, there's a learning curve associated with it, and I feel very fortunate that I've had a great opportunity to travel around New York and meet a lot of people and develop my own skills as a candidate and fortunately, I, like anybody else running for the Senate, has done that all in public view, but you know, that goes with the territory.

I hadn't had any experience before this past year and now in the campaign itself, and I'm loving it. So, you know, if you asked me two years ago if I'd be doing this I would've said "Of course not," but now that I am... I intended to live in New York after the White House but I never intended to be living there as a candidate for the Senate. This all happened when Senator Moynihan said he wasn't going to run again and people started calling me, urging me to consider this and the more that they urged me, I slowly came around to the idea that maybe I should consider it and then when I began to consider it, I found that the issues that New Yorkers were concerned about were the ones that I've worked on for three decades. I've really loved meeting with people and talking about what could be done to bringing jobs to upstate New York or improve the schools in New York City. So the more that I explored it, the more excited I became about the possibility about serving in the Senate and I decided to commit myself to this race.

This is probably going to have to be your last question if you don't mind.

Well, I would encourage anyone who has even a modicum of interest in public service or the political process to start out by being involved in some way. Work in a campaign. Work in the League of Women Voters. Be on a committee or commission at the local or state level. Work in a presidential campaign and see what that's like. Gradually decide whether it's something you feel you would enjoy doing. And if there are opportunities to run for office – if you have any desire at all – I would urge Wellesley alums to consider it because we certainly need dedicated, intelligent public service and we need (electronic flaw) in public life. I hope that a lot of Wellesley women will be on the campaign trail in years to come.

There are a lot of wealthy Wellesley alums, both from my class and other classes doing just that. They're organizing events for me, they're doing fundraising for me, they're volunteering in my headquarters and I certainly could use all of the Wellesley help I can get in this campaign.

Thank you very much.

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