



Women Running for Office: How Far We Have Come; Where Do We Go from Here

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Morning Plenary Address

Ready to Run New Mexico

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Thank you Christine Sierra and the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute for asking me to give a little context to your day here and share some of my own experience. I was very fortunate to be a NM State Senator for 16 years but before that I had been working hard here in New Mexico to elect women to office. I think I've gone to more training sessions like this—over the 30 years I've been involved, both as a candidate and as a campaign worker, than I care to recount. But times have definitely changed. In 1975 when I came to New Mexico there were only two women state senators and

three representatives. Women were simply not running for office. They didn't have the networks, the money or the confidence. There were only a few models and these were women who had become legislators by chance, when their husbands died. There was just no pipeline and no precedent.

That was when a small bi-partisan group of women called the NM Women's Political Caucus decided that this had to change. The efforts of the group, led for a time by Republican Marjorie Bell Chambers of Los Alamos, first focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment—and they succeeded. The NM legislature was one of the first states to pass the amendment. But other issues that hit women even more directly pay equity, child care, rape, domestic violence and reproductive freedom were all hanging out there. And we knew the answer was more women in elected office.

During the 1980s, spurred by Geradine Ferraro-- the first woman to be on a presidential ticket, and Judy Pratt, a state representative, who was the first women to run for the US Senate in New Mexico, more women began to step up. But usually—they lost. In 1987 there were still only two women in the Senate and nine in the House. Stung by defeats at a national level—anyone remember Anita Hill? Or how many women there were in the Reagan administration – many of us went back to the grassroots, to the school boards and ward meetings, to becoming appointed to boards and commissions where we got experience to run for the legislature, the city council, or the US Congress. **We didn't mourn, we organized.** And along the way, we drew on some skills we'd had all along—resourcefulness, the ability to multitask, to communicate, to network and to build coalitions.

During the next decade in the 1990s, women began to step forward, using some of their traditional skills and new ones, too. Important new ones like fundraising, targeting, and media relations.

There were more mentors, and more models. In the political world we had Cory Aquino, Golda Mier, Margaret Thatcher—all heads of state in troubled times.

But it was still a tough sell to elect a woman, particularly in the mountain west, the home of a traditional male-oriented culture, where men who had already been in office had a tremendous credibility edge when it came to raising money and getting the media and the electorate to take them seriously. But there were chinks in the armor. Citizen legislatures where elected officials were not paid, drew fewer candidates. Term limits in many states helped women who until then always found themselves running against incumbents. In other states like Arizona and Maine, public financing programs allowed grassroots support to supplant fundraising prowess. And women *did* actually seem more honest and transparent, something the electorate and the media had begun to value.

In 1995, I decided it was time that I give it the old college try myself. I had worked on many campaigns, many of them for women candidates. My pediatrician, Sue Brown, actually recruited me to be her campaign manager for School Board as I was giving birth. Overcoming a fear of failure, sick of the sense of powerlessness, and armed with the belief that I could do it better—I stepped forward, as a candidate for the Albuquerque City Council. Over a seven-month period, I went door to door—probably to about 3,000 homes—running against a popular three-term incumbent. Remember-- women candidates, especially in the '80s and early '90s, have almost always been challengers, with trouble raising money and inspiring credibility. I ran a good campaign. I addressed issues of growth, crime and environmental protection. I learned a lot about my neighborhood.

I lost by nine votes.

I thought that my political career was over—that I would go back to my role as citizen. But, and, here's the lesson--- even though I lost the battle, I won the war. People were impressed with my effort. Many thought, gosh, if I had just gone out to vote, maybe she would have won. Maybe every vote **does** count. Maybe *next time*, I'll get involved.

Well, miraculously, six months later, the twenty-year veteran senator from my district decided to retire, leaving an open seat in the North Valley of Albuquerque. His senate district overlapped the City Council District that I had just gone door-to-door in. It was a golden opportunity for me. I was dead tired, but I was also older and wiser... I had built even more support. People took me seriously, volunteered and contributed, and I won. Even though I had very stiff opposition in the Democratic primary, in a heavily Hispanic district that had never elected a woman for any position--especially someone who was an Anglo, a non-native who had lived there a mere 25 years-- I won. And I won handily, out polling both of my primary opponents combined, and garnering almost 70% in the general election. **Women** were my core of support—I could not have done it without them. **And I could not have won the second time without losing the first.**

During my time in the Senate, I was lucky to serve with 11 other women, and about 20 others in the House. Sometimes we constituted a critical mass—to change the atmosphere and get the majority of men to take our issues seriously.

But progress has been uneven. The percentage of women in state legislatures throughout the nation declined slightly from 2010 to 2013, but it hovers around **24%**. There are now only six women in the NM Senate today, and were it not for a number of new women elected to the House in 2012 our percentage would have declined. As it stands today—in 2013—we

now have 25 women in the NM House and 6 women in the Senate for an overall percentage of about 28% (27.7%).

That's better than the nationwide average (24%) but it's a lot less than Colorado's, where 40% of legislators are women.

Now, for women running for office today—there are some new rules and some new challenges. The 2012 election in New Mexico saw more money spent than ever before—and in an entirely new way that involved SuperPacs fueled by out-of-state money, and a new campaign finance law that, for the first time, limited some contributions. The median cost of campaigns for legislative candidates was about \$44,000 with winners actually spending \$58,000 and losers spending \$15,000—a \$40,000 gap. And that was only the median. Consider the outliers—Sen. Lisa Curtis, a Democratic incumbent from Albuquerque spent \$276,000 on her race, mostly her own money-- and she lost. Sen. Michael Sanchez, of Los Lunas, spent nearly as much-- \$259,000 and won. Sen. Tim Jennings, a Roswell Democrat, was targeted by Gov. Susana Martinez's Superpac, Reform NM Now, which spent \$2 million on New Mexico races. In turn Jennings spent, \$373,370—and lost.

I hope you will talk a bit today in your workshops about how SuperPacs, unleashed by the Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United, are now just as important as political parties and candidates own fundraising efforts. In 2012 they spent almost \$4 million independently of legislators' campaigns. And they are narrowing the issues to those intended to divide communities and increase partisanship, which makes it much more difficult for candidates who win and actually want to get something done.

I'll leave you to draw your own lessons about these trends and from my experience. And to figure out how we put more and more women in elective office next year.

But I think you already know the answer—it's supporting women who are already there-- who are beginning to form a critical mass, who are already using their positions of power to recruit other women to run for office, to serve as faculty members, or fellow managers or as members of boards or commissions. It is supporting them as they tackle problems like domestic violence and early childhood disease that men haven't taken as seriously but which actually figure quite large as stumbling blocks to economic development and a healthy society here in New Mexico.

And it is stepping forward *yourselves*, to serve as mentors, to run for office, to get involved with women's political campaigns...to lobby the legislature, and to realize that nothing is free, you've got to work twice as hard—but *it is* possible. I've got a sign near my desk that is a quote from the German writer Goethe. And I look at it when I feel like I'm never going to make any progress with some of the big projects I've tackled—projects like campaign finance reform, taking on the pharmaceutical companies or the tobacco lobby.

I leave you with it today.... “Whatever you do, or dream you can, **begin** it. Boldness has genius and power and magic in it.”

So, be bold, be brave, remember-- from my story--- that **failure's not all it's cracked up to be**, sometimes-- for women-- it's a prerequisite for greater success.

Thank you again for inviting me, I hope you have a productive day.