

Inspiring Women

Episode 31: Joane Booth

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing, women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women. And we are speaking with Joane Booth today, and Joane is a partnership manager with the Michigan League of Conservation Voters. Now Joane, what she does there, she assists with building strong, authentic, and intentional relationships with diverse communities and businesses across the state. Now Joane's background in addition to what she's doing now, she's worked on presidential campaigns. She is in Minnesota and prior to working on the Michigan LCV team, she was the diversity and inclusion outreach director for United States Senator Tina Smith. Before that she was a senior policy advisor to the former Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton. She's worked on presidential campaign. She has a degree from the University of Minnesota, and she's been recognized as a leader, 2018 40 Under 40 Award from the Minnesota state St. Paul business journal. Joane, thank you very much for being on Inspiring Women.

Joane Booth:

Yeah. Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to talk with you.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I'm looking forward to this conversation. I always like to start with inspiring women speaking to women like you, what are you doing now? What is it you do your day-to-day profession? Where are you at today?

Joane Booth:

Yeah. So, currently I am in Michigan and it's a Detroit suburb called Canton. And I am, because of COVID working from home for the Michigan League of Conservation Voters, which is a bit of a misleading name. Most folks assume, they hear conservation, they assume conservative or whatever, but they never really understand. But essentially what we do is work to advocate for laws around clean drinking water, clean climate, energy, land, water, air, all of those issues. And knowing about the importance of clean water in Michigan, it's a really, really enlightening and interesting place to be and doing this work. So, I do a lot of work with our team around partnerships. So, building relationships with non-traditional communities that you wouldn't

always assume go hand in hand with the environment. So, thinking about the health space and the connections there and the connections to education. And so, it's been a little over a year now, but I'm really enjoying it and just learning so much that I never thought I would ever know about, especially when it comes drinking water.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, drinking water in the state of Michigan is something I think we all learned about with the Flint Michigan water crisis. And I think we've also come as a public to learn about the interconnectivity of those kinds of public issues to all kinds of broad networks. So, very interesting work. Now, Joane, in terms of your background, I mean, you have worked on presidential campaigns, state, federal government, back to state government, tell us the interest in terms of how did politics become of interest to you, how to government work become a place that you're passionate about?

Joane Booth:

Yeah, it's actually really interesting Laurie, because I literally fell into it. So, before I took my first job in politics, I wanted to be the next Oprah. So, I wanted it to be a talk show host. I wanted to be on TV. I wanted to be in People's Business. And then I had taken a job right out of college that didn't work fell through. So, I had to come back home and it just so happened that a former, a really close friend of ours that I have probably hadn't talked to in years, but he was older than me became a state Senator in that time. And so, he was looking for a legislative assistant and he was kind of looking around at all of the different assistants in between the house and the Senate. So, that's over a 100 and something assistance and saying, "Wow, we really don't have that many assistance of color."

Joane Booth:

And so, he reached out and was doing some really intentional outreach about getting folks involved. And so, he just so happened to get my name and he interviewed me and even when I took the interview, I was talking to him as if he was a US senator, because I didn't even understand the difference in levels of government. And so, that shows you my level of interest in politics. I had none. And so, I took this job. It was a huge leap of faith. And I literally haven't left since and from there, it's just like things kind of fell into my lap and different opportunities through word of mouth always came across my way. Same with the governor's office, I had no intention of doing policy work and I'm really lucky that the governor and lieutenant governor at the time noticed me from my work with Senator Bobby Joe Champion and I kind of have just fell into everything since then.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that is incredible. And actually, falling into that a couple of years ahead of this past year, the pandemic where we've seen sort of structural racism and public awareness of issues that have always been there. But our level of understanding of them as a public has really exploded during the course of this year. So, once you took that leap of faith and probably learned the differences between state and federal government, what kept your interest? Just give us a sense of those early days when you were starting to learn and be effective there.

Joane Booth:

I think just knowing and learning the actual implications of, I felt like before that, politics just seemed so disconnected and I never really saw myself in the issues, but as actually started to do the work day to day and understand, "Wow, these people literally decide how fast I can drive on the street outside of my house. They decide just so many things that affect my day-to-day life and I was oblivious to it." And so, I kind of got trapped then, because I was just like, "Oh my gosh, now I'm interested in this." And then I really found kind of the portfolio that I loved and worked on a lot of my time in Minnesota was around criminal justice reform and second chance work and giving folks that may have served time when they get back out into the community, figuring out how to get them back into society, right?

Joane Booth:

And so, I think really just the understanding of how real it is for people and getting to do work that was transformational, like a bill that my former boss passed, giving folks a chance to get their records expunged so that they could get a job or could find housing and understanding that affects thousands of people. And, I'm just sitting here kind of collecting the paperwork and moving it around. And so, I just, I was hooked after I realized how it affected people on a day-to-day basis.

Laurie McGraw:

So, you go from no awareness to sort of catching the bug, understanding the kind of impact that you can have being in government jobs. So, that's really interesting, but you've had a number of career opportunities, sort of one progressing from the next, how did you find those next things, where there are people that pulled you into them? Were there people that you reached out to? Did you have mentors? Give us a sense for that.

Joane Booth:

Yeah. One of the things that I really have always tried to do, even before I got into politics is find mentors, because I think you can always learn from someone. It doesn't mean that you have to do exactly what they did, but you can learn from their mistakes or their successes. And so, I was also blessed to have really great mentors that I came across and I will say, I've always been blessed to have really amazing bosses that invested in me just as much as I invested in them, right? And so, that also changed my perspective throughout my career path of like, "Am I just coming to work for you and just pour everything I have into you and you're not even interested in seeing me succeed or making sure that the passions and things I want to do are included?" And so, that was really a part of shaping kind of my trajectory is that I would have different mentors and they kind of knew what I wanted to do.

Joane Booth:

And then they would find opportunities. Like I said, my old boss Senator Champion, another way I got into the governor's office was because he was very adamant. Anytime he came across a meeting with the governor, lieutenant governor of saying like, "Yeah, my assistant Joane is doing X, Y, and Z," and not everybody does that. Some people don't act like they have anybody helping them. And so, I think that really is what helped kind of lay out the path that I'm on is I've

always had people that have advocated for me when I'm nowhere near the room that a conversation is happening.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, being in the room matters, just being able to observe, take the notes, understand the types of conversations that you might not be leading a conversation, but just hearing it is a wonderful opportunity. So, those are great things. And also, I think for other women hearing this, the more that you can find yourself to be in those kinds of places, you learn a lot from them. Maybe Joane, if we can talk about some of the DEI work that you did prior to your current work now. I mean, you were doing that before everybody was doing it. It seems like everybody has a diversity equity and inclusivity program underway. I'd love to understand your thoughts about that. What were you doing? How is it different now versus then? What are your thoughts there?

Joane Booth:

Yeah. So, once again, my time with US Senators Tina Smith, who is amazing, I've worked for her in four different capacities, but, and so I really just valued her as a person, but after working on her campaign and just understanding her as a person, it was very clear to me that she wasn't just a talker when it came to D&I work, right? She actually wanted to put in the work and do better and see the spaces that she was in become much more inclusive. And so, when I worked on her on the campaign and different things, it was just clear that we couldn't let the ball drop once she was elected and that we had to continue the work of engaging communities of color and making sure that all voices were at the table.

Joane Booth:

And so, when I thought about the different roles that were already in her office, I was like, "I can pass off all of these connections and folks can make sure that they're staying in touch once she's elected, but who's going to actually be able to foster those and have the capacity to really wrap their arms around doing this work and being intentional?" And so, I was like, "I don't know that anyone's there because everyone's portfolios are already full." And so, I kind of pitched to their office, "How about I come in and I really make sure that communities of color can actually see themselves in your office," right? It's not this distant place where nobody ever talks to you and then you do hear the narrative, which can be very true in some cases, politicians only come around when it's election time.

Joane Booth:

And so, my focus is really taking the work that she was doing every day, but just making sure that in every step of the way we were putting a D&I lens on it, so that we could truly put our money where our mouth was and not just be talking about it and not come around election time, but be doing that work all throughout. And I feel like folks are starting to realize the importance of it, right? Folks are starting to realize that communities of color are not dumb so that we can tell when you're just faking it for the moment, versus when you're actually instituting new changes and creating a much different culture. And I think that's where it's changing. And you're seeing, especially with social media, that the just talking about it doesn't work anymore. People want to see action and they're going to call you out on it.

Laurie McGraw:

So, that's what I'd like to understand more about, because I think everybody is talking about it. And it seems like that has been long overdue. And I hear a lot from different people in terms of DEI efforts that we want to be intentional about it. What does that mean? What's the difference between just talk and being intentional and showing results.

Joane Booth:

Yeah. So, I'll give you an example. So, a lot of times I'm invited across the board to come in and talk about different things or work with folks that say, "We want to be inclusive. We want to be intentional. We want to do the work," right? And then I get there and it's only taught and they just want folks just want to hear kind of what the plan is, but they don't actually want to do the work, or they're always skeptical. And something that I've learned, I think this will always be true. And so, I can't remember who told me this, but they said, communities of color know what to do in their own community. They don't need someone to come in and tell them what to do. They know what to do. And so, when you let folks lead, you really do see the changes in the investments that you want.

Joane Booth:

And so, a phrase that I really love that I've heard a lot of times, there's nothing about us without us. And so, I think that's the difference, right? There's one thing to say. And sometimes you get a room full of white men or women, and they're thinking about how can we work in communities of color, not one person in that room is from a community of color, right? And so, I think actually one making sure folks are included, but then also letting them lead and trusting them to know their own communities. And that always need that outside input and thinking you know better. It doesn't work that way, right? You can't ask someone for help, but then constantly tell them that. But no, not like that.

Laurie McGraw:

Right. Well, look, I think that's really specific, extremely helpful. Let's move that same thought process to career development. And as an African-American female professional, what are some of the issues that you see that are unique to you and what are you advocating for? What are the types of things that someone like myself who is a white professional, that I should know about? Give me some of those examples.

Joane Booth:

Yeah. So, that's interesting because actually in my role at Michigan, LCV one of the things we're talking about is what's called bystander intervention. And so, it's basically learning how to be an ally when people of color women or whatever are in a space where you might have to stand up and intervene. And it's very subtle but one of the things, when we started this discussion I told people about, it's so easy, but it's a really big deal is when I worked for Governor Dayton, I remember many times he had a white female assistant and I would be in a room with him as his senior policy advisor and then on the other side would be his white female assistant. And many times white men in particular would come into the room and have a meeting and disregard me the whole time because they assumed I was the assistant.

Joane Booth:

But what was very helpful from the governor and his assistant at the time was that they were allies and they would frequently pivot the conversation back to me so that whoever we were talking to understood that, "No, this woman is in charge as well. And her voice is just as important to me. And you can not disregard her in this space, right?" And I think at least for me as a black woman, that is what I find helpful because that happens all the time, right? Just assumptions are being made that either I don't deserve to be there or I don't actually know what's going on, or I have no say. And so, when you have allies that are willing to say, "Oh, no. Joane, what do you think?" And bring the conversation back around, that's been one of the key things that it's small, but it's really impactful, especially when you find yourself as a black woman in spaces that are predominantly white.

Laurie McGraw:

Right. And I think also that guidance that you're giving up, these are things that allies can do because there are also many conversations that people want to be a good ally, but they don't necessarily know what that specifically means and what can be done. And I think there are simple things that actually do matter. And I think that that is also generally true for being an ally to women in general, because there are many times that just women are in conversations and their voices are not being heard or disregarded or things like that. So, that's really terrific examples, Joane, thank you for that. What about other issues? I mean, sometimes if we talk about women moving up in leadership, there's more emphasis on having diverse teams, but there's often sort of a one off something. And sometimes that can be a token kind of person, but they don't necessarily have a true seat at the table. How have you seen those situations? How do you advocate for changes to those situations? Have you experienced those situations and what have you done in those instances?

Joane Booth:

So, I along with some other amazing women in Minnesota, we had started a group called Minnesota Power Moves. And it was basically started because we found that we were in these spaces again, as women of color that were predominantly white and we just, we didn't know what to do. We didn't, we all knew we were frustrated in having similar experiences, but we had no clue of like, what is an outlet? So, we created this group where that was kind of how we, that was the basis of us coming together, just getting together and figuring out as a group of women, how do we feel, what are we doing? And what are some things that we can do to turn this around? And one of the first events that we had was about being the only, and it was by far the most powerful probably experience I've ever had because it was a room full of almost a 100 women of color in a room saying, "Everyday I go to work, I'm exhausted, I'm beat down.

Joane Booth:

I know that I'm good at my job, but because I'm the only because someone's disregarding me, I feel beat down every day I leave work." And so, I personally have not had that specific experience directly where I've been invited into... I have had it in instances, but not directly from an employer, but it was powerful to just see that this happens to women and specifically women of color all day, every day. And so, some of the things we talked about was having those outlets as women of color to kind of cope and having self care and having spaces where you can come

together with other women of color and debrief or talking to women or even other men, right? That can be allies and assist you and to be transparent with them getting on different... Sometimes organizations or companies have the ERG groups and how can you use those and start to build some power for change. But I think if you talk to most women of color, they've experienced in some way, shape, form, or fashion.

Laurie McGraw:

Getting sort of groups together in terms of other people like you and how helpful that is and providing the support. But Joane, the other thing is just, reading some of your background, listening to some of your previous interviews, when you were recognized as one of the 40 Under 40, you also talked about some of your own aspirations. And one of the things that sort of struck me was what you were, I think, recognized by your class as one of the most likely to become president. I remember reading Stacey Abrams' *Lead from the Outside* book where, when she said that out loud, people piled upon her for being too ambitious. And I'm curious, just as a woman who has ambition, have you been criticized for being that ambitious? What's been your experience because I think those are fantastic ambition?

Joane Booth:

Yeah. So, as I mentioned earlier, even as early as high school, I remember being Oprah for Halloween as that is because I just have always thought big for myself. And I think that's also like shout out to my parents who always taught me to just think big and my family. And so, of course you're always going to have people. I mean, it's not even just professional, personal relationships with people kind of trying to put that light out in you. And so, I've definitely experienced that, but I think I just, the way I'm built, it doesn't really affect me. I just keep going for what I know I love and I'm passionate about. And when people ask me, "What do you want to do in five years?" I never really have a specific answer because I don't have a role or anything in mind, even though I said I'll be the next president.

Joane Booth:

But what I mean by that is like, I just want to continue doing really good work and helping people. And one of the things I'm really passionate about in particular is working with communities of color and continuing to see that all of the knowledge and all of the things that I'm blessed with to learn and understand about politics and different structures, I can pass that on and use that to support communities of color to keep them going and really just do the work of people that look like me supporting them the best way I know how.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think that first of all, the ambition is great and the impact that you can have with that just seems boundless. So, I really appreciate you having that passion. I'm energized just listening to your journey. So, thank you for that. As we're closing out today and this inspiring women conversation, I just love to hear your words of advice for other younger aspiring women, just as they might think about their career journeys, just from what you've learned so far and how you think about what's next.

Joane Booth:

Yeah, I would say similar to what I mentioned earlier is finding folks that you can confide in and finding mentors that can help you. It has been such a great help to me to have folks that I can talk things through that I really trust and I know have my best interest in mind. And so, finding those folks that are really going to be in your corner through the good, the bad, whatever is really key and they're going to be transparent with you and not just tell you what you want to hear is so key because they're going to push you to be better. They're going to push you to do more. They're going to just always be encouraging you as well. And having a really good solid foundation of people around you is so key. Because again, those are going to be the people that when you're not in the room that are advocating for you and speaking up on your behalf.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that is just fantastic advice. We'll close out on that. This has been an excellent Inspiring Women conversation with this inspiring woman, Joane Booth. Joane, Thank you so much.

Joane Booth:

Thank you.

Laurie McGraw:

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