

Ep #38: My Mom and Leading by Example

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

I recorded my last podcast episode before Election Day 2024, and so we didn't know the results yet, and of course it came out after the election. I still think it's pretty perfect though, especially if you're feeling rocky, unsettled, grief, angry, any number of things about the election. So I recommend that you give it a listen.

Since the election, I've been thinking a lot about my Mom and her run for public office in 1982. I wrote about this in an email to my mailing list last week. And I've heard back from several people it was helpful. So let's give it a broader audience here on the podcast.

In 1982, my Mom decided to run for the Idaho State House of Representatives. She was the first woman from our half of the state to ever have attempted that, and her run for public office attracted a lot of attention.

She was a pro-choice democrat, running in a county that hadn't voted for a Democrat since John F. Kennedy. So we didn't think her chances of winning were very good, but the thinking was, “you need to stand up for what you believe in, even if you don't win. Even if you think you don't have a chance of winning, stand up and be heard. Set an example that it's possible.” And so she ran.

The State Republican Party, you know, as part of their campaigning, published a comic book that was about all of the candidates running in southeastern Idaho and the two or four pages that were devoted to my

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Mom, took her pro-choice Democrat stance, and, uh, labeled her a communist lesbian baby killer, which was a phrase that came back to me in the junior high lunchroom with food being thrown at me. And in letters to the editor, of course, and campaign signs were stolen. It was a fraught time.

It was tough to be 12 and have your mom run for public office like that. It was tough and it was fun. Our home was full of people, new people to me who just came out to support my mom's campaign.

And there would be Saturdays where we're all through the kitchen and the living room writing thank you notes to people who'd made campaign contributions, addressing postcards that were going to get mailed, folding brochures before we went out and walked the neighborhoods going door to door, talking to people about her campaign.

There was a lot of love and a lot of excitement and a lot of energy of possibility, and that was really something to see as a young person.

We were all pretty sure that she was going to lose, let me be clear. Progressives, just hadn't ever done very well in my county. And so, when she lost by just over 900 votes, instead of the 3,000 that I had been imagining, that really felt like a victory.

And sure enough, two years later, I think five other women in Idaho ran for public office. At the time, there were maybe two in the Idaho State House of Representatives, out of 70 possible seats.

And so, for the next season, for there to be five women running, that just felt like something broke through. That, too, felt like a victory. The setting an example panned out, right? Show what's possible.

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And now, today, in 2024, in the Idaho State House of Representatives, there are 24 women serving. There are a total of 70 seats, so it's still way less than half, but it's way more than two, and that, that feels like progress, in terms of how, how far we've come.

I remember about the same time, 1982, might've been 1980. I remember being school shopping with my mom at the Bon Marche, which was a department store that I think was later bought out by Macy's or maybe Dillard's. I'm not sure.

It was the first building in Idaho Falls to have an escalator going from the first to the second floor and so it felt like a fancy place to shop. Probably compared to how you could shop in New York on Fifth Avenue it was not a fancy place to shop, but it sure felt fancy with that escalator.

And I remember being out with her shopping and we're going to check out, you know, at the register. And my mom had a Bon Marche credit card in her own name, and this was a new thing.

Only since 1974 could women have credit cards in their own name. She had a Bon Marche card, and she presented that card to pay for our purchases, and the cashier called the manager, and the manager came over and said, "I need to call your husband at work to verify that it's okay that you make these purchases."

I don't remember if they actually called my dad at work or not. He was working at the National Engineering Laboratory, and I'm not really sure he had a phone number. It was a very secretive kind of place to work, so I don't even remember if we took the things home.

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I think we did. I kind of expect that my mom would have made a fuss because that was completely illegal, to call a woman's husband to make sure it's okay that she buys these things.

So I'm sorry that I don't remember how the story ended, but I think this story is valuable even up to that point to illustrate that we have made progress.

This scenario happening today in 2024 is utterly inconceivable. My own children have seen their whole lives how I have paid for things with cards and nobody has ever questioned my right to do that.

So, I tell you this story to show that we've made progress. Some things have changed. The needle has moved. It might not have, it definitely hasn't moved as much as we need it to, as we want it to, but it has moved.

And I've been sitting with that, with this story and all of that lived experience that I have in my own body since the national elections, and just really feeling how the road to equity, representation, equality is a long road, and we're, we're still in the middle, we're still on our way.

And as much as I, I think most of my life wanted to believe that we just had like maybe 2,000 more vertical feet to go. Maybe even a thousand more vertical feet to go if we're climbing a mountain, right?

I think most of my life, I felt like we were almost at the top and now I see that we're maybe a quarter of the way up Mount Kilimanjaro. There's a long way yet to go, but in no way do I believe that the fight is over. Because I've seen, I've lived through how far we've come.

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When I was watching Kamala's acceptance (*concession) speech, and she said, when we, reminded us, "when we fight, we win." I don't know if she said this, but I've been thinking a lot since then.

"When we fight, we win," doesn't mean that we get to decide how long the fight is. The fight takes as long as it takes. And we win because we don't give up.

So, if you're, angry, if you're sad, if you're nauseated, if you can't think about it, if you're watching puppy videos, if you're ready to move to a foreign country, if, whatever, all the feelings, all the circumstances, all that you may be going through right now, that's real, and that's true.

And I, I don't mean to posit some kind of false positivity. I just want you to know that from my lived experience, this feels like the middle. It feels like a hard middle, but it feels like a middle that we can manage, especially if we stick together.

How I'm managing right now, not surprising, is of course with singing. Singing is the one thing, well, not the one thing, singing is one thing that really helps me, uh, to regulate my breathing, to feel present in my body, to calm the F down, and to feel part of something larger than myself.

When I'm singing, I feel less alone. Even if I'm singing alone in my house, nobody else around. I don't feel alone because at the very least, at least one other person wrote the song that I'm singing.

I do make up songs, but I don't tend to remember them. They are things like, "Why do you drive like that?!" You know, that kind of thing. It doesn't go anywhere beyond that. It just keeps me from screaming obscenities in my car.

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In this email I sent to my list, I said that, “Singing doesn't fix anything. It just reminds me that I'm capable. If you're not a singer, taking a walk might do the same for you. Watching yourself conquer gravity one step at a time.”

And one of my former students wrote to me, right away, and said, “I would like to politely disagree with you on one thing you said, ‘Singing doesn't fix anything.’”

And he goes on, “I disagree because I have experienced far greater connection and energy when I hear the choirs sing at my church. It's so much more than simply entertainment, especially when the singers are clearly singing what they believe. Also, when I find myself down or on edge, I find that grabbing the guitar or playing some karaoke tracks allows me to focus my attention differently and raise my energetic vibration in a way that playing without singing cannot bring about for me.”

And he's absolutely right. When I said singing doesn't fix anything, I mean in the outside world. I mean, my singing doesn't change the circumstances of the nation as a whole, but it does bring me back to better, more centered, more focused self. And listening to the singing of other people does the same, too.

Eight years ago, after the 2016 election, I put together a collection, well, a list of songs, but also a collection of questions to help people maybe make it through Thanksgiving that year. That was a big concern – how are, how are we going to get through Thanksgiving dinner with people we disagree with?

And one of the things that volunteering at the San Francisco VA Hospital for a very long time, 16 years of visiting with veterans who are, in

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skilled nursing or, are in hospice or long term care there and having conversations about the music that has meant the most to them, the songs that they love, what brings them comfort, what brings them joy, what takes them back in their memory to a happier time.

I've learned so much about, I've learned so many songs, first of all, but I've learned so much about how many individual ways there are to overcome adversity, how many different ways there are to comfort yourself, how many stories there are in the world of joy, happiness, heroism, good memories.

It's just amazing to sit with someone for even five or 10 minutes and hear just a couple of stories from their life and how it intertwines with music. There's so much richness and depth there.

And most of us, we're never going to know even like a fraction of those stories. For one thing, there are a lot of people on the planet, which means there are a lot of stories, but I think also we're not in the habit of asking.

And so back in 2016, it seemed to me important to point out that you can have a conversation with another person about music, about songs that have touched them that goes straight to the heart of the matter, straight into their heart, straight into their lived experience, motivated by our sincere curiosity and desire to connect.

Maybe I should say motivated by my sincere curiosity and desire to connect with them. We don't have to agree about anything else. We don't have to agree about anything. Well, we have to agree to have the conversation. We have to agree to talk about music, to talk about what's important. But we don't have to agree about what's important.

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In this relationship, I'm coming in mostly as a very careful listener, and a skilled musician who can make music with them, can sing with them, can connect the dots between us.

So I still have that list. I think it's called Thanksgiving When We Disagree. Or maybe it's called Everyone's Life has a Soundtrack. Both are true. And I'll attach it in the show notes.

If you're feeling that singing might be good for you right now, it's a great list of songs that you have to know one of them. If you're just drawing a blank like, "I want to sing but I don't know what it's a good list. It's a list. Maybe it's a helpful list."

And then also a bunch of, conversation starters, questions to ask, ways to enter into a conversation with somebody maybe you're pretty sure you disagree with, or maybe you're worried about disagreeing, or maybe you just don't want to talk about politics. You just want to talk about something else.

This is a great way to get a family history, a kind of musical family history, and to hear stories that you might not hear otherwise. So again, that, PDF, whatever I call it, will be in the show notes.

Thanks so much for listening.

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