

“If I don’t say anything, nobody says anything!”

The Pledge Season 2 - Episode 3

Bethany: I learned really quickly that if I don't say anything, nobody says anything. There's so few people there that all of a sudden, you know, there's not diffusion of responsibility. Like, you have to stand up because if you're waiting for somebody else to say something, it might not happen.

Allison: This is The Pledge, a podcast profiling people who have pledged to engage in our Democracy. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman. On this episode you'll hear Bethany Letiecq's story.

Protest sounds

Allison: Bethany is one of many brave people shedding light on the consequences of hidden deals behind private gifts to public universities. Public universities like George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, where she's a professor.

Bethany: When I came to Virginia, I didn't know how *Kochified* the University was. I didn't understand the ways in which they could have bought themselves into the structure of the university to such an extent.

Allison: I don't know about you, but this issue of private money, or dark money, in our higher education system took me by surprise. I mean, I knew about the Koch Brothers pushing for a libertarian agenda in government, and I'm well aware of the Tea Party and the conservative, populist movement that grew out of it. But then I saw historian Nancy MacLean speak about her book, [Democracy in Chains](#). It was at that reading that I learned about the activism at GMU and Bethany's role in it. While dark money donors like Charles and David Koch claim to promote free speech, they also promote an agenda that explicitly attacks academic freedom.

Bethany: They are anti-public, they are anti-governance, they are anti-labor unions, they are anti-worker, they are anti-public education. They want states to divest in all public works.

Allison: Bethany got involved with the resistance in 2016.

Fox News: Controversy at George Mason University just across the Potomac from the U.S. Supreme Court. The GMU Faculty Senate saying it does not want to name their law school after the late conservative Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

Allison: Bethany believed that adopting the name of a controversial figure like Antonin Scalia should at least be based on some process involving the broader community. She was part of the Faculty Senate speaking out.

Bethany: I joined with students and faculty and community members who were concerned about that. We tried to push back. We tried to fight that renaming. And it was brutal.

Allison: It turned out, her group had very little power. The name change came with a 30 million dollar donation and was not up for discussion.

Bethany: I walked away going, "Man! It doesn't matter if you're a Democrat or a Republican." That was just too much money. It was too much money to pass up and everybody was on board, and I was shocked by that. I just was shocked.

Allison: So Bethany started to organize the faculty by revitalizing the GMU chapter of the American Association of University Professors: a national union for academics. Her group, along with the student group Transparent GMU, and a national organization called, UnKoch My Campus, sought to force transparency and draw attention to the implications of private influence in public universities.

Bethany: Democracy depends on an educated, liberated base. Democracy needs that, it feeds on that. If you destroy that base, then you can have these oligarchs control everything. And when they control everything, resources, when they control educational curricula, we serve at their pleasure. Which is not a democracy anymore.

Allison: Bethany and these other groups have had impact. It's been huge to have the outside help of UnKoch My Campus, which serves as a source of support, experience, and expertise. With lots of hard work and this help, GMU activists even got a case that went as far as the Virginia Supreme Court. Details about *that* in the next episode, and you won't want to miss it. But first, more about why Bethany is as fearless as she is.

Allison: It starts with her Grandmother. Bethany's mom's mom--a white woman who defied the norms of her time.

Bethany: She was a brave warrior who had a best friend who was an African-American woman. And at the time in her neighborhood, you were not to allow black people to enter through the front door of your home. And my grandmother said, absolutely not in my home. You will enter through the front door. I will show you as much respect and dignity as I would show anybody.

Allison: Bethany grew up with that story and she felt a deep connection to her Grandmother.

Bethany: When I was an adult, I fit into her wedding dress perfectly. It fit me like a glove. And I've always had I've always had this romantic connection with this woman who I never met.

Allison: But her Grandmother died too soon.

Bethany: She was this powerful, caring woman, this glue of the family, and when she died, the family really was just absolutely shattered, and still in recovery, I would say.

Allison: Bethany's mom was only 16. Her mom ended up leaving her shattered home relatively young and got married early. Her husband, Bethany's father, was an alcoholic. Bethany was 16 when her father took her on a business trip to Hawaii.

Bethany: I was really excited about it until we got on the plane and he put back probably a fifth a Jack Daniels. And I realized like, oh, he's not taking me to Hawaii, I'm taking him.

Allison: When they landed, things got worse. He took her to a bar where she got a lot of attention from a group of older men.

Bethany: These guys got me drunk and and then took me back to their hotel and one of them raped me. And I'd never even, I'd never even kissed a boy at that point in my life.

Allison: Bethany tells me how that young girl got herself back to her hotel, in a totally strange city, and then, keyless, slept outside her room, in the hall, until the housekeeper could let her in. It's really hard for me to imagine.

Bethany: I remember getting him back on the plane and getting home to Rhode Island. I never told a soul what had happened.

Allison: These days, Bethany is a professor of Human Development and Family Science at GMU. Her area of research grew directly out of her experiences of being forced to survive with little support. Her work exposes laws that marginalize people.

Bethany: People have to begin to understand that laws, policies, and practices have been put in place to marginalize people. For the purpose, the intentional goal has been to marginalize people. So that they can not exercise their rights, so that they can not engage. I document that in my work.

Allison: Bethany understands how important it is to listen to people who are struggling and to use her power to help.

Bethany: I can connect to suffering because I've suffered myself. And I think that's a part of that collective will, that holding of each other that allows for us to move through challenge, and together be better for it to be stronger, to be stronger together.

Allison: Bethany sees activism and community engagement as an elixir for suffering. Activism helps to refocus and reframe your situation and to build community with people who are also struggling. But it took a lot of work for her to get to this place of strength.

Allison: After the trip to Hawaii, finishing high school was really hard.

Bethany: I look back now and realize I don't know how I got through it.

Allison: She thinks her curiosity and love of learning saved her in the end. She knew she was unhappy, but she pursued her education.

Bethany: And I got my PhD, and you're supposed to get your doctorate and, you know, have a plan. And I went on the market, I actually got a job offer at a great university, and I was like, I'm not going.

Allison: Bethany needed space to figure stuff out. So she ended up travelling and found what she needed to move on.

Bethany: At one point I ended up in the Swiss Alps. and it was there that I think I had, sort of, I'm not a very religious person, but I sort of had my spiritual epiphany or an awakening that that I could leave my suffering to the mountains and let them hold it. Let them, let the mountains hold it.

Allison: Once she found a new kind of peace in the mountains and through her travels, she was ready to start her academic career. The political activism followed. She ended up at the University of Montana. Life was different out there.

Bethany: I learned really quickly that if I don't say anything, nobody says anything. There's so few people there that all of a sudden, there's, you know, there's not diffusion of responsibility.

Allison: Bethany tells me that it was in Montana that she actually got an appreciation for the Libertarian perspective of *live and let live*. She stresses to me that the perspective often connected to a deep sense of caring about each other's welfare.

Bethany: And I think in rural spaces people understand that you can't just drive by a stranded car, on the side of the road because that could mean somebody dies.

Allison: But the libertarian ethos was fertile ground for the Tea Party and it was Bethany's first exposure to the Koch Brothers. She watched as Koch funded Citizens United and their ground game, Americans for Prosperity, moved into the state and influenced elections. In other words, untraceable corporate money was behind the elected officials.

Bethany: And all of a sudden there's dark money coming into school board races in Montana.

Allison: The whole thing was a wakeup call for Bethany. She decided she had to run for the state legislature to push back against this new agenda.

Bethany: My daughter was just born, and I was looking for something else to do, apparently!

Allison: She wanted to push for more accountability and protection of women's rights, reproductive justice, and marriage equality. A bold move in a conservative state. And, she wanted something else too.

Bethany: I wanted to be the first woman with an infant elected to the Montana legislature. But when I ran, so many people were like, you're being an irresponsible mother, you should be taking care of the baby, not running for office. And I was like running for office is exactly what I should be doing for the welfare of my daughter, thank you very much.

Allison: She lost that election but she didn't regret the effort.

Bethany: You need that agitation on the edges to keep reminding you what are your base values, you know, and what should you not be compromising on.

Allison: In 2013, Bethany got the job offer from GMU, and as a single mom, she was eager to be closer to her family in Rhode Island. But when Bethany arrived at her new job, she was surprised to learn just how pervasive the Koch Brother influence was on campus.

Bethany: I had no idea that that was happening at public universities.

Allison: It's happening in over 300 universities. But GMU was one of the first. It also was the one of the first to have faculty and students fight back. But fighting back is really complicated. The Kochs give a lot of much-needed cash to colleges and universities, and they say they support free speech and a diversity of ideas. They write gift agreements with universities that start with an emphasis on the importance of independence in higher education.

Allison: Bethany explains that you need to look a little deeper to see how the giving actually leads universities to be increasingly dependent on the private money and vulnerable to the power and control than comes with it. I ask Bethany to give me an example of how the influence plays out in a destructive way. She explains to me that the Koch funded Mercatus Center at GMU takes credit for the recent tax reform. The reform cuts corporate taxes permanently but individual taxes only temporarily.

Bethany: We're eating ourselves from within. It makes absolutely no sense that our university administration would support the Mercatus Center and give it a home on our campus when that center is advocating for anti-tax reforms that are going to further deplete our coffers. How does that make any sense at all?

Bethany: I guess you have a choice. You can either be worried and do nothing, or you can join with, and be inspired, and latch on to hope and then do your part to actualize justice. And I say get out there and do your part.

Allison: In our next episode, you will meet Janinie Gaspari, a former GMU student activist who worked with Bethany to make incredible progress in this very tough battle.

Janine: I'm so grateful to have had the experience and to have met all the people that I met in the process and to see the change that has come out of it already.

Allison: Be sure to listen! You will see how good it feels for a young person to experience her work actually having impact.

Allison: If you like what you hear on The Pledge, please subscribe, share and review this podcast. Those stars and comments mean so much and they help others find us. Finally, if you haven't made a donation to our project, please consider going to thepledgepodcast.com and click on the donate button. I will be VERY grateful.

Allison: Thanks so much to Bethany for taking the time to speak with me and share her story and knowledge about these issues. I've learned so much. If you want to learn more about Transparent GMU and the threats posed by dark money, go to thepledgepodast.com and check out the show notes. There are lots of links to fabulous resources and some book recommendations.

Thanks also to my team:

Sound design from Tina Tobey Mack;

Tech and editing support from Ezra Hausman;

Graphic Design from Patricia Nieshoff;

And last, but far from least, thanks to all of you who listen, share and have sent in donations to keep this podcast going.

Until next time, Stay Strong and Stick with your pledge.

###