

Persevere with Dignity and Grace

The Pledge Season 3 - Episode 6

Laura: They just don't know that there's an election. They don't they don't know what's on the ballot. They don't know what the positions of the people who are on the ballot are or how voting is going to impact their day to day lives.

Allison: That's Laura Misumi, a fourth-generation Japanese American and an organizer in Michigan. Laura is the Executive Director of a new organization called Rising Voices for Asian American Families

Laura: There's a significant percentage of Asian-Americans who never get reached out to by any party, any organization, about civic engagement and about voting. And so for us, we see our goal for the November election is simply to just increase voter participation and to increase people's knowledge and information going into the voting booth.

Allison: This is The Pledge. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman.

Break

Allison: Rising Voices for Asian American Families launched in May 2019 to make sure Asian Americans, who are the fastest growing population in Michigan, could make their voices heard.

Laura: And so continuing to engage women and Asian-Americans who may not otherwise be engaged. Seeing the voting booth as being just one of the tools in the toolbox to effect change. And one of our multiple strategies for power.

Allison: I met with Laura over the computer because of Covid. And virtual interviews can make it harder to get to know people, but even over video, I couldn't miss her tattoos.

Laura: Oh, yes, I have a lot of tattoos.

Allison: So I asked her about them.

Laura: I have a *shamoji*, which is like a Japanese rice scoop that my dad drew that was actually my grandmother's. This is a tattoo of my mom's handwriting. It says Gamon,

which is a Japanese word that essentially means to persevere with dignity and grace, and is a phrase that a lot of Japanese American folks throughout the incarceration experience really used as kind of a way to kind of steel yourself. All of my family that was in the United States at the time was incarcerated during World War Two from Berkeley and San Francisco and all up and down California.

Allison: So Laura keeps her family's history and her Japanese American roots very close. She is also following a tradition of her parents' political activism.

Laura: They were communists. And that's how they met.

Allison: Laura's parents met in the early seventies in San Francisco. They were protesting the building of a highway that would displace homes and businesses, right through Japantown and the Fillmore district--at the time a predominantly Black community. Both of her parents were members of a collection of communist groups called The League of Revolutionary Struggles.

Laura: It was a very political marriage and relationship, for sure, based on shared values and a shared vision of what the world should be.

Allison: Raising Laura to be an activist was central to that vision.

Laura: They always had an emphasis on me knowing my history and where our family came from and what we went through. But then also not seeing the incarceration of Japanese Americans as kind of an isolated blip, as it's often referred to, like, "it was a mistake!" You know, like this, kind of, singular stain on the United States civil liberties record. But rather it is part and parcel for what the United States is and how it was founded and created on the backs of slavery and genocide of indigenous people, and that the work that we were doing as Asian Americans within our community had to always be in solidarity and in coalition with other communities of color.

Allison: For me, radical Japanese American activism is a fresh discovery, something I've never heard about. Laura tells me that family vacations were trips to the south to learn about civil rights in American history or to the Southwest to learn about the displacement of indigenous people.

Laura: These were really important family moments, of course, you know, every family wants to take vacations together and spend time. But really, kind of putting that in the context of what it means to be an American.

Allison: Once at college at the University of Michigan, Laura began to forge a politics of her own. She took a class on organizing with a legendary professor. And she told me about a class project that involved organizing at the soup kitchen in Detroit.

Laura: The goal was to have student volunteers who would be able, by dint of their familiarity with bureaucracy and also their privilege and power, be able to kind of assist folks who went to the soup kitchen in getting their IDs or birth certificates as kind of like the first step in being able to either secure employment or get benefits.

Allison: This assistance opened the door for organizing, how they could make their community better, and voting.

Laura: One way to kind of talk to folks and help them with some immediate need and then be able to build up the conversation about organizing, and what does it mean to organize as someone who is homeless or housing insecure.

Allison: The approach resonated with the students, and Laura tells me that many of them continue to organize in this way today.

Laura: Because we know that when we engage people based on their own self-interest in the issues that they feel strongly about personally, they're more likely to vote. It's not just a blanket, "Voting is important. Do your civic duty and vote." It's like, well, you care about housing. So do we. We know that X, Y and Z on the ballot is going to have an impact on this issue that you care about. And so that's why you should come to our meeting. And that's also why you should vote.

Allison: After Laura graduated she started to explore organizing in various parts of the country. She told me about one challenging experience working for AmeriCorps in Lowell, Massachusetts. This was not far from where Laura grew up, in Lexington, but she was unprepared for what she found.

Laura: It kind of felt like being thrown in the deep end of the pool in a lot of ways. I think the work itself was challenging because the mission of the organization was really to work with the most marginalized and gang-involved and truant youth. And, you know, I'm a little middle class girl from Lexington, Massachusetts, like I'm not from Lowell. So, you know, in terms of who's the best messenger or who's best equipped to work with this population? It was not me.

Allison: But she didn't give up.

Laura: Being able to be authentically myself and being honest about that, like I was still able, you know, to build relationships with young people and do my job. It just was, you know, it was challenging.

Allison: Laura ended up going to law school. She intended to become a labor lawyer.

Laura: Thinking that, you know, the left needs more lawyers on our side, and, that, like, throughout my experience doing different types of organizing I had felt really strongly that the labor movement was a way in which people's day to day economic and material condition can be improved, pretty drastically, and fairly quickly, by forming a union and by getting a contract.

Allison: So she became a lawyer... for a while.

Laura: I kind of say, I am a recovering attorney.

Allison: As it turns out, the pull of organizing remained strong. When she and her partner moved to Detroit, Laura connected with a fellow University of Michigan alum, Branden Snyder, the Executive Director of Detroit Action, the organization you heard about in our last episode. As Laura was figuring out her next step, she and Branden met over coffee.

Branden: I was in need of an operations manager, someone who could really hold the backend of the organization. And also had these really big ideas of how we could grow our organization, how we could prepare for 2020, this moment now. And she seemed like a really good fit for it. And, you know, we gave it a shot.

Allison: And in fact, she was a great fit.

Branden: The energy that she brings to the room and she brings to organizing is, like, disciplined and progressive and fierce, but it's also really tender. You know, it's always from a place, like, protection and tenderness, and, like, wanting to make sure that the organization is both accountable to the community and to ourselves.

Allison: Her work at Detroit Action led to getting involved with Rising Voices for Asian American Families. In 2019, Michigan State Senator Stephanie Chang asked Laura to join the board and ultimately to serve as their first Executive Director. Laura and

Branden figured out a way for her to do both jobs. The position allowed her to tackle a question she'd been thinking about for a long time.

Laura: What are ways that we can rethink organizing tactics, for Asian-American women in particular, that acknowledge some of the specific cultural barriers that might exist for their participation?

Allison: Barriers like language, poverty, and just being and feeling different from the dominant culture. Rising Voices collaborates with a few other organizations--including Detroit Action--and has identified 183,000 Asian American voters who are typically not reached by campaigns. This is just over half of the 370,000 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the state. Laura introduced me to one of her canvassers.

Munni: So my name is Munni Rachman, it's actually pronounced mu-ny.

Allison: Munni is a Bangladeshi American, and a stay-at-home Mom with three kids between the ages of 4 and 9.

Munni: After having my children while I was in college, I just kind of got taken into the whole motherhood moment. Right? And I was yearning to somehow get back out there to do work with my community.

Allison: She hadn't seen herself as an organizer, but she went to a potluck dinner sponsored by Rising Voices for Asian American Families and loved the community. Then, a canvassing job opened up.

Munni: And, at first I was a bit hesitant. I was like, how am I going to do this? You know, with three kids? But then that other part of me was like, no, you have to do this for yourself because, you know, it's been too long. I took a leap of faith and I went for it.

Allison: Munni explained how she connects with people on a personal level by honoring their cultural traditions.

Munni: You know, if it's a Bangali person and I see that they're Muslims, I'll be like a *salaam aleikum*. And, you know, and as soon as I say my name is Munni, you know, and like, how are you? And and I say, all this, in Bangla and automatically I got them. They're not hanging up on me, you know, they're not hanging up. And then next thing you know, they're trying to figure out who my dad is or my husband is, you know? "Oh! You live such and such..."

Allison: For Munni, she feels so good about getting out important information.

Munni: You have that connection and you're able to provide vital information to them that they need, that they can benefit from. That we can all benefit from that.

Allison: She loves talking to people.

Munni: And it's just been such an amazing, amazing experience. Just each person that you're able to connect with, you know, and they're always like, oh, thank you so much for doing this. Thank you so much for reaching out.

Allison: Laura says that Munni is now one of 9 canvassers and, because of the election, they keep expanding, so they actually reach those thousands of Asian American voters that most campaigns ignore. And just as Laura learned in college, building community to build political power is central to their approach. Their outreach is not just about getting out the vote. It's about bringing people together over shared interests, despite the diversity of a community.

Laura: How do we create more space and opportunity for moms from different backgrounds to talk to one another and find their commonalities and find the ways that they want to stand in solidarity.

Allison: Munni marvels at all the different people she's met.

Munni: Bengalis, you had Pakistanis, you had Indians, you had Muong.

Allison: Rising Voices regularly brings women together for activities but it's not just about the activity.

Laura: Yes, this is a fun activity, but we're also engaging in pretty serious conversation about what our values are and how we want the world to be, and then looking to then translate that to make sure that people are registered to vote. And you know that we have a conversation about turning people out.

Allison: Munni tells me about a project she loved that involved growing okra.

Munni: We actually grew okra in the backyard. My kids planted them. They were big fat okra, And, I was like, Wow! And I love okras. So rising voices just doesn't is not just making calls and it's just not making, you know, text voices. But they're connecting us.

Allison: As Laura said, using lots of tools in the toolbox to bring people together to build political power.

Laura: What's important for you to see in your community that you don't see right now and then connecting that to what it means to be engaged in this election and to vote.

Allison: Branden told me their work has the potential to influence the whole country.

Branden: Asian Americans make up the difference. That is the voting block that is key to winning Oakland County.

Allison: Oakland is a suburban county northwest of Detroit with 1.2 million people. It's a big, populous, swing county in a swing state. So they're not just planting okra. They're planting seeds that can make a big difference for their community - and the country.

Branden: The work that she does isn't just a novelty. It's about actually building, like, long term power and building a long term infrastructure for civic engagement.

Laura: That's our dream and that's what we'll continue to do after the election.

Allison: Next time is our last episode for Season 3, we're heading south again, to Louisiana. There's an amendment on their November ballot that will deny abortion rights in their state constitution. Katrina Rogers is the campaign manager to get people to vote no.

Katrina: This is a critical moment and it is obvious that things are shifting. And more than ever, it is our responsibility to not just bear witness to what's happening, but be a part of what the shift looks like.

Allison: Thanks so much to Laura, Branden and Munni. You are all doing such important work and I'm grateful that you took time to share with me and all the Pledge listeners. I am grateful to my team. Thank you Jeb Sharp, Tina Tobey Mack; Ezra Hausman, Hedrick Smith, Multitude Productions and Patricia Nieshoff. Thanks to the Ford Foundation for partially supporting this season. And thanks to you for listening! Until next time, stay strong, stick with your pledge and VOTE.

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