

“What the Heck? How is this Not a Thing?”

The Pledge Season 2 - Episode 1

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Music

Allison: Welcome to Season 2 of The Pledge, a podcast profiling people who have pledged to engage in our Democracy. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman. This season, I'm in Virginia.

Protesters chant "equality in the constitution."

Allison: It's a state with such an influential history--both good and bad. Over the next several episodes I want to share stories that reveal the ways that Virginia and Virginians are leading us all to a stronger place.

Music

Allison: And what about you? Do you participate in our democracy? Do you want to do more? Tweet about your efforts with hashtag #pledge2020. Help spread the word that our democracy is strong.

In this episode I'm looking at the fight to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to our U.S. constitution. As it turns out, Virginia might be the last, crucial state needed to make that happen.

Woodruff: It was almost 100 years ago in 1923 that Alice Paul, a leader of the Women's Suffrage Movement, first introduced to the public an idea of what would eventually become the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. The rising voices of women, the passage of civil rights laws, and the power of organized labor all helped to build momentum in the 70s when it passed congress.

Allison: Full disclosure, this particular amendment, the Equal Rights Amendment or ERA, means a lot to me. I mean, I think it means a lot for most women and I have three

daughters, lots of awesome nieces and many young friends just beginning their careers. To put it simply, we deserve to be recognized as full citizens. But also, the very first time I canvassed was for the ERA. It was 1982, I was in Ft. Lauderdale, hoping to get *Florida* to ratify. Back then, we still needed *three* more states to get a constitutional amendment. I'm afraid Florida still hasn't happened. But in the past few years, Illinois and Nevada have ratified, so that leaves just one more state to go and that state could very well be Virginia.

Allison: I, for one, have to say, It's really about time. I still remember when the energy just fizzled out.

Woodruff: ...as state legislatures faced ratification votes, the ERA ran out of steam and hit a wall....

Allison: I thought that was it. No ERA, ever. So what does the Equal Rights Amendment actually say?

Lisa: *Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.* So all we're saying is we should prohibit sex discrimination of any kind. That goes for men and for women and everything in between.

Allison: This is Lisa Sales, one of the leaders in VA Ratify ERA, a statewide, grassroots, nonpartisan campaign with the sole mission:

Lisa: To get the Equal Rights Amendment ratified in Virginia and make Virginia the thirty-eighth and final state, so that we can have the equal rights amendment enshrined in our Constitution, finally!

Allison: Many people actually think we *have* equal rights because we did pass the 19th amendment almost 100 year ago.

Lisa: One hundred years of of voting and we still don't have equal rights. We have voting rights, but not equal rights.

Allison: Even Lisa, just a few years ago, didn't realize we don't have equal rights protected in the constitution. She grew up in California, and California ratified the ERA a long time ago. A few years ago she was back in L.A. She was at a women's rights conference when she heard a speaker read the list of states that hadn't ratified. Virginia was last.

Lisa: I buried my head in my hands, in my own home state that had ratified when I was a baby. Only to learn that I live in a state that hadn't.

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Allison: I meet Lisa in a library in Fairfax Virginia. She's a tall woman with the kind of long blond hair I would dream about as a child. It surprises me that she walks with a slight limp.

Lisa: I've had three surgeries. I have other injuries as a result and dare I say, you know, post-traumatic stress.

Allison: As you'll hear, what happened to Lisa was terrible, but it's also fundamental to understanding where her activism comes from. And I do want to warn you that it involves sexual assault. She's just starting to talk about it in public.

Lisa: I did my first real public telling of my story in front of the Capitol building in Richmond on Valentine's Day this year.

Rally Intro: And our next speaker, Miss Lisa Sales is going to come and speak with us all about her support for the ERA, why equality matters, and she's also going to share with us a story of her own. Miss Lisa Sales. Can everyone make some noise and welcome Miss Lisa Sales!

Lisa: And I was there to talk about the Equal Rights Amendment, but I was there to tell a little bit of my story and what brought me to the fight.

Lisa at Rally: In September of 2011 I was sexually assaulted...

Allison: Lisa tells me the story. It happened eight year ago. Her attacker was renting an apartment in her house.

Lisa: And my tenant wasn't there but for about six or seven weeks before he got extremely drunk came upstairs to my master bedroom. Where he resided was in a basement apartment in my home, so he had to come up three flights of stairs, and on September 17th of 2011 he came barreling through the double doors of my master bedroom, and he threw me to the ground.

Allison: She fought back.

Lisa: So for four or five hours, I tried to get away from this man and fought him off in my own master bedroom, crawling away from him on my knees, him pulling me down, him sitting on me screaming he's going to "f" me for a bit.

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Lisa: It changed me forever.

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Allison: In Lisa's telling, it's not just the attack that changed her. It was also a series of events just prior to the attack. She had started a business with her then boyfriend – investing time, money and expertise – only to have him walk out on her, taking the business with him. She was left with almost nothing. That's why she took a tenant into her house in the first place. She needed money.

Lisa: And I thought I'll just do this for six months, it will be temporary. In the meantime I had started a new job.

Allison: Then came the attack. The perpetrator was arrested and convicted. But the legal proceedings were traumatic and endless. In the end all that suffering gave Lisa a new understanding of the prevalence of violence against women and a determination to address it politically.

Lisa: I don't think I realized the impact violence would have on me. And I think that if you're a white, privileged woman who's never had to fight for anything, that's never had to worry about a dollar in her pocket, that's never had to worry about a roof over her head. And that has never experienced violence, you're not going to get it. But if you have fought and struggled and been paid less than a man, if you've been sexually harassed or if you've been beaten, if you've almost lost your life to domestic violence or you've been sexually assaulted, it changes your outlook on life.

I have to think that everything I've been through, the violence, and the abuse, that there's a reason. I know that sounds funny, but there's a reason that I experienced those things, and that's propelled me here, so that I can be a voice, so that I can get my confidence back and help other people so that they don't have to go through what I went through.

Allison: So Lisa got involved with local and state efforts to protect women against male violence as part of her healing process. Once her eyes were opened, she saw a need for action everywhere.

Lisa became the Board Chairman for the Fairfax County Commission for Women, a group that advises the Board of Supervisors on ways to promote full equality for women and girls in the County. It's part of a national group of over 300 state and local commissions. That's what got her to that conference in Los Angeles to discover that Virginia hadn't ratified the ERA. And now, she's working with people all over the state, including young people in Fairfax, who are also shocked to learn that there aren't equal rights on the basis of sex.

Rosie: What the heck? How is this not a thing? And I'm not hearing about it and that an even bigger issue. That people don't know it's a thing is an even bigger issue than it not being a thing.

Allison: That's Rosie Cator. She's 15.

Rosie: I'm the Executive Director of Generation Ratify. And I'm here to make the Equal Rights Amendment as inclusive as possible and that includes adding youth into the fight, make our legislators hear our voices because we matter too.

Allison: It's the day after I spoke with Lisa. Rosie and about 40 other teens have gathered in a library in Arlington, Virginia on a Sunday afternoon. They learn about the ERA from Lisa and Ilene Davis, an ERA advocate for the past 40 years. Here's Ilene.

Ilene: I mean I'm 65 years old. I've been fighting for this for years...The cake is baked for me. What we're fighting for is going to affect them. And they know that. The energy that's coming from the bottom up... The people in power will have to listen to their voices.

Allison: And it's not just women fighting for the ERA in Virginia

Delegate Lopez: We are in a sprint of raising money, door knocking, getting the message out.

Allison: That's Virginia Delegate Alfonso Lopez.

Delegate Lopez: First Latino Democrat ever elected in 400 years to the Virginia House of Delegates.

Allison: It was Delegate Lopez who introduced the constitutional amendment to the Virginia General Assembly three years ago. Passing the ERA is personal for him too.

Delegate Lopez: The first political memory I have as a person was when my Mom carried me on her back at an ERA rally in front of the White House in 1974.

Allison: Sadly, his mom passed away before he was elected. Perhaps this makes him fight even harder to get Virginia to ratify the ERA. And last year, it appeared that they actually had enough votes to ratify. But the Republicans wouldn't bring the bill to the floor even though there is a lot of Republican support. Democrats made a motion to get it on the floor, but they lost by just one vote.

After that experience, it's clear that the only way for Virginia to pass it, is for Democrats to get the majority back. And that's why so many people are working day and night for the November 2019 election where Virginians will vote in an entire new General Assembly.

Lisa: And I think what's important for people to hear is that this isn't a Virginia thing. If Virginia ratifies, she ratifies for all of America. That's 162 million women and girls potentially impacted.

Allison: There will be a couple of remaining hurdles for the ERA to overcome, even if Virginia ratifies. First, Congress would have to repeal its original 1982 deadline for state ratification--efforts for this are already underway. Second, around five states have since voted to rescind their ratifications. But the constitution doesn't give states power to rescind, just to ratify. Still--it could be a court battle.

Lisa sums up why ERA could make a real difference.

Lisa: Laws can be rolled back. Repealed at any time with the stroke of a pen, at the whim of a legislator, by executive order. We see what this president is doing today. ERA would give existing laws teeth. And when it's a constitutional amendment, when it's something that's enshrined in our nation's most fundamental document, there's nothing stronger, right? There's nothing more revered than are our American constitution.

Allison: She says it's time for Virginia to come through.

Lisa: Virginia has been on the wrong side of history too many times, when it comes to interracial marriage, when it comes to slavery, when it comes to voting rights. It's now time for Virginia to be that final and 38 state and make positive history. I think enough of the nation has heard what's wrong with Virginia. It's time for Virginia to do the right thing.

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Allison: Lisa's experiences left her with only two choices--give up or fight. Now she's working every angle of the system--from local law enforcement to state ratification of the ERA to help stop violence and discrimination against women.

It's not easy to get involved but making a Pledge can help motivate you to get out there. So share your pledge. Tweet about it with #pledge2020. Let's get hundreds--dare I say thousands?--out there.

In my next episode, we see people confronting, head on, the frightening reality of the climate crisis.

Kim: The fate of humanity is counting on it, so it must get done. The alternative is just too devastating to imagine.

Allison: The crisis for many in Virginia isn't in the future, it's now. And there are people in Virginia that show what we can do about it.

Thanks so much to Lisa Sales, and her tireless effort on behalf of the women in Virginia and our country and for having the courage to share her story. Thanks also to Rosie Cator, and her team, and Delegate Alfonso Lopez for speaking with me. For more information about the ERA and VA Ratify ERA, go to my website, thepledgepodcast.com and look at the show notes and transcript. You'll find links to lots of resources and ways to help Lisa's group.

Thanks also to Sound designer Tina Tobey Mack

Until next time, stay strong and stick with your pledge.