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THE BIRTH OF AN ACTIVIST

How a Massachusetts Native Found Her Political Voice

Why would a Massachusetts resident champion a Democrat running for office in Alabama?

For Allison Daskal Hausman, it was a way to express her nascent political activism in a state where blue candidates seldom win. But Doug Jones’s race for Senate in 2017—and ultimate win against Roy Moore—shattered the notion that only Republicans can win in Alabama.

It was, in fact, because of Jones’s success that Hausman ventured into Alabama to record the first season of *The Pledge*, a podcast that features people from diverse backgrounds who’ve made the leap to civic and political engagement. It’s called “*The Pledge*” because activism involves a commitment—a pledge—to take risks, work hard, and fight.

Hausman wanted to interview women doing incredible things to support and

spark change in their local Alabama communities. *“It was like, all this energy went into Alabama to make something that nobody thought would happen, happen. And that, to me, was an amazing story of people who really cared and were getting involved. I was interested in that story,”* said Hausman.

While she was fired up to learn everything she could about the grassroots organizations that propelled Jones to his victory, she quickly realized that Alabama wasn’t transformed by his win. *“I think I had this false expectation that this election was evidence of a completely new Alabama. I went down there with rose-colored glasses on,”* Hausman admitted. *“There’s change, and people who are fighting really steep, uphill battles. But it’s a state that’s been going in one direction for a really long time, and there are a lot of powerful forces [in Alabama]. I was taken with the determination and the courage of people there,”* she continued.

The ‘political activism bug’ bit Hausman during that trip. The more women she talked with, the more she had to admit that her only political engagement began and ended at the voting booth. Women who were pushing against established norms and fighting for what they believed in surrounded her in Alabama. *“When you talk to people about democracy and their roles as citizens and have conversations that are deeper than ‘How’s the weather?’ you get an appreciation for the various ways people walk in this country. You have a new kind of empathy and understanding*



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DOLLY PARTON'S AMERICA

Something everyone still seems to agree on is Dolly Parton—but why? That question leads to a deeply personal, historical, and musical rethinking of one of America’s icons.

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of whatever, whoever they are,” Hausman said.

Which brings this story back to Hausman’s support for Tabitha Eisner, a Democrat running for an Alabama state congressional seat. Inspired to canvas and organize for Eisner in Massachusetts, Hausman believed her candidate had a good shot at winning, even though some of her neighbors were supporting candidates with higher odds of success. It was Eisner’s perceived lack of electability that caused Hausman to run afoul of a neighbor who complained about the efforts Hausman was putting into a race that wasn’t as winnable as others.

“She questioned that use of not only my time, but also of other people’s time, and [our efforts in] raising money—like those resources shouldn’t go to Alabama,” Hausman said with a hint of frustration. “That was problematic to me. I had been in Alabama. I saw how abandoned these people, who were fighting so hard, felt from the rest of the country, including the national Democratic Party. Democracy requires people fighting back. If you’re not going to fight back, then democracy is dead. I felt that it was an important use of resources.”

In the end, Hausman’s candidate lost, but that didn’t diminish her newfound political activism or dampen her desire to highlight how women are stepping up and making their voices heard.

For Season 2 of *The Pledge*, Hausman turned her attention to Virginia, which

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was dealing with possible ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), ‘dark’ money donations to public universities, the continuing aftermath of the Charlottesville riots of 2017, and other charged issues.

Virginia, poised to become the thirty-eighth and final state needed to ratify the ERA (even though the deadline for ratification expired in the 1980s), did so in January 2020. *“These women who’ve been*

★ THE ★ PLEDGE



High school students formed Generation Ratify to champion the ERA's ratification in Virginia. (left to right) Anabelle Lombard, Podcaster Allison Daskal Hausman, Belan Yeshigeta, Yasmina Mansour, and Rosie Couture

working [for ratification] were like, ‘We want to be the thirty-eighth state!’” Hausman said.

Sometimes, Hausman is surprised by what she discovers as she researches ideas for her podcast. A lecture by the author of the book *Democracy in Chains* introduced her to the influence that ‘big’ money, (also called ‘dark’ money) donors have on public college campuses today. Universities need the money, but as they increasingly rely on these large gifts, their independence slowly cedes to the donor class. And, “While dark money donors like Charles and David Koch claim to promote free speech, they also promote an agenda that explicitly attacks academic freedom,” Hausman states. One of *The Pledge’s* episodes features George Mason University professor Bethany Letiecq, and her efforts on the front lines of the resistance against dark money.

In late 2019, Hausman went to Charlottesville to see how the city was faring after the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally riot. The effects of that day are “still alive and raw in this community,” she reports. This particular

episode focused on three activists: Kathryn (white), her daughter, Althea (mixed race), and Katrina (black). Katrina and her son were at the rally to protest when her son was nearly hit by the car that killed Heather Heyer, a Charlottesville native also protesting the hate rally. “I might not have gotten hit by that car, but I see it every day,” said Katrina, whose story illustrates the anger, frustration, and determination still felt by many affected by the tragedy. Today, each woman continues to evolve and fight for social justice in her own way.

Hausman, once politically disengaged, has found new life and energy in producing *The Pledge*. Her goal is to give a voice to those supporting democracy, whether liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat. “I think everybody’s realizing the importance of using their voice, and that’s part of what our country is all about. That gives me great hope.” 🗣️



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