

Now Is The Moment

The Pledge Season 3 - Episode 7

Katrina: This is the moment in our lifetime to be able to shift things and not become disillusioned to the point where we give up and also not to pretend like somehow things are magically going to become what they need to be.

Allison: That's Katrina Rogers. She's the campaign manager for Louisiana for Personal Freedoms. She's fighting to block an amendment on the November ballot that seeks to change the Louisiana constitution. The amendment would permanently take away the right to have an abortion or to provide state funding for abortions.

Katrina: There are people who will be inconvenienced and then there's some people whose lives will be devastated and they will be criminalized. They will go to prison, they will die.

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

BREAK

Allison: Full disclosure--I've known Katrina for over a year. She's a communications specialist and she's been a consultant to the Pledge. Her role in this episode is kind of a surprise to both of us.

Katrina: It's so interesting, I was like, oh, my gosh, I never crossed my mind that I would actually be on this end of the show! So... (laughs)

Allison: But when I learned about this campaign to take away abortion rights in Louisiana's constitution, it became clear that this was the story I needed to tell to complete Season Three. It's about voting and the 2020 election. It's also about our rights and a citizens campaign to prevent people from losing those rights. Katrina is spearheading that campaign, working to get out the vote and engaging in conversations across the state.

Katrina: I am an organizer first and foremost, and I believe in relationships. I believe in people power. And we're talking to people across the state. We're talking about Amendment

One and how it impacts people and what it will lead to. People get stuck on their personal feelings about abortion, which you have the right to do, but it doesn't serve any of us to pretend like this is where it stops, with us losing rights.

Allison: Katrina started as communications consultant with no notion of becoming the campaign manager. She was just volunteering.

Katrina: I was just doing what I could for an issue that was really important to me.

Allison: After Katrina spoke at a rally about the amendment, she was invited to a coalition meeting in Baton Rouge. At the meeting her instinct as an organizer kicked in.

Katrina: It was at the African-American student center and I was the very last person to speak. And in earnest, I said that what I wanted to get out of this meeting is understanding how they thought that they were going to win a statewide campaign when the room looked the way that it did. And at that moment, I was the only black person and only black woman, in the room.

Allison: Katrina knew that a statewide campaign required bringing in black and brown communities.

Katrina: Louisiana is second when it comes to African-American population right behind Mississippi. We're around 34 percent black. And just wanted to be very clear how this room full of white people, specifically white women, thought that they were going to win a campaign and they're not even in conversation with black people.

Allison: I'm taken aback that she was the only black woman in the room. It was clear that she needed to stay involved.

Katrina: I don't even think of these things as opportunities, but responsibilities. And my commitment is to the people who I'm very clear will be heavily impacted by this amendment, and also all of the other terrible things that are happening in the state right now.

Allison: So she kept showing up. She helped them with external communications, she was on the governance committee. She was gaining authority and demonstrating leadership. When it was time to hire a campaign manager, people realized that Katrina was obviously the best person for the job.

Katrina: I was really excited to hit the ground running and do the things that we've been able to do and build it out in a way that feels very honest and true to my vision.

Allison: That vision meant keeping the people most impacted at the center of their strategy. It also meant making sure the framing reflected all of the ways reproductive freedom affects people's lives.

Katrina: So I am intentionally running this campaign using a reproductive justice framework, which means that people should be able to decide if they want to parent, if they don't want to parent, and if they do want to parent, how they parent, which means being able to take care of your children, being able to provide shelter and food and utilities and just the basic tenets of survival at the very, very least.

Allison: In 2018, almost 20 percent of Louisiana's population was living below the poverty line. And Katrina believes things have gotten worse. The state economy is heavily reliant on tourism, hospitality and oil.

Katrina: Three industries that have been just devastated in the last few months.

Allison: Katrina explains how poverty is criminalized in Louisiana.

Katrina: Our car insurance rates are extremely high. I think they're like about twenty five hundred dollars a year. And that is a really clear example of how poverty becomes criminalized, because if you don't have car insurance and you get a ticket, if you don't go to court, you get a bench warrant, which means you go to jail.

Allison: Katrina connects criminalizing poverty with criminalizing abortion. It's all policy that takes away peoples' freedom instead of policy that supports the life that's already struggling to survive.

Katrina: When people talk about being pro-life, what does that mean? And very often it is about being pro birth and wishing people all the best once they're here, because we just, we don't have any systems in place to support folk once they're actually here.

Allison: There are two goals behind the campaign.

Katrina: One is to obviously defeat the amendment, but the second one is to have these conversations with folk throughout the state or really talk about the issues and amass

people power so that we can push back when another bill like this comes up and hopefully we can just kill it in committee.

Allison: It's clear that this people power coalition is overdue. Even with Roe v. Wade, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court Decision granting women the right to choose to have an abortion, it's gotten harder and harder for people in Louisiana to make that choice.

Katrina: So since Roe has been decided, Louisiana has passed almost 100 anti-abortion bills.

Allison: And that has made safe abortions very difficult to get in Louisiana.

BREAK

Allison: Much of Katrina's work focuses on the crucial connections between reproductive rights, poverty and race. But she also introduced me to Kimberly O'Brian. Kimberly's heartbreaking story illustrates the repercussions of the Louisiana regulations already in place, even for residents with means and access to options.

Kim: I grew up in Lafayette, Louisiana, so that's south central Louisiana, a very conservative area, for the most part, very Catholic.

Allison: Kim is white, a lawyer, a mom of two daughters. She tells me her father listened to Rush Limbaugh constantly. Kim now lives in New Orleans. And when we spoke over the computer, she was in what looked like a very pretty kitchen. Behind her I saw a little illustrated poster of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her personal story is one of many that illustrates how harmful and dangerous these anti-abortion state policies are.

Kim: So we had our first child in 2009. Everything went well. And then shortly after we had our first daughter, we tried to get pregnant again because we knew or we expected that it would be a little bit challenging.

Allison: They had help from fertility specialists for their first child and sought out help again for their second.

Kim: We went through the whole expensive and time consuming process of using medication and going for the scans and everything. And then so we went for the 20 week ultrasound with the maternal fetal medicine specialist here in New Orleans and discovered that there were some major problems.

Allison: The devastating news just got worse and worse. They saw a brain defect. They did research and did a lot more tests.

Kim: Luckily, my husband was a doctor. He had all these professional and social connections from medical school residency from his network at work. And so we were super fortunate to have access to all these people. But unfortunately, throughout all the testing, the prognosis got even worse. So after talking to all these doctors and talking to each other, we ultimately decided to terminate the pregnancy.

Allison: It was a heartbreaking decision for them. And in Louisiana, a difficult one to carry out.

Kim: We went back to the doctor, the specialist that I was working with here in New Orleans, and he was very empathetic, you know, really compassionate guy, but basically said, “you know, I understand, I support the decision, but I can't help you. My hospital system here won't permit me to perform abortions this late,” which was after 20 weeks at that point.

Allison: They were forced to go out of state.

Kim: And I just remember feeling shocked. I mean, I already was very upset that we were not going to have a second child. It certainly was a very difficult decision to make. And I just thought, I can't believe that I'm going to have to go get on an airplane and travel all the way from New Orleans to Colorado to have an abortion. I mean, I'm legally entitled to do this, but there are no options near me.

Allison: As difficult as this was, Kim recognizes the many ways her privilege comes into play here.

Kim: I mean, it was shocking because we are privileged people. I've never in my life thought, oh, my gosh, I can't pay the bills or I don't have health insurance. I can't go to the doctor or I can't afford the co-pay. That was just not something that I had ever had to go through. And then I knew from my legal training I had the legal right to have an abortion. And while I never even imagined that I would be in that position to choose to have an abortion, because I knew that I wanted to have kids. I never expected that I would be denied care.

Allison: Because of their personal connections, they were able to get an appointment just a five-hour drive away, in Houston.

Kim: It was something that the average person would have never gotten. Right? I mean, we were really fortunate in our position to have this access.

Allison: They dropped off their daughter with her parents and drove to Texas. Her experience there shows, again, how cruel restrictive health policies can be. Kim tells me about unnecessary tests they made her take, pamphlets she had to read.

Kim: Which actually contained inaccurate, I mean, medically false and inaccurate information.

Allison: They even had to make arrangements with a funeral home for the fetal remains.

Kim: How we would pay for it, whether they wanted me to ship ashes to me or what I wanted to do.

Allison: That was the first day. The next morning, she was supposed to get the procedure.

Kim: I, and my husband, went to the hospital, got checked in, got admitted, registered, you know, went into a room, had the hospital gown on. They start an I.V. and we were there for at least an hour.

Allison: Finally the doctor came in and told them that the hospital had a new policy.

Kim: They are no longer going to allow abortions beyond 20 weeks.... So, you know, I was in a hospital gown, put on some sweatpants. They put me in a wheelchair. We literally rolled across the street into a medical office building, met a new doctor in a clinic, and they started the procedure there. And then I was rolled back into the hospital where my doctor could finish. And so the procedure was supposed to be very short, supposed to happen that morning, and I mean, between all of this chaos, I didn't finish until late that night.

Allison: This all happened nine years ago, before their second daughter was born. With some distance, Kim can tell me the story with calm and clarity.

Kim: But it was a pretty traumatic event. After being incredibly depressed, just devastated with the idea that I wasn't going to have a child and then to have to go through all of this craziness when there was zero purpose, I mean, really, it did nothing, if not harm, and put me at risk for all these health complications to drag this out. And so I just was basically in shock.

Allison: But beyond her hardships, Kim was horrified by what it meant for people without the resources that she had.

Kim: I feel so strongly now that I had these resources that so many other people don't have, and I feel very obligated to advocate for better access to reproductive health care. Because this is something that every woman, every person, should have the right to do and access should not be impeded like it was for me and is every day for other people.

BREAK

Allison: Here's Katrina again.

Katrina: This is a woman of means, right? She is a lawyer. Her husband's a doctor. She could travel to Texas. And even with all of that, she was still barely able to get the care that she needed. And the lack of, the lack of respect for people's humanity and that people are forced to suffer is really important to talk about and to consider and to push back on. And how folk who can get pregnant are really just seen as these vessels, or containers, and like they don't matter, that your experiences don't matter, their needs don't matter.

Allison: That chilling realization drives the activism behind stopping Amendment One. To defeat it, the campaign has to generate about one million "no" votes. Louisiana is a big state and a diverse state, but Katrina is optimistic.

Katrina: So a million people -- it doesn't feel like a lot to us just because we know how many people are registered to vote in the state. We also anticipate that a lot more people will be voting this go around. We don't have to convince people to go to the polls to vote, but we do need to talk to them about the amendments because there is always a drop-off, down ballot. And amendments are just, like, confusing.

Allison: Getting voters informed about the issue of amendment One is their most important challenge.

Katrina: Our biggest opponent is a lack of information, just because people didn't know about them being on the ballot.

Allison: Katrina knows that honoring local organizing will make a huge difference.

Katrina: One of the things I know to be true, is that people have always been organizing their communities long before Obama made community organizing a famous term. And my goal was to defer to them and trust them as the experts in their areas and that they know the people that they've already been talking to. And this just be an opportunity for them to continue to organize and have access to resources.

Allison: They are bringing in dozens of people to make calls. The goal is having conversations to reveal the far reaching implications of losing the right to choose an abortion.

Katrina: There are a lot of people who are active with this moment of the movement, who are invested in what's happening here, because, again, the Amendment is about abortion, but this campaign is about so much more than that.

Allison: It's fundamentally about fighting for our basic rights.

Katrina: Most of us spend the majority of our lives just trying to survive. And when that is the case, there is no room and imagination or capacity to fight for more.

Allison: Katrina believes that fighting for our basic rights requires a broad coalition. When I asked her what made her feel the most hopeful about the campaign, she told me about their recent virtual launch.

Katrina: We were able to have a slate of people talk about various issues, and we had someone who's Catholic talk about his faith mandates that he support people being able to make the best decision for themselves and their family. We had a trans man who talked about abortion, not just being a women's issue. We had a black feminist who talked about reproductive justice and how abortion care is very much so connected to this moment of the movement and the fight for black lives. We had someone talk about GenZ voters and why it is very important for them to be engaged.

Allison: So many people from diverse viewpoints united by abortion rights.

Katrina: And that was really exciting for me. And it meant a lot for us to be able to do that.

Allison: I asked Katrina what she saw as her biggest challenge. Her answer surprised me, and reminded me, once again, of the courage it can take to fight for certain human rights.

Katrina: It's dangerous and I don't, I can't pretend like it's not. I can't pretend that my safety is not a concern. If that is me being attacked, digitally or physically or whatever the case may be, I don't have the luxury of pretending like I am safe.

Allison: Katrina knows firsthand about violence. She tells me that two years ago she was with a group of peaceful protesters in Chicago who got assaulted by the police. The police beat the protestors with batons and threw them to the ground. She still suffers from the trauma.

Katrina: My thought in that moment was that they're going to kill us and get away with it. Hearing me think that - and knowing that - that could have been my last thought really impacted me for a while. And it was really, really difficult and still is. It's it's better, but it's been hard.

Allison: This story makes me admire her courage even more.

BREAK

Allison: As we wrap up Season Three of *The Pledge*, amidst the most tumultuous political season of my lifetime and the very real suffering caused by the pandemic, Katrina helps remind us that along with great challenges, many people are gaining new critical understanding that can help us move forward.

Katrina: I think that people are having epiphanies and realizing that suffering has nothing to do with your value as a person and what you deserve, but that there are decisions that are being made that are not in our best interest.

Allison: I have learned so many important lessons from Katrina, and from all of the inspiring organizers I've met, about the importance of looking beyond one election or one issue and of focussing on working together, building community, so that people can have a real say in the important issues that affect their lives. I am so appreciative of the time these brave and committed individuals have given me to share their stories with you. I hope they have inspired you to raise your voice as well, to help build a more just and compassionate nation, where the voices and needs of all people are recognized and honored.

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: Thank you Katrina and Kim for your leadership and courage. Your brave and critical work will move Louisiana and the country to a better place. And a final thanks so much to my team for Season Three. Virtual production has had its challenges, and I miss seeing all of you. But we did it! Thank you Jeb Sharp, Tina Tobey Mack; Ezra Hausman, Hedrick Smith, Multitude Productions and Patricia Nieshoff. Each of you has helped make this project happen and keep happening. Thanks to the Ford Foundation for partially supporting this season.

And thanks to all of you Pledge listeners. Please be sure to sign up for our newsletter so I can stay in touch as we figure out our next project. Sign up at ThePledgePodcast.com.

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

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