



## “The Blessing of All This Madness”

*The Pledge Season 2 - Episode 7*

Gay: There's something that comes from making food and sharing food, that is very primal, and very loving. For me, I just feel like that's what effects change.

Allison: This is The Pledge, a podcast profiling people who have pledged to engage in our democracy. And it turns out, this is also a podcast about love. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman.

*Sounds of kitchen activity*

Allison: I'm in Vermont. And I have to say, I'm a bit misty-eyed at how lovely it all is. Peg Alden, who I will be interviewing, invited my husband, Ezra, and me for dinner. She lives in cozy house, with a big garden. Flowers, kale, bean poles and cool statues pop up in surprising places, and, of course, a wood stove.

*Discussion*

Allison: Peg had spent the afternoon on a hike.

Peg: A friend and I went up The Pinnacle, which is this wonderful hike on the ridge up here and there's a cabin at the top. It's just a gorgeous, gorgeous view. It's really nice.

Allison: You can hear from my “wow,” I'm swooning a bit. It's just an idyllic vibe for me. Ezra and I had spent the weekend biking and revelling in the famous Fall foliage. Conveniently, Peg's house in Putney, Vermont, is on our way home. But she isn't going to let us interview and run. That's just not how she does things. Dinner was already going in the slow cooker.

*Kitchen Activity*

Allison: So how does this ideal evening tie into The Pledge? What I saw is that for Peg, and all of the people that are involved in her volunteer political efforts, political engagement



goes hand in hand with nurturing each other and enjoying life. My thought was, what better message is there for the end of Season Two, and the beginning of the 2020 election year? And as you will come to learn, it also involves soup. Let's get cooking!

*Music*

Allison: Before we get into their recipe for taking action, I want you to get to know Peg, one of the “master chefs” so to speak. She's one of three co-captains leading a Vermont group of volunteers for a national organization called [Sister District](#). Sister District organizes volunteers to get Democrats elected to targeted state legislatures. How did Peg end up being a leader of this Vermont Sister District group? First, she realized, even after a life of participating in her community, that a deeper engagement in politics needed to become a priority.

Peg: Anything that I care about—gay rights, women's reproductive rights, the environment, racial justice—I can make the list, anything I care about. If we don't change the political system, it's all gonna go down.

Allison: Peg fears that the Trump administration's actions are dismantling everything she cares about.

Peg: So that's what's motivated me to stay plugged in, politically.

Allison: Connecting her civic involvement to political campaigns is actually new for Peg. She emphasises to me that she was never all that politically involved. That doesn't mean she isn't an involved person. It's clear that since she was a child, engaging in her community and the world, has been central to who she is. She grew up Catholic, and she remembers as a child stumbling upon magazines about the Maryknoll Nuns.

Peg: A group of nuns that do international work. And I remember sitting there reading those little MaryKnoll magazines and being really intrigued by what they were doing.

Allison: As we continue talking, she realizes that, in fact, her family was also very active.

Peg: A couple summers we went for vacation to Kentucky, to Appalachia, and helped build schools, and sort piles of donated shoes in a second hand shop that was raising money for the community that we were in. So yeah, in their way, they were very active.

Allison: Peg is following their example. She has always spoken out about issues and focused most of her career on international education.

Peg: I've just done a lot of international work. Most recently as the Director of International Education at the college that I work for, but so many other things along the way.

Allison: But after the 2016 election, Peg started to fear the direction the country was moving. Hate crimes and demonstrations increasing. Immigrants being targeted and mistreated. She wondered were there signs around her that history could repeat itself?

Peg: I don't know. I lived in Europe. Of course, I didn't live there during the rise of the Nazi movement, you know, the Nazi era. But I've lived there enough to hear the stories and know what it was like for people there. And you know, I think like for so much of my life, I've thought would I know if it was happening? You know, like even from a young age, learning about what was going on with the Nazis. You know, it was always like. But didn't people know? Didn't people see this happening? What kept people from doing what they needed to do until it was too late? And I feel that way here. This is bad. This is evil. This is going a direction that scares me. And I don't want to be one of these people who waited and waited and waited until it was too late.

*Music*

Allison: Peg was determined to get involved but she was living in Vermont and it felt like the battles were elsewhere. Like in Virginia, where we've spent this season of The Pledge.

Peg: I kinda knew that I wanted to do something that got me out of Vermont because although we have plenty of work to do here, too, I just felt like on this national front, we've got to get out of here. It's like, do I need to move somewhere else? How can I influence what's going on outside of my community?

Allison: But Peg needed help. Where could she have impact? What would be the most strategic way to use her resources? As involved as she had been in her community, political action was kind of foreign to her.

Peg: Just the basic, basic workings of our government, I felt like I didn't really know that much about.

Allison: That's why Peg reached out to Sister District. They have a well-researched strategy for how to make the most of volunteer efforts and they connect groups to specific campaigns—often in other parts of the country. Sister District's co-founder, Lala Wu, said that the Southern Vermont group is a real success story.

Lala: Southern Vermont is one of the best teams for showing off this idea of distributed organizing and this concept that we can empower folks all across the country to work

on what really matters to them. And we can give them a chance to shine, and some freedom to figure out, OK, well, what works for our community, what makes sense, what matches with our skills and our interests. And how can we turn that into power and real effective change? So that's an incredible, huge success story. Amazing, amazing thing to see.

Allison: Sister District focuses on state-level races because they see gerrymandering as one of the deepest threats to true democracy. Gerrymandering happens on the state level, and is when one political party manipulates the boundaries of voting districts to influence election outcomes.

Lala: We looked around and saw that Democrats were the majority of this country and Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by almost 3 million votes. Yet we were in control of none of the branches of government. How could this be? You know, we looked around, and we saw so many reasons. From fake news, to the Electoral College, to voter suppression. But one that really stood out to us and it stood out to us—and it stood out to us because we saw that ordinary people could actually make a difference—is gerrymandering.

Allison: And that led them to connect volunteers, like the Southern Vermont group, to key state legislative races.

Lala: If we can win these state legislatures, we can have an impact on rolling back some of this very harmful gerrymandering the Republicans did last time around. It's a once in a decade opportunity.

Allison: They also believe that electing good people into state government builds a crucial pipeline of candidates for the future. Peg was convinced.

Peg: I trusted these women who started Sister District. They're brilliant. They're just an amazing group of women and they had a research arm of what they were doing. And they were just trusted that they, they knew what they were doing. And so they would pair us with a race, and our first race was in Virginia.

Allison: Peg collaborated with her Sister District co-captains and got to work on creating their own unique blend of ingredients. They landed on a soup co-op, a brilliantly organized project that, at this point, involves over 50 chefs who sometimes make the soup, and hundreds of people who subscribe to get a quart of homemade soup for four months.

Peg: If you pay \$50 bucks, we'll provide four quarts of soup, and it started small but got big quickly. People were very enthusiastic about it.

Allison: When I was there, they were selling shares for the Fall.

Peg: Right now, we're signing people up for a new round of soup that will start in October, and we'll take 80 subscriptions. I think we just have a few left. They'll sell, for sure.

Allison: They provide the recipe, labels and jars to the chefs, chefs drop the soup off at one of two country stores for subscribers to pick up. If you can't pick up your soup, it gets donated to the [Putney Foodshelf](#) for people who need a little help making ends meet. When I was there, the project had raised over \$25,000 for state-level elections in Virginia.

Peg: I would say \$25,000 in a small Vermont town that we could raise \$25,000 for candidates in Virginia is success.

Allison: Their dollars went to support delegate John Bell in 2017 when he ran for re-election in the House and won. In 2019, the contributions were split between Hala Ayala (who won) and Larry Barnett (who lost). It's now been Two and a half years of sustained volunteer effort.

### *Music*

Allison: So after you have a clear strategy and some determined leaders, Peg's group has figured out a recipe for success. First ingredient: make it doable.

Peg: People don't have a lot of extra, but they can make soup. You know, they can buy soup. It's a simple thing they can do.

Allison: Second ingredient: create different roles so people can engage at different levels. For the soup project, that means that they have soup chefs, and soup eaters, and organizers. I spoke with Gay Foster who is one of the chefs. Peg says she's one of the most committed and rarely misses contributing a batch. Gay is grateful for her role.

Gay: I'm not comfortable in big groups, I don't do a lot of meetings, but I really want to somehow affect change and I feel like we are. You know, some of our sister district candidates have been elected. And so it's just really rewarding.

Allison: And then there's the job of subscribing, and buying the soup.

Liza: I'm Liza Burns, I live in Putney, Vermont, and I buy soup. That's one of the main things I do!

Allison: For Peg's friend Liza, a single mom, that's her realistic way to contribute.

Liza: I know my bandwidth, and I was like, well, I don't know how I can make this soup, but you know, when I heard about it was a subscription. I'm like, oh, that? I can really do that. I could do that.

Allison: And she loves it.

Liza: It's lovely. It's like soup time. I get an email: "Please go get your soup on Monday by 4:00, it'll be available." And it's always a little treat, like "oh good, it's soup! Soup Day!"

Allison: Third ingredient: make it a finite commitment. For the soup project, volunteers sign on for terms of four months at a time. Here's Peg.

Peg: I think what makes this work so well is that it's cyclical. So everybody's kind of making a commitment for one cycle and it's, it has an end point to it. So all we're saying is, can you subscribe for this one cycle? Can you cook for this one cycle? Can you help organize for this one cycle? And then people can re-evaluate at the end of it. And I think that makes it easier for them to pitch in. And most people, once they opt in, they keep going. Because it's very doable.

Allison: Making it "doable" includes rotating leadership. After a year and a half of leading the soup project, Peg and the other co-captains wanted to start a second fundraising activity. This one, [\*Save Our Nation Vacation\*](#). Another innovative and fun idea where they get people to donate homes as rentals to benefit Sister District. Kind of like an AirBnB but rental fees go to support a cause you believe in, instead of just to the owner. Starting a new project meant the co-captains had to reach out to the now, very established network, and ask for a new leadership team.

Peg: That was a beautiful thing, too, at that point when we wanted to launch another fundraiser. You know, we put it out to the community and said, "who wants to take over the soup team?" Basically, we need six people to be part of the new soup team and people came forward. And so a whole new round of leadership kind of took over the soup project.

Allison: The final, crucial ingredient, kind of like the salt, is: make it fun. Peg shows me pictures of get togethers they've had to celebrate

Peg: This is the one that's really fun.

Allison: Wow

Peg: This was the first round of soup chefs.

Allison: Look at that with the ladles.

Peg: I know. (Laugh) We try to have fun. You know. We all had aprons...

Allison: You can tell how much fun they have just in the names of the soup.

Peg: This was "Can't Quit Now Quinoa soup"; You know, here's "Bank on Blue"; The "Be Brave Borsht"; This was "Move Left Minestrone".

*Music*

Allison: Peg admitted to me that getting started was hard. She said that what finally got her to move from wanting to do something, to actually doing it, was hearing a speaker at a political event emphasize that if everyone in the crowd chose one thing to focus on, things would get done. She urged people to trust that someone would cover the bases that they couldn't cover. Each individual's job is to commit to something and stick with it.

Peg: Because it's easy to feel like, oh, my God, there's so many issues. And you get so immobilized by it. But there was something about that just, you need to pick one thing and see it through.

Allison: Commit to something. Sounds like a Pledge to me. Peg also shows that you don't need to know everything to take action. You can learn.

Peg: I mean, when I started getting involved in this project, I would laugh, I would tell people when I'd go and speak and I'd say, folks, if you could see my Google search, you know, I would be mortified. I'm having to look up how many representatives are there in the states, you know, how does this work?

Allison: Peg also got help. She works with two other co-captains, a good friend and a new friend.

Peg: That's been a blast of a friendship to develop. That's really that's been, you know, the blessing of all of this madness.

Allison: It's clear from these Vermont soup activists that working with a national group is motivating, and just smart. These groups can help you target your action, and give you confidence that your time is being well spent.

Remember Liza? The soup-subscriber? She told me how much she appreciates Sister District's role as her guide.

Liza: I love that I can just trust whatever is going on. So, I just trust Sister District. I really respect that they've vetted and figured out a lot of things that I wish I had the capacity to do, but I can't figure out what's close races, and who should I be following, and where should we support, or donate to. So for me, it's very easy and I feel super confident in whatever they're doing with it.

Allison: We left with our very own quart of "Be The Change Corn Chowder." It was delicious. Go to [ThePledgePodcast.Com](http://ThePledgePodcast.Com) for the recipe, along with links to Sister District and other organizations that help volunteers take strategic action.

My hope is that these women in Vermont gave you your own craving to cook something up yourself. What have you got in the oven?

*Music*

Allison: Thanks so much to Peg Alden for speaking with me, and for her hospitality and help. Thanks to Liza and Gay for speaking with me as well, and to Gay for sharing a quart of outstanding soup. And finally, thanks to Lala and the Sister District team for their work connecting activists with impactful opportunities.



So that's it for Season Two. I am so appreciative to all of you. If you've liked what you've heard, please consider making a donation to help me make Season Three a reality. There's a [link at thePledgePodcast.com to donate](https://www.thepledgepodcast.com/donate). Your dollars will help keep this project going. Thank you!

And thanks to everyone who's helped this season.

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And again, thanks to all of you who listen, share and have sent in donations to keep this podcast going. I am so grateful.

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