Event Recap — Public Service and Changemaking: A Conversation with Women in Politics

Panelists:
- Ellen Kamei, Councilmember, City of Mountain View
- Mary Hughes, Founder of Close the Gap CA and President of Hughes & Co.

What did you do in college to prepare you for your present career?

Ellen
- Historically, a lot of early entry points into politics aren’t paid, so take advantage of your time in college because you can do that work for academic credit or even get a fellowship.
- Those unpaid positions can lead to fruitful experiences and you can make some great connections that will help you later.
- Also, your professors are great people to know, so keep those relationships, they might know of TA opportunities or internships for you.
- Lastly, trust your gut when making decisions; you know yourself best. Be sure to weigh your financial situation in making these decisions, but also ask yourself “Will I regret saying no to this opportunity?”

Mary
- My advice is to be present to what’s happening in your life. Don’t take classes that will put you on a career path; take classes that interest you and make you a good thinker and an empathetic person.
- Those career-specific classes will teach you skills, but they won’t teach you the lenses through which you can experience the world. And honestly, you can learn those skills anywhere else, so prioritize making yourself the best you.
Seeing as you both attended graduate school, can you elaborate on your experience at graduate school and what you got out of it?

Mary

- I never regretted getting a law degree and having it was immensely impactful on my career, because in the 1970s, people weren’t respecting me until I told them I was a lawyer. So, graduate degrees can be really helpful for women as a way to signal expertise and respect.
- I’m a big believer in studying what you’re curious about, so if there’s more you want to know, go for it.
- Otherwise, having a credential or advanced degree is a way to shortcut just jumping into a career, but you can end up in the same place with or without graduate school.

Ellen

- As seniors, you will be at a crossroads where you can pick school or career and I will say I had a 4-year gap between my undergrad and graduate experiences and that gap allowed me to see what I still had left to learn and what I wanted to learn.
- I thought I wanted to do public interest law, so when I was interviewing with law schools, people were telling me that no one goes to 3 years of law school to do public law, so maybe look into a Masters of Public Policy or a different kind of program. That’s when a friend told me about this program at UPenn that was about social policy and it felt like the right fit.
- UPenn was and is a door opener for me, just like Stanford will be for you. Not just because of the name but because of the classes and opportunities you’ll get.
- I will say, if you decide to go to grad school, do the things you didn’t make time for in undergrad.

What are some qualities that will prepare women for political work?

Mary

- Through Close the Gap CA, I often try to recruit women into electoral positions and one of the qualities that I look for most is resilience.
- Politics can be harsh, competing interests can get loud and competitive. So, I need to know that the people I find and help are relentless, they don’t quit, they can drown out the noise and keep going, they can lose an election and run again. Something I’ve noticed is when men lose
elections, they treat it as a scrimmage and keep trying to get elected. When women lose, they just throw in the towel. Losing isn’t personal and there’s a lot to learn from losing.

- One of the worst qualities you can have is any amount of self-interest. I often ask women I meet with, “do you want to be somebody, or do you want to do something?” Public service isn’t about being someone, it’s about helping people.
- So be committed to public service, not just committed to winning an election.

Ellen

- One of the words going around now for women in politics is grit. It’s the people with the idea of perseverance in them that advance and not the ones with just success on their resume.
- This field can get noisy, so you need to have tunnel vision to get where you need to go. Part of that for me is keeping it about the policy, the actions, and the good you’re trying to create.

Politics can feel like an ongoing fight, so how do you remind yourself that politics is about creating a better world?

Mary

- I channel my competitiveness into getting people who will create a better world elected.
- But after the 2008 presidential election, my co-workers and I had to ask ourselves, “what do we care about and what’s our next step?” Some of them went to work outside of electoral politics, but for me I realized I cared about electing women to local and state office so they could create change.
- In my role as a headhunter and mentor, I’ve learned that sometimes all people need to hear to get them to run is “people think highly of you and as an elected official you’ll get to work with X-issue and create a better world.”
- My advice is to do service if you care about what you’re doing and who you’re serving.
Ellen

- My goal has always been to be like Leslie Knope in Parks and Recreation. I want to have the optimism that public service and government can do good and I believe it because I’ve seen it before.
- My mom has been an elected official since I was 9 and she would take me everywhere with her, so I got to see all the good she was able to create.
- Thinking about that reminds me that this is first and foremost service. I’m here to serve and that keeps me grounded in my work and my communities.
- When I go on runs and I think about how so many people have access to these beautiful trails, that reminds me that my work is to do good. Those little reminders that my work affects my world and communities keeps me grounded.

Fellowships to look up: Cardinal Careers Community Impact Fellowships in local government, City of Mountain View internships (12 across various departments, see Cardinal Careers newsletter for more information), Hughes & Co., various post-grad fellowships in San Jose and Redwood City government, Stanford in Government fellowships