



CFP 000: Welcome to Changing the Face of Power Podcast + Meet Rebecca

Show notes at <http://www.rebeccamthompson.com/meet-rebecca/>

Intro Narration: Welcome to the Changing the Face of Power Podcast where we're on a mission to inform, inspire, and support black women to run for elected office. Now please welcome your host Rebecca Thompson.

Rebecca: Welcome to Changing the Face of Power the Podcast. I'm your host Rebecca Thompson and I am so excited to have you listening to our very first episode. Over the next few minutes you'll hear a little bit more about me and my journey and more about what you can expect from our show. But I first just want to start off by saying thank you so much for taking time out of your day to listen to this show. This podcast is a manifestation of some of my biggest dreams coming to life. And so I know that you could be listening to anything else since all the fact that you are spending your time with us means so much to me.

So again my name is Rebecca Thompson. I am from the east side of Detroit and for as long as I can remember I've always been this girl with really big dreams and I think if you're listening to this show you might have an interest in politics or running for office or just doing something that helps you change the world in your own way. And that's always been in me and for as long as I can remember I've known that I wanted to do something to help people and to change the world. And so my mom's from Detroit, my dad is from Saint Louis, and both of my parents struggled growing up. They both struggled with chronic unemployment and substance abuse. My dad was an alcoholic, he was on heroine, he was on crack, and they both struggled with homelessness.

So my dad was living homeless on the streets of Saint Louis, and here in Detroit we were getting evicted every six months. And going to new schools and constantly shuffling around. So I started working when I was 14 years old and not because I wanted extra money to hang out with my friends at the mall, but because I needed money to get to school and often times my sister and I and brother would have to use the money that we were earning to either give it to my mom for her to get to work or for us to get to school. And so that hustle and that grit from having to pay bills at 14 years old really always put something in me that I knew that I wanted to get off the east side of Detroit.

And a few years later I discovered that it was elected officials and politicians who were making decisions about my community and my neighborhood and I wanted to be that person who helps to make sure we have access to better schools or to make sure that my parents had access to jobs and the person whose decision that might be that we wouldn't have to take two buses to get to school every single day.

And around the time that I was graduating from high school Kwame Kilpatrick was elected mayor of Detroit at just 31 years old. And at 33 now the idea of being a 31 year old mayor sounds kind of crazy. But back then it was the first time that I saw a young person in politics and I had never seen that before. But I quickly realized that I didn't have a last name that people knew, I didn't come from a wealthy family, and I didn't even know anybody in politics. So I figured, how could a girl like me from the east side of Detroit get into politics? And I knew that if you wanted to be an actress you went to LA, if you want to be a model you went to New York, and so if you wanted to be a politician or an elected official you went to Washington.

So from as early as I can remember I had this big dream that some day I was going to move to Washington D.C. and learn from the best people in politics and bring that experience back home to Detroit. And so I went away to college, about a one way greyhound ticket to Market, Michigan where I attend at Northern Michigan University and I didn't know anybody and I've never been away from home before and I arrived at this town in the middle of the night and it was this all white university where there were folks who had never seen black folks in real life.

And I was so out of my element and so I'm comfortable that after a few months I decided that this was just not the place for me. And a mentor said to me that you can complain about this place or you can do something about it. And that's how I fell in love with organizing and some friends and I decided that we were going to reactivate a chapter of the black student union and we started off just throwing parties and tofu dinners. But we really started to think about why were there so few black students at Northern to begin with. And we started to organize even when we didn't know what that word meant.

And we started talking to folks and we started picking up students from the bus station and we took the list of all the accepted black freshmen from Detroit, in Chicago, in Milwaukee, and we started calling through the list and talking to their parents and inviting them to campuses. And in one year we took black student union from inactive to organization of the year out of 300 organizations on campus.

We were so excited and it occurred to me that if we could do this with just a really small group of students, I should say out of 10,000 students on this campus there were less than a hundred black students. And if we could do that with just this really small group of people I really wonder what else could we do? And so I decided that I wanted to become student body president. And people told me that I was crazy that Northern was this all white school and that I should maybe start by being representative cause I should be clear that I wasn't even on student government at the time. But I said, "No. I want to do this."

And we took this team that we've built from black student union and we knocked on doors and we met with the administration and met with every student organization that would meet with us. I mean I literally met with the Anime club even though I had no idea what the hell they did. And on the day of the election I stood on the middle of campus

from 8:00AM to 8:00PM and talked to every student that I could. And one girl said, "I'm going to vote for you just because you've been standing out here all day and I could see you from my window." And I won that election by just 32 votes. So I was like the first black female student body president in the school's 100 year history. And there has not been a black woman elected since and that was over 10 years ago.

And so being elected to student government really set me on a path to politics that completely change the course of my life. And so for me, my work and my career has always been about the intersection of organizing in politics and if you've got organizers who don't understand policy they might not be effective. And if you have politicians who don't understand the people or have relationships with people they might not be effective. And so I always wanted to be the kind of elected official and policy maker that understood the two of those worlds.

And so after college I packed up my car and I moved to Washington D.C. and I was living my dream. And I started my career on Capital Hill working for an amazing organization called the United States Student Association that was organizing students from across the country around college access and affordability and free higher ed. And what I saw what badass, amazing, young people of color who were queer and undocumented and from Detroit and Chicago and other places all around the country who were just like me who were fighting for issues they cared about. And I started my career as their legislative director and I got to travel the country training young people about organizing and how a bill becomes a law and I got to work with the White House in the Department of Education in Congress to actually pass legislations to make college affordable and to make sure that students like me had access to opportunity.

I tried to come home to Detroit in 2008 but I couldn't find a job like most people. I stayed in Washington D.C. a little bit longer. I worked in local government in the mayor's office. And I stumble into what I would call one of my mini dream jobs. I was the director of a national program called Young People For and it was this amazing development program that taught young people across the country how to create social change in their neighborhoods. And that program also allowed me to train young people to run for elected office. And we ran a program called The Frontline Leaders Academy and a sister program to that was the Young Elected Officials Network. So it was this amazing pool of young people who all wanted to change the world in their own way.

And so we had college students from over 150 campuses across the country who were doing amazing work, and this group of young people who were learning how to run for office, and then young people all under the age of 35 from every state who are mayors and congressmen and women and school board members. And I got to learn from them, I got to work with them. And year after year as I was training these folks to run for office I realized that I was encouraging them to do something I haven't found the courage to do myself. And I knew that I wanted to run for office, I knew that I wanted to get back home in Detroit, and I was watching what was happening in Detroit on the news and the city was in a really difficult time. The mayor who I'd grown up admiring had been sent to federal prison for nearly 30 years and the city was struggling. And so I knew it was time for me to go back home.

And so I moved back home to Detroit about five years ago and I had really romanticized what it meant to be in Detroit. And I will tell you that the city was in a very different place, the city was on the verge of bankruptcy, the street lights weren't on, trash wasn't being

collected, and my family was in further poverty than when I left. My mother was living in a hotel, my father was homeless on the streets of Saint Louis, my younger brother was homeless, my oldest niece and nephew came to live with me. And I was pretty frustrated. This was not what I had signed up for and I thought, "You know what? I was just going to go back to D.C. and go back to my friends and go back to my life." But I was reminded of what my mentor said to me all those years before that you could complain about what was wrong with this place or you could do something about it.

And when I saw who the state representative was that represented my neighborhood, the neighborhood that I had grown up in I felt like they didn't share my values, they didn't really represent me and I could do something about that. And so I decided that I wanted to raise my hand, I was going to run for state representative. And just like I ran for student body president people told me to wait my turn, that I was too young. I was 30 years old at the time mind you. And they said, "Let somebody else the seat and you need to find something else to run for." And I rejected that because I had all these experience, this was the neighborhood that I grew up in, and I really felt like my voice could be really important.

And so in the first three months of our campaign we raised over \$20,000 in just 90 days and outraced the incumbent opponent by 3 to 1. We had hundreds of grassroots donors from across the country. People, community college student in Baltimore contributed \$5, a complete stranger in Texas gave us a thousand dollars which was the maximum. And we completely changed the conversation of this race from little girl wait your turn to holy shit she might take this incumbent out.

And over the course of the next nine months we raised over \$60,000, I knocked over 15,000 doors, got local, state, national endorsements and really ran a competitive race. Our race was named the number one most competitive state representative race in the state in 2014. And it was the hardest thing I'd ever done, but also the most amazing thing that I had ever done. And I should say that I spent 12 years of my career doing every candidate school and campaign booth camp in the country, even ran my own but there was nothing like running your own race to prepare you to run for office.

And a week before election day my dad passed away, and it devastated me. And imagine knocking on doors and having to raise money when you are literally grieving the passing of your father. And so the weekend right before election day I was burying my dad in Saint Louis. And on election day I went to every polling location and there was nobody there and I rained in the morning and it rained at night and just after the polls were closing my partner whispers in my ear that we were six votes down and that they were about to count the absentee ballots but it wasn't looking good.

And I will tell you that I left just a few minutes after that and I had no idea for days what the actual election results were. But we lost that election by just six votes on election day. And by the time they counted the absentee ballots we were just about 200 votes short. And for the next few months, the next year I was a bit of a zombie. I was not myself. I was depressed, I could barely leave the house, my partner had to literally drag me out of the house. I could not function. And over the course of that year my dog died unexpectedly, my dad passed away, I lost the election, and I lost my job.

So to say that I was devastated, to say that I was depressed would be an understatement. And what I will tell you though is that after about a year and lots of time

spent on my therapist couch I started to feel like myself again. And what I knew was that there were other women like me who have this dream of running for office, but didn't know what to do with it or they were spending time getting a bunch of degrees or going through a bunch of trainings when what they really need to be doing was running for office and I really felt like I lost that election because somebody needed to learn from that experience. And I started to ask myself a series of questions, what if I could share those kinds of examples, what if I could teach them everything I learned, what if I could teach them how to win the first time and to learn everything that I learned the hard way.

And so that's why I started this podcast. This is my dream. It is my dream to be able to help women around the world who want to run for office, but don't know how. And especially black women. For me this is really about changing the face of power and I got tired of seeing a bunch of old white dudes in office and not being the example of what it means to be an elected official.

And so what you can expect from this show is that every week we will talk to a brilliant badass black woman who's elected at the state and local level. And that's important because women in Congress, women who are in high level positions get a lot of attention and we hear those stories, but there are women on school boards and city councils that we never hear from and I want to share their stories. And my mission with Changing the Face of Power is to inform, inspire, and support black women who want to run so they can fulfill their purpose and change the world.

And so each week we'll talk to a different black woman. I want you to tell me who do you want to hear from; who's an amazing, brilliant woman in your community whose story you know the world needs to hear. And each week we'll tell their stories and we'll introduce you to a new woman who is changing the world in her own way. And once a month we'll do a special session that I'm calling #askrebecca where you can ask me any question that you have about running for office or what it means to get started in politics and how you should get started in politics.

So I just want to say thank you so much for listening to our first episode. Thank you for being on this journey with me. It is the biggest dream of my life to be able to do this and you'll hear so much from so many brilliant women. I cannot wait for you to meet them. So thank you again for taking time to listen to our show today. Our next episode is going to introduce you to someone that is really using her black girl magic to change the world and I hope she inspires you in the way that she has inspired me.

So thanks again and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Outro Narration: Thank you for joining us on the Changing the Face of Power Podcast. If you want all the show notes from today's episode go to www.rebeccamthompson.com.