



CFP 001: Attica Scott – State Representative Elect, Kentucky House of Representatives

Show notes at <http://www.rebeccamthompson.com/attica-scott/>

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: Hi and welcome to Changing the Face of Power the Podcast. I'm your host Rebecca Thompson and I am so excited to chat with our featured guest today. I am thrilled to introduce you to Attica Scott who is a state representative in Kentucky and she recently made history as I have heard of being the first black woman elected to the Kentucky legislature in over 20 years, Attica, welcome to Changing the Face of Power.

Attica: Thank you so much, Rebecca. I am honored to be here.

Rebecca: It is so great. I cannot wait to hear all about you. So why don't you tell us a little bit more about you and how you got started in politics?

Attica: Sure. So I got started in politics actually living in Knoxville, Tennessee although Louisville, Kentucky is home I wanted to go away and attend a historically black college. So I graduated from Knoxville College in East Tennessee and after graduation I worked at the University of Tennessee for and with a woman who is a county commissioner. So that was really my first introduction into the world of politics in that way of being connected to someone who was part of this governmental system. So that's how I got started and then I ended up working on the campaign of a friend who also graduated from Knoxville College who ran for mayor. So he was one of the youngest people to ever run for

mayor in Knoxville. He had already ran for city council and defeated a long term incumbent and I worked on that campaign. And it was just exciting to be in the midst of all of that and to do the grassroots and community based and underground work that it takes to win an election.

Rebecca: That's so great. And what it makes me think about is how it's about relationships because I too got my start working for a county commissioner and really know how transformative it can be to know those folks because you sort of dymystify what it means to be an elected official. So when did you make the decision to run and what was that process like for you?

Attica: So I came back to Louisville in 2004 and was working at Kentucky jobs with a justice, so doing some really good work with labor unions that were leading, organizing campaigns and different work like immigrant worker justice, single parent health care, etcetera. And so that meant we were doing a lot of local and state grassroots lobbying, and in watching all of that I began talking to some folks who were doing local social justice work about we need folks who have a mindset like ours in office. And I also had two kids who were in our public school system and they were really my inspiration for running for office the first time and that was for school board. And so while I did not win that election it was a wonderful opportunity to say to other folks we can run campaigns and we need to learn how to build up people of color and young people and women's leadership to run for office and to be part of the core of campaigns, whether be a campaign coordinator or a treasure or whatever the case maybe.

Rebecca: Oh, there's so much that I want to unpack there, because we share some similarities on our social justice work. But tell me about running and not winning, what was that experience like and how did you make the decision to get back up again?

Attica: That is such a great question, Rebecca. Because it can be hard, it was hard for me to lose that raise because it's so public. You're out there for especially for the first time in the public eye and naive enough to think and ambitious enough to think, "Yeah, I can win this. We're doing all the work you're supposed to do to win." And then to not win it was devastating and it was devastating for all of the people who had worked on the campaign, who had never done anything like that before. For some people had never done voter registration or gone door to door for a candidate, nothing like that before. So we were introducing new folks into campaigning especially grassroots campaigning and then we lost.

And so for awhile we were all sad and thinking, "Why bother? It's always the same folks who get elected every time and it's never folks who are like us, who are out fighting for justice." But then a few months later the opportunity opened up itself for me to apply to serve on our metro council which is other places called A Board of (All the Mini City?) Council, but we are a merged city county

government. So it's our metro council. And I applied and I think there were about 16 other people who applied and we're interviewed and ended up being appointed to that seat by the metro council and here we were, we had the opportunity that otherwise ... if I had not continued to be in community work, continued to show up and to stand up for justice I may very well not have been appointed to that position because those council members would have not know that I was someone who is committed to what's right, what's equal and what's fair and what's just.

So the way that I got into office the first time was through staying involved in community and having a strong network of supporters.

Rebecca: Oh, that's so great. So I love that because what it really echoes for me is the importance of staying ready, right? Is that a lot of women do lose the first time that they run. Just like me, I ran for state representative and lost by six votes on election day. And it was devastating but I didn't stop, right? And so what I hope that women who are listening to this will take from your story is that that only introduces you to the world, right? So I love that you were able to take the work of your campaign and sort of do it in the metro council. So how did you make the transition from being on the council to going into legislature?

Attica: Sure. So in less than a month after being appointed to that metro council position ... Yeah, less than a year after being appointed to that metro council position I had to actually run to serve out the rest of that regular term because I was stepping in after someone else had resigned from the position, and so I had to run a campaign again. And we won, again because of that network and the we, and I say the we because I'm here as a representative of a whole lot of other folks. And so I want to be very mindful that what I'm serving I'm serving. And it's not about the me, it's about the we. So like you said stay engaged, stay involved, and had to run the next year and won and then two years later it was time for the regular cycle of the election for the seats and I lost to the daughter of the woman who had resigned. And so that meant I was out of office and that was in 2014.

But just as you pointed out for the past two years I have stay involved in neighborhood based work where I live, in different community based work whether it was immigrant worker justice or labor organizing or black lives matter work that was happening locally or fairness for people who are LGBTQIA, I stay connected, involved, and engaged. And so when the opportunity presented itself this time to run for office, even though it was against long term incumbent I knew that I had that community of folks who had been saying to me for the past year, "We need you in this seat." So it was my responsibility to respond to those asks, those repeated asks from people who were saying, "We need you in this seat." So that's why I ended up running for state representative.

Rebecca: Wow. So just in so many ways just it's so perfect to be talking to you because you know what it feels like to have ran and been unsuccessful and then be appointed and then run and be unsuccessful again and then have the opportunity again. So I mean, you embody the notion that like if you fall down seven times you get back up eight. Losing that second time after you've been in office, what was that experience like?

Attica: That's a good question because it was so vastly different from the first time that I lost. The first time was so devastating because there was so much naivety around it. There was this idealism of, "Yeah, we can do this." It was an open seat. The person who was in it was retiring. So we thought, "Yes, it's anyone's game." And we learned a lot. We learned a lot from that experience. And then the second time running was ... or the second time losing was a little bit different. I had already been in office, I had seen what the system was like, I had experienced lost before. So I knew that you could get up again. I didn't know that the first time. The first time I was like, "Well, it's over. It's done." But then the second time I knew that you could get back up again, and so the lost didn't weigh as heavily on me as it did the first time.

Rebecca: Wow. That is so powerful and I know that there's somebody who is listening to this who may have experience lost more than once on their own. And so I think somebody needs to hear that. So thank you for sharing that. So Attica, you've been doing amazing social justice work and you've been elected. But you also have a life that is outside of politics. So I don't know that I quite believe in balance, I think that it's important to have a life that includes everything that you love. But tell me what it has been like having a family and taking care of yourself in the process because it also is a hard job to be doing and I'm curious of how you take care of yourself at the same time.

Attica: That's a really fair question and it's something that I've been intentional about in the past few years. And I had to say that a lot of ... much of it, if not most of it stems from the women in my life who are constantly asking me that question - how are you taking care of yourself? What is your self-care look like? And women who are extending themselves and saying, "What do you need help with?" And when my children were younger just calling or stopping by and saying, "Hey, come to pick up the kids and take them to the movies with my kids." Or people who didn't have kids who said, "Well, I'm coming to pick up your kids and take them to get something to eat." Just to hang out with them and to give me a break.

So the women in my life have been have been amazing and the first time I ran it was because I've gotten together with some women who were some very close friends with whom I have deep relationships and we were also intertwined in community work for justice, and we sat down together and actually map out a plan and said, "Look, if we are going to change anything, one of us has to run for office so let's figure out who it is." And we actually came up with this strategy to

figure out who it would be and it end up that it was me. All support and put all of their resources behind to run for office. And so really that circle of solidarity with other women has helped me to maintain some sense of ... and I'm with you, balance to me I'm not sure that's the word because it's relative, it's different. What I can hold and maintain is going to be different from what someone else can make hold and maintain.

So I don't know that it's fair for me to say balance. I would say that self-care is something that I'm able to do and have focus on because of that support system. So I do it. I work and I serve politically and spend lots of time with my kids and my family and my friends and I like to travel. So I make sure that I invest time into doing all of that.

Rebecca: That's so great because it's like you can have it all, right? And maybe you aren't doing every single thing at the same time. But I want the women who are listening to this show to know that you can travel, you can have a family, you can serve, and there will be people there who will support you in the process. And I want to explore something that you talked about, about sitting down with your support network and even mapping out with folks, somebody's got to run and if we really want to be a part of the change like this is what we have to do. So I mean, how did that process come about and if there were some women, some way listening to this who wants to do that for themselves like what advice would you give them as they embark on that similar sort of challenge?

Attica: Sure. This story is the advice that I would give which is that there were a handful of us who had been doing justice work, marches protest rallies, speaking to the metro council, going and doing grassroots lobbying in our state capital. And after awhile of doing this work and having some successes and having lots of loses as far policy change and systemic change and environmental change. It goes back to that question or that conversation earlier about if we really want to see policy change we've got to change the people who are in office and we've got to get office who share our way of thinking or at least the way in which we believe in justice.

And so we sat down one evening and said, "Okay, let's talk about which one of us we would all be willing to invest our time and our resources and our talents into supporting to run for office." And we went through it. We talked about what each of us had going on in our lives, what were our priorities, what is coming up for us, which one of us was really committed to running for office and being willing to be vulnerable and open and in the public eye, what are the different skills and resources and talents and abilities that we each brought to either running the campaign or being the person who was the face of the campaign.

And so every person had their different skills and interest. Some were not interested at all in running. I was interested. I have an undergraduate degree in political science and a graduate degree in communications. So it was a great

opportunity to marry the two plus I've had more experience with at least working in quasi-governmental institutions and with people who were elected officials. And so we decided at the person we're going to get behind to run for office and now we need to figure out which office.

So we went through a similar strategy to determine which office. Would it be school board or metro council or a state office? And because of my deep person connection to the public school system in Louisville, having both of my children in it, and having graduate from it myself that made sense to us plus we knew that the seat was becoming vacant. So that's what we were through. We went through this strategy of what do we each have going on personally, what can we each give, and then which office would make sense for us to focus on running for.

Rebecca: I can see so many women listening to this and now sitting around dining room tables mapping out strategies for who's going to run and what positions make the most sense because we need to be doing this and as a someone who also is fighting for justice in the work that I'm doing in my community, it's black women that are leading this work, right? And so it's us. It's going to be us and should be running for office. But I love, love, love the idea of putting your brains together to really map out a strategy for that and I don't hear enough women talking about doing that. I know there are other people sitting in a room mapping out strategy, but I don't know that those rooms are full of black women. So it is a brilliant idea and I love hearing about that.

So I am really curious as you begin to prepare to run for state representative. What did you have to do to prepare for that campaign? Because it sounds like you had the relationships, tell us about how much money you had to raise. I know that that is something that keeps a lot of women from doing this because they feel like, "Well, I don't have money." How much did you have to raise and how did you raise it?

Attica: Sure. So I ended up raising close to about \$30,000 and I am officially in the ballot in the November general election. So we still kept our online fundraising side open. So I still actually get donations every week which is fantastic. Folks giving what they can because they want to make sure that when I run for re-election I have already got something that's in the call first. And so we've raised closed to 30,000 and that came from lots of different sources. But most of it from individuals and I'd love the people who would give and say, "This is my first time ever giving to a political candidate because we share so many of the same ideas and ways of being and the generations that we're giving." So younger people and older people which is beautiful across the board support.

And so we did the fundraising work. But I had also gone through Emerge Kentucky. So I had also gone through a training program that prepared me to run. So after my girlfriends and I sat down and determine I will be the person to

run for office. The same year that I was running for school board, I was also in Emerge Kentucky, so I had that network to call on as well, women across the state who are willing to step up and work on my campaign. I had a woman drive from Lexington, Kentucky to Louisville to go door knocking with me one weekend. I mean, that's the kind of love that we as women have for one another and women of color and black women, the way in which we show up and we're there and we hold one another.

And knowing that we were going up against a 34 year incumbent, we knew that the real way that we were going to win regardless of how much money we raised was by knocking on every single door that we could possibly knock on because people needed to see my face and at least see the face of people who supported me and people needed to hear what I valued and what mattered to me and for me to listen to them share their issues and concerns. And so running for state office, we ran the most grassroots campaign that we possibly could run.

Rebecca: That's just amazing. And particularly to take on a 30 plus year incumbent and to take them out, right? So it shows it can be done and for those of you who are listening to this who are waiting for somebody to retire or waiting for them to get out of the seat, this is a perfect example of you don't need to wait and especially if there is somebody who does not share your values they got to go, so kudos to you for being able to take that on. And so I know a lot of times when we think about elected officials and candidates, we see a lot of the glamorous stuff, we see the accolades and we see the wins. But let's talk a little bit about some of the things that maybe you've struggled with that people haven't seen, right? It's one thing to sort of struggle when you're losing. But you've been in office and I'm curious to hear from you sort of what has been your biggest challenge being in office.

Attica: One of the biggest challenges is trying to be all things to all people. So I learned from serving on the metro council that that's impossible and I learned it the hard way, because no matter what I did or try to do there were always the people who felt like it was never enough, even if it was more than what anyone else had ever done or whatever think about doing. It was still never enough and I am convinced that part of that is because I am a woman and I am a black woman, and so there is so much more that is expected of us that we're constantly proving ourselves and always having to show up in every single place. And if we don't show up there's a problem. But other people cannot show up as well and that's okay. It's easy forgiven.

But there's so much more of a higher expectation of us and often times unrealistic expectation of us that if we're not careful we could easily get burned out and then have people say, "Well, she shouldn't have tried to do so much. Or we saw that coming." So at some point I had to say to myself, "You're not going to be able to do all that people want you to do and you're not going to be able to show up everywhere that people want you to show up. But you do what you have

the ability to. Show up where you can show up and make all of that be as meaningful as possible." And so that's what I learned from serving on the council is that if I didn't take care of myself in that way politically no one else is going to.

Rebecca: That's right. And as black women we are always taking care of other people, right? We are taking care of our communities, our families, our friends, those around us. And I have to believe that it's true that we can run and serve but do it on our own terms and in a way that allows us to still take care of us, right? Not at the expense of us. So thank you for sharing that.

Another, we are going to have a whole lot of women who are listening to this who are struggling with making the decision to run. And I am curious as to what advice you would give someone who is on the fence about whether or not they should do this cause it's a hard thing and it's a public thing. What words of wisdom would you share with her?

Attica: Well, ladies. I would say do it because at the end of the day you lose. We lose everyday. There are some small battles that we lose everyday, whether it's at work or with our kids or if we go to a place of worship or we're in relationships or we're dating. We lose everyday. And so losing a political campaign is probably going to happen. It may happen the first time you run, it might happen after you've actually won and served. And that's okay. You can get back up again and keep going.

The other thing that I would say is that we have to allow ourselves to move beyond the concerns around money, because people will give when they believe in you. People who I know I made some assumptions about their lack of inability to give, simply because I know how much I've struggled financially as a single mom of two kids and growing up in housing developments. And so I know what it's been like to grow up with little and so I don't feel comfortable asking people who I either know or think have little to give up what they have. But I've also learned after running for office a couple of times that people will give what they can and that I have to respect them enough to be able to make their own decisions. So if I'm going to ask them for a donation, I have to trust that if they can't give it they're not going to give it. But if they can, they will.

And so I think that as women we have to allow ourselves to have the conversations that sound like yes we can do it, yes we can raise the money rather than being defeated and saying there's no way I'm going to be able to raise that much money. Because when we have that attitude we won't raise that much money. But when we have the attitude that we can, we will.

The other thing that I would say to women who are thinking about running is make sure that you have the different support systems around you. And that includes the political support system, the people who are going to help to manage our campaign and to run it, and also those social support systems, those

folks are going to call you up and stop by when you need someone who is going to cook your meal or if you need someone to help clean your apartment or your house or someone who's going to call you up and say, "Okay, let's go to the movies cause I know you need a break. I've seen what kind of week you had."

You've got to have that social support around you and sometimes that's family members and sometimes it's friends. So make sure that if you have a relationship with, you're a family that you keep them close as well because they're going to be the people that you will need to call on probably the most for a lot of different things and for a lot of different reasons. So keep all of these different support systems close and being clear with them about what you need.

In these kinds of times when you're running for office and people see that, they know you need a lot so it's okay to ask for a lot.

Rebecca: That's right. And it also reminds me of one of my favorite sayings which is healthy people ask for what they need and I think a lot of times there might be some unspoken needs, right? And so don't assume that people know what you need. So being able to have a support network of people who can do things like keep the kids and pick them up are super important. And so it also challenges me to think about even for those women who are not running for office, how can you do that for someone else, right? Because we need candidates and we need the folks that are showing up to sort of be that team. So I really appreciate you echo in those sentiments.

So when you think about ... you mentioned Emerge and I was just training for them a couple of weeks ago here in Michigan. What are other resources that come to mind for you that were helpful for you on your journey to run for office?

Attica: Oh, Rebecca. That's probably the hardest question you've asked because I don't feel like there were a lot of resources. I just don't. Emerge Kentucky was by far one of the best for me. The other that existed here at home in Louisville was the Metropolitan Louisville Women's Political Caucus. And so they have every other year a day long campaign school. And so that was helpful in being involved with the organization. The Metropolitan Louisville Women's Political Caucus helped to open up doors for me to be connected to other women who had either been in office or work currently in office or who also are running for office.

But outside of those two organizations that were specifically geared toward women, there were not a lot of other resources that I found helpful to me. And part of that for me is that I am the kind of person who is not that deeply connected to the local or state political party that I'm a part of for a lot of reasons - one missing out, not seeing the social justice platform that I have wanted to see over the years, but also not really seeing black women in leadership in either local or in the local or state party. So I haven't really been involved that they may

have been resources, but I didn't find them to be resources for me. And that may change now that I'm going to state office and different and new relationships can be build.

But at the time that I ran for the council and this year when I was running for state rep, I can't say that it was really there and part because I was also running against an incumbent who is the same political party. So I understand that challenge as well. But this is just to say to women who are listening that some of the places where you think you might get support it's not always going to be there. And then other places where people may have historically been a little quiet or stayed in the background around politics, if they support you and believe in you they'll step up and that's what happened for me.

Rebecca: That's right. So it's such a powerful point around ... you don't know where your support is going to come from and it's also why I wanted to create this community of black women who can support each other because whether it's a woman in Kentucky or a woman in Michigan, we are fighting for many of the same things and our battles are very similar. So my vision for this work is that we can connect and we can support each other and maybe it can't be stopping by bringing food, but maybe it can be donating \$5, right? And so how do we build those networks because other people will not build them for us. So I appreciate you for even being a part of today's show because this is the spirit of that, right? Is that this advice and wisdom that you have will be in service to somebody who absolutely needs it.

So you talked about running against an incumbent. Tomorrow here in Michigan is election day and there are going to be women on the ballot. This will air in a few weeks. But there's another election coming up in November and so the words of wisdom that we asked for earlier were for somebody who was thinking about running for office. But what would you have said to yourself the day before that election? Knowing everything that you know now, for women who have decided to step up and who have put their names on the ballot, what advice would you give to them?

Attica: I would say the day before the election let it go. You've done everything you could possibly do up into that point. So breathe it out, let it go, release it, because there's only so much that is in your control. You have one vote just like everyone else. So trust that you did all of your work the way that you are supposed to do it, trust that you talked to the many people in your district that you could possibly talk to, and trust that they believe enough in you that they will vote for you. And on election day what is meant to happen will happen and whatever that is embrace it and determine where you will go from there.

Rebecca: That is such great advice and I know it will come in handy for some woman. And so I know that when you are officially sworn in that you are going to do some amazing things and you will continue to make history in Kentucky. And

for those women who are listening who might want to reach out to you, what is the best way that they could connect with you?

Attica: Sure. In the aid of social media, that's one of the best ways to initially get connected and I am happy to be connected to other women especially black women across the country who are either running for office, thinking about it, or are already in office. I think that there's a lot of power in us being connected online. So please let's follow one another on Twitter, I'm @atticascott and my Facebook page is Attica Scott Campaign.

Rebecca: Awesome. And we'll include all of that information in our show notes. Attica, this has just been a real joy and I mentioned earlier we didn't know each other before this show and I remember reading about your election and just being so excited and saying to myself someday I would love to meet her, and so great to have the opportunity to not only have the chance to chat with you, but also to be able to introduce you to other women who I know will be inspired by your story and all the amazing work that you are doing in Kentucky. So thank you again for joining us on Changing the Face of Power.

Attica: And thank you, Rebecca. Thank you for doing this podcast. You're awesome.

Rebecca: I really appreciate that. Well, so great chatting with you and until next time. Thanks again.

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.