

“It’s painfully easy to be ignored”

The Pledge Season 2 - Episode 4

Janine: I remember thinking like, Jesus, we’re putting our faces out there. Like this is it. There’s no going back. And I think that was the moment when I realized that there is a lot of courage that goes into taking a stance on an issue that is backed by so much power.

Allison: This is the Pledge, a podcast profiling people who have pledged to engage in our democracy. I’m Allison Daskal Hausman.

Sound of protests: Education is our right, so we’re going to fight, fight, fight!

Allison: Last episode I brought you the story of Bethany Letiecq, a professor at George Mason University in Virginia. She’s been fighting to expose the powerful private interests influencing the direction of her public university. On this episode you’ll meet a couple of the student activists who inspired her to speak out.

Janine: So I got involved almost on accident. (laughs)

Allison: This is Janine Gaspari, a recent GMU graduate.

Janine: I had no idea that we got so much money from large donors at George Mason. I didn’t really understand anything about the world of academic freedom. I just knew that my really good friend Sam told me I needed to go to this presentation that she was having because it was important. And I was like, okay, sure, whatever, I’ll go.

Allison: What she heard blew her mind.

Janine: And I went to this presentation and was like, what is going on here? Like here in this room? What’s going on at this university?

Allison: What Janine learned was that George Mason University gets millions of dollars from the Koch Brothers, the billionaire philanthropists known for their libertarian ideology. And she also learned that those donations influence everything from the names on campus buildings to what’s being taught in the classrooms.

Janine's friend Samantha Parsons, then a senior, who invited her to that meeting, had had a similar awakening a few years before.

Samantha: So when I was a freshman at George Mason I joined a club on campus called the environmental action group. And my friend Dan was in an Environmental Economics Course and he came to a meeting one evening and shared the fact that his professor was teaching climate denial as fact in the classroom and even threatening students that if they don't believe what he has to say or if they want to debate climate change with him they can leave and not come back.

Just a little bit of quick Googling we learned that that faculty member was a Koch-funded professor. So all of these pieces started connecting and shortly thereafter the faculty also shared with us they were blocked. Faculty had tried those internal processes to get answers – and to us as students we just viewed it as ok we need to actually organize now.

Allison: So they did. Samantha co-founded the student group Transparent GMU. Janine arrived at Mason three years later and joined in. These women with their friends and the faculty fought hard against having universities taken over by corporate interests. A threat, they believe, jeopardizes our democracy and the future of our country.

Janine: We should be supporting our education and supporting the future of our students and economic growth. But, we shouldn't be doing that so that these large donors can get ahead and push their agendas. We shouldn't be publicly subsidizing political movements and that sort of way.

Allison: I have to say, I love meeting young women activists. I know a lot of inspiring young women and each, in her, or their, own way, is just so much farther along the path toward liberation, seeing themselves as powerful.

When Samantha and her friends started to organize they focused on the issue of transparency – getting a hold of documents between the Koch Foundation and the University to try to understand the scale of the donations and their terms. Progress was slow. The administration barely budged. But student and faculty activists were galvanized in 2016 when the law school at George Mason University was renamed for the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. Here’s Cenk Uygur on the Young Turks network, a progressive news and opinion channel on YouTube.

News: So, George Mason University, which is known to be conservative, apparently called up a couple of donors and BOOM! Jackpot!

Allison: The renaming happened in conjunction with a \$30 million gift from the Kochs and an anonymous donor. And there was no public process. At that point, Janine was a Sophomore and had barely heard about the Koch brothers.

Janine: I didn't even know really who they were until the renaming of the law school. and I knew who Antonin Scalia but still was sort of understanding political things...

Allison: Janine’s political awareness grew fast.

Janine: When I got to college, I started realizing that there were all these different oppressive systems that were actually causing a lot of the injustices that I was either experiencing myself day to day, or things I was hearing about.

Allison: Janine also began to appreciate her privilege and the responsibility that came with it.

Janine: I know where my next meal is coming from. I have a roof over my head and all these sorts of things. Not everybody has that. And once that really sunk in for me I realized there is absolutely no excuse for me to not at least be part of some sort of change to try and bring a more just world to everyone.

Music

Allison: Janine was actually at a Bernie Sanders rally when she first met Samantha Parsons.

Janine: She was covered in face paint and blood dressed like a zombie.

Allison: Samantha remembers too.

Samantha: (laughing) That's so funny. Oh my gosh. I do remember that action. We dressed up as the Walking Debt because, you know, debts turn students into zombies. We're working really hard. We're trying to go to school, we're balancing so many jobs, and then when we graduate we're still burdened with this big debt. It's like a virus we can't get rid of. So it was a pun on the Walking Dead.

Allison: At that first encounter, Janine had no idea Samantha would lead her down a path that would totally transform her future.

Janine: She was the person that I think sort of took me under wing and helped me when I was interested in things, or like if I had questions. She was just always great at answering them and she had a lot of patience with me and I really appreciated that.

Allison: Their friendship turned out to be fortuitous. Under Sam's mentorship, really Janine really came into her own as an activist. And when Sam graduated, she was able to hand over the reins of the student-group Transparent GMU.

Samantha: She turned out to be just an amazing organizer and so committed to not only building her skills and building the campaign, but doing that with other people and inspiring other people to step up just like she did.

Allison: Janine figured out early on that a key part of what she needed to do as a leader of Transparent GMU, was to just keep up the momentum.

Janine: Making sure that we were having meetings every single week and being really aggressive about recruitment and just getting visibility about the issue. Five years ago it was a struggle to even have people know who the Kochs were.

Allison: Today, the increased awareness is palpable. There's a Facebook page called *GMU Memes for Koch Brother Teens* with over 5,000 followers, and the April 1st satirical issue of the newspaper was dedicated to the subject.

Janine: I wouldn't say that every single person on campus knows it, because we're such a large campus of 33,000 students. But there's quite a bit of name recognition of Transparent GMU, and people to know to come to if they have an issue about money, or transparency, or donations.

Allison: In addition to raising consciousness and building Transparent GMU, Janine was able to organize a consistent presence to support Bethany Letiecq and the faculty's

resistance that we learned about in our last episode. Bethany credits the students with helping faculty like her boldly speak out.

Bethany: Transparent GMU students came to just about every faculty senate meeting that we held this last year and stood in the back of the room holding signs. Just about every one. They protested. That gave me the gumption to ask the questions that I asked.

Allison: Janine had learned how important it was to be there for every single meeting.

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Janine: Unless there is a very intentional movement to build power, which I think we did really, really well and continue to do and maintain, it’s really easy to be ignored. It’s painfully easy to be ignored.

Allison: In 2017, Transparent GMU with the help of Samantha Parsons now at the national organization, *UnKoch My Campus*, filed a Freedom of Information Act or FOIA request, They were trying to gain access to the donor agreements between the university and the university foundation that administers donations like those from the Kochs. The first attempt went nowhere.

Janine: And the foundation came back and said, “No, we’re not subject to FOIA.”

Allison: But that wasn’t the end of it. Here’s Samantha.

Samantha: Thanks to work that Janine did to lay a lot of the groundwork to maintain momentum long after many of us who started Transparent GMU graduated, there was still a big interest – right? Like there were still students who were ready to kick it up a notch. And thankfully by that time I had been able to come onto staff at *UnKoch My Campus* and serve as a mentor and support network for them and other students around the country. And that’s when we actually found a lawyer, Evan Johns at Appalachian Mountain Advocates in Charlottesville, Virginia, who said, you know, “we’ll help you submit another public records request, maybe it was just the language y’all were using.” Admittedly we were students. I had no idea of what a public request was until I submitted one.

Allison: So they submitted a second FOIA request. When that second FOIA request was refused, their new lawyer helped the students take it to court.

Janine: In April of 2018 we went to our trial in the Fairfax County Circuit Court and the courtroom was packed for the entire day. We had community members that were there and students that were there. People came when they could and left when they had to go to class.

Allison: Think about this for a second. Janine's group of undergraduate students organized significant student presence at this trial for the entire day.

Janine: The judge saw that this was something that people cared about. The room was full with at least 30 people for the whole day. And that was maybe the moment that I realized that people really had our back. And even though the judge didn't rule in our favor at that time, we still got granted an appeal at the Virginia Supreme Court.

Allison: The case at the Virginia Supreme Court was heard on September 11th of this year. Samantha and Janine, both graduates by then, didn't miss it.

Samantha (at court): Welcome to our press conference before Transparent GMU heads into the Supreme Court of Virginia.

Cheers

Allison: At that press conference outside the courthouse, Samantha had nothing but praise for what her fellow activists on campus accomplished after she graduated.

Samantha (at court): Y'all didn't just sue the school and stay quiet. You sued the school and then also started meeting with legislators about legislative options for Transparency. You sued the school and then you kept working with your faculty allies about gift acceptance policies changes on campus. Y'all literally pursued three major strategies in full force and you're winning. I mean, what, last year legislation was proposed to make this shit transparent in Virginia. And last year George Mason University was forced, because of student and faculty pressure and community pressure, to change their gift acceptance policies on campus, being the first university to fully transform their gift acceptance policies because of Koch influence on their campus!

Applause

Allison: A decision from the Virginia Supreme Court is pending.

Music

Allison: For all their success, Janine says the movement's impact has come with lots of lessons.

Janine: I just didn't realize that it is really exhausting. It takes a lot emotionally, it takes a lot mentally. A lot of it is making sure that you're well-educated on the issue and you can connect with people and you can communicate all of the important information in a way that people actually understand and relate to and care about and making sure they are heard in the process. All of that takes a lot of time to learn.

Allison: But she believes the risks have yielded real impact, and that is a powerful feeling.

Janine: This is a problem that is not going to be forgotten at this university. And because it's not going to be forgotten at this university it won't be forgotten at a lot of other universities.

Music

Allison: Janine graduated in 2019 and now works as a legislative assistant for the Virginia State delegate Mark Keame.

Samantha Parsons is the Campaigns Director for *UnKoch My Campus*, the national nonprofit.

Allison: And while waiting for the Virginia Supreme Court decision, Current Transparent GMU students are not stopping their action. Just as I was producing this episode, I got word that Transparent GMU had finally gotten a meeting with the new interim president of the university, after six years of trying to talk to the university's highest officials.

The student group also reports they had an incredibly productive conversation. And the administration has committed to analyzing and understanding its relationship with the politically motivated think tanks on campus.

Music

Allison: In our next episode, you will meet Valerie Slater from RISE for Youth, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization committed to dismantling the youth prison model in Virginia and leading the country in creating community-based alternatives.

Valerie: Don't take a housing community and tell the children in it, "do better." Do better how? Are you going to change their education system? Do better how? Are you going to give them something else to do with their spare time? Do better how? Are you going to provide resources for their family so that food is always on the table so that they have literally just the bare essentials when it comes to school supplies and clothes? Do better how?

Allison: Be sure to download and learn about Valerie's amazing journey!

If you like what you hear, please subscribe, share and review this podcast--Those stars and comments mean so much and they help others find us. Finally, if you haven't made a donation to our project, please consider going to thepledgepodcast.com and click on the donate button. Thank you!

Thanks so much to Janine and Sam for taking the time to speak with me and share their stories and knowledge about these issues. I've learned so much. If *you* want to learn more about Transparent GMU and the threats posed by dark money, go to thepledgepodcast.com and check out the show notes. There are links to resources and book recommendations.

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

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