

Let's Get Out There!

Organizing in Detroit

The Pledge Season 3 - Episode 5

Vanessa: We're trying to talk to one hundred and fifty thousand voters and that's all through digital phone calls, text messages. Um, and that sounds easy. But reaching out to them is different from getting them to vote.

Allison: That's Vanessa Velazquez, Field Director for the grassroots organization, Detroit Action.

Vanessa: Our goal is to then, out of that 150K, create a base of voters afterwards that stays on to us and holds on to us as a political home going into our next election years. And then it comes into the seamless cycle of like voting culture. That would be the most beautiful thing that we could create. And that is the goal.

Allison: And this is The Pledge. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman.

BREAK

Action: What do we do? Stand up, fight back. Stand up, fight back.

Allison: Detroit Action hosted a rally on September 1st to address the desperate need for housing assistance.

Action: The citizens of Detroit are losing their houses. They're being evicted because the moratorium is over.

Allison: Detroit Action is a community-based organization explicitly working with the Black and Brown communities in Detroit. They organize to build a membership. And they fight for the changes people in the community identify as priorities. They often work with more vulnerable people that national organizations might ignore. Populations that don't necessarily have a strong history of getting to the polls. How does Detroit Action

build relationships and gain public trust so that less energized people become hopeful and feel motivated to get involved and go vote? Detroit Action's answer?

Vanessa: Continue to engage people through the issues that they care about the most and then tie it into how they can have that vote reflected to honor those issues.

Allison: Because Michigan is a swing state, dollars and organizers from across the country, both red and blue, work to get Michiganders out to vote. But Detroit Action is about more than just this election. It's about building a voting culture and local power. Vanessa's job is to manage the team that builds that long-term grassroots power. It's a big job and she's still pretty young.

Vanessa: I'm kind of used to the like. "Oh, how old are you? Oh, you're the director!" Yes. I'm shocked, too. I did not know I'd be here five years ago, but I've gotten used to it. Yeah.

Allison: Vanessa first made the connection between her lived experience and politics in her teens. It started with her Mom's rule that at 16, she would have to get a job so she could pay for her cell phone.

Vanessa: "Once you start getting your job, you will pay for these phones, like that's your responsibility." OK, so I was excited. I started working at JCPenney that summer.

Allison: Vanessa was proud to be getting a paycheck and to be able to pay for her phone. But then,

Vanessa: My mom asked us to use our first check on helping her pay the water bill.

Allison: Most of us have heard about the Flint water crisis. Well, water is also a problem in Detroit, and it's very expensive.

Vanessa: So I'm like, what! I can do that? Yes I want to do that. So at first I'm thinking I'm so excited to go and pay this water bill for my mom. And it was a type of accomplishment that I felt like I had for a while. But then I got to thinking about it and I was like, why do we pay for water if we're in a Great Lakes state?

Allison: Vanessa was on to something. According to a 2018 study, Detroit's low-income residents pay the highest share of their income on water of any city in the country. That was the end of her first paycheck.

Vanessa: It blew my mind, it blew my mind that people have to pay for water and that a month's bill, I think that bill that we helped pay was maybe 400 bucks and change. I'm like 400 bucks! I'm like, this is the first time I had my hands on 400 bucks. Like what?

Allison: Later, when she was in college at Michigan State, majoring in political science, Trump's unexpected victory catalyzed her thinking into taking more responsibility.

Vanessa: 2016, of course, the impact of that for the rest of my college experience was very much like, "okay, this isn't a joke, anytime we have these pretend worst case scenarios of so-in-so gets into the office, it's actually unfolding." So I think that's when I started to do more self-reflection of what I wanted to do and what that actually looked like.

Allison: She set out to become a political organizer. Her first job was as a canvasser for an environmental organization. But, as it turns out, it wasn't quite the right fit. They were focused on fundraising and it was in communities that didn't feel like home to Vanessa. Then she saw this ad on Indeed.

Vanessa: The ad was racial and economic justice. I'm like, boom! It's doing exactly what I was just doing, member building, getting donations, fundraising, on top of building a base. And it was for Good Jobs Now - now Detroit Action.

Allison: She got the job as a canvasser. And while it sounds like the same job, it's goals were explicitly around building community and it was targeting specific Detroit neighborhoods that Vanessa knew. Within a year, she was promoted to Canvass Director, which meant that she managed the whole team of canvassers. Not long after that first promotion, she was asked to become the Field Director. That meant developing the strategy for the canvassing teams--hiring, training, targeting where to reach out and developing scripts for conversations. *This* was a good fit. Vanessa loved connecting to her community in a deep way. She was building grassroots power to address real life economic and environmental problems, like the ones she saw in her family back when she was 16.

Vanessa: When I started with the group in 2018, I could share not only experiences, but understanding of how the systems around Detroit operated, one being water shutoffs, being able to relate back of how I would pick up the water bill, like just all those things were common stories that I could talk to other Detroiters about.

Allison: And although the immediate struggles are huge, and devastating, Detroit Action stays focused on changing the systems that are the roots of the suffering.

Vanessa: When you come to us talking about facing foreclosure, yes, we might know some applications that you can fill out to stop it. But joining our fight doesn't mean that you'll necessarily have to not face foreclosure anymore. And that's the sad reality, is that a lot of the times that we do meet people in crises and we're not an organization that's set up to fix crises because these crises are the actual institutional change we're trying to fight against.

Allison: When I last spoke with Vanessa, she was in the homestretch of the campaign for the national election. To ramp up their outreach, Detroit Action has been hiring a lot of people, many from the communities that they serve, but not everyone.

Vanessa: I actually recently hired somebody who, the reason why they even applied and wanted to get involved was that they didn't vote in 2016.

Allison: This new applicant was moved to get more involved by the racial justice fights and the pandemic. After she got the job at Detroit Action, the training really drilled home the power of voting in Michigan, and how narrowly the election was decided in 2016.

Vanessa: I had broke down the numbers to her that Michigan was only lost by like ten thousand seven hundred votes. And basically two votes per precinct and she's like two votes per precinct? And I'm like, yeah, if we would have just divided up by two more people making the polls by 8pm to vote for Hillary, we would have won. And she's like, that's mind blowing. I could have been that second person in my district that had I gone out and vote.

Allison: Although some groups are knocking on doors, Detroit Action is leaning heavily on phones, texting and social media platforms because of the pandemic. But even virtually, Vanessa emphasizes having personal conversations is central to their kind of outreach.

Vanessa: Over the last like two days, we've had over like 600 conversations with people, like actual conversations, and of those 600 folks, we've had just shy of 200 of them confirmed that, yes, they'll be voting absentee. And that's just that's great.

Allison: Add to that the volunteer outreach, and that goal of 150,000 seems very attainable. They collaborate with a national group called Center for Democracy who brings to them volunteer teams.

Vanessa: We just did a volunteer session. And in 30 minutes, there was like twenty five or so volunteers active on Hussle, a peer to peer text messaging app. And in thirty minutes they had already sent text messages to twenty three thousand people.

Allison: By the end of the 30 minutes almost 150 people replied “yes” to the question “Can we count on you to vote?” For Detroit Action, this is huge, because the people they were targeting weren’t the usual voters.

Vanessa: And the list that we had targeted was a list of folks who did not vote, disillusioned people who did not vote in ‘16, ‘18 or have not voted at all yet in 2020. So we’re like, we’re talking to you because you deserve a conversation and why this year’s important.

Allison: And then they called some of the responders who told them they hadn't voted in 20+ years.

(on phone) And so, how, how is the, what, what is the feeling? How are people feeling about the work? Like how’s your team feeling. How are you feeling?

Vanessa: Oh, I mean, the team, they are, we are energized, but we also definitely are prioritizing self care. Every night we always share the bad story and the good story, the one that made you frustrated. You had to take that five minute break. And then the one that got you cracking a smile and you developed a phone friend. Like we always celebrate those, but we're definitely making sure that even though we're energized, we're also honoring when we're tired.

Allison: A good example of getting tired happened during the primaries in early August. Vanessa had just moved to a new home with her twin sister, also an organizer at Detroit Action. Turns out, there was no time for housewarming.

Vanessa: No friends or family came over, we just sat on the dialer and I remember in an hour there was like, I had just refilled my cup of water and I didn't take a sip of it. Like it was just I would hang up one call, there would be another one already loaded. And on days like that, it's just tiredness that hits us. We just talked to 20 people in a 35-minute span. So, yeah.

Allison: But Vanessa is energized by her team.

Vanessa: I have a very strong team who loves to throw their sassiness and their voice into their into their pitches that when we're talking about, like the income inequality with like billionaires literally profiting during this time, they're like that also gives us energy.

Allison: Their plan is to take one more three day weekend off, and then, because of early voting, it's election day every day.

Vanessa: We don't have votes to miss, like, let's get out there. So. Yeah.

Outro

Allison: In our next episode, we'll meet another organizer at Detroit Action, Laura Misumi.

Laura: There's a significant percentage of Asian-Americans who never get reached out to by any party, any organization about civic engagement and about voting. And that's one of the main barriers. You know, people just don't know.

Allison: Laura is a fourth generation Japanese American and comes from a long line of activists.

If you are interested in supporting Detroit Action or volunteering, go to the show notes at Thepledgepodcast.com for the link to learn more. They're ready to train volunteers and you can sign up for shifts that work for you to make calls or to text. You'll be calling people with information about voting.

I want to first thank Vanessa for taking the time to speak with me when I know how swamped you are. And thanks to everyone at Detroit Action who also helped make this happen. Thanks to the The Ford Foundation for partially funding this season. Huge thanks to my team: Jeb Sharp, Tina Tobey Mack, Ezra Hausman, Hedrick Smith; Multitude Productions and Patricia Nieshoff. And thanks to all of you for listening! Until next time, Stay Strong and Stick with your pledge.

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