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Under the Dome

Nurse as Politician

Gale Adcock

When I was in the eighth grade, my class travelled 3 hours by bus from southwest Virginia to the state capitol in Richmond for a field trip. We toured the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in the morning and attended a special performance of Moliere's play *School for Wives* in the afternoon. Seated very near the stage, I was enthralled by every aspect of the performance, from the period costumes to the elaborate sets that glided magically into place. That singular experience stands out in my otherwise hazy memories of junior high. A half century later, I found myself once again perched on the edge of a front row seat, dazzled by a different kind of intricate and impressive production with an equally arresting title: the "Healing Politics Campaign School for Nurses and Midwives."

One of a Kind

"Healing Politics" is equal parts brainchild and love child, the creation of cofounders Kimberly Gordon, a certified registered nurse anesthetist (CRNA), and Lisa Summers, a certified nurse midwife (CNM). Gordon and Summers met at Yale in 2018 when Gordon was a student in the doctor of nursing practice (DNP) program and Summers was her faculty advisor. They shared a fascination with the vital role for nurses at the intersection of policy and politics. A literature review and deep dives into legislative, political, and organizational sources confirmed their suspicions: there were few nurses in elected office *and* no nurse-specific campaign training programs. The grave implications of those dual realities—and a conviction that both should and could change—formed the basis of Gordon's DNP project.

With guidance from Summers and support from (now former) dean Ann Kurth, Gordon and her DNP project partner interviewed nurses with successful and unsuccessful campaign runs, scrutinized standard campaign training content, designed original curriculum, recruited political experts as faculty, and used social media and professional networks to capture the interest of nurses across the country. Their ambitious timeline allowed for typical doctoral project setbacks (multiple rewrites, institutional review board delays, etc).

They could not have predicted, and ultimately could not overcome, the impacts of the global pandemic that hit the United States in Spring 2020, just as their onsite pilot was set to launch. When social distancing forced all Yale classes and programs online, the date was optimistically pushed out a few months. After a second months-long delay, amid continued case spikes and spotty vaccine availability (and with Spring 2021 graduation fast approaching), the original plan was reluctantly scrapped.

A virtual webinar fulfilled Gordon's degree requirements but not her dream of an immersive campaign school. That undimmed vision led Gordon and Summers to embark on a mission to move the idea from academic exercise to reality once they left Yale. Thus began a 2-year saga that included establishing a nonprofit, expanding the base of interested nurses, creating a virtual platform for events and communications, and pitching potential funders.

In May 2023, 31 nurses from 16 states gathered on the Duke University campus at the Sanford School of Public Policy for the debut of the country's *first* campaign school for nurses and midwives. Students, faculty, and cocreators were bound together by the inspirational and aspirational "Healing Politics" mission: "to inspire, motivate, recruit, and train nurses and midwives to run for elected office up and down the ballot while building a culture of civic engagement within the profession."

Welcome to the Arena

I shared front row honors for this historic event with fellow "Healing Politics" faculty Delaware Lieutenant Governor Bethany Hall-Long and state senators Erin Murphy (Minnesota) and Kristin Roers (North Dakota). Over 3 days of intense programming, communal meals, and invitational events featuring local nursing leaders, we spoke frankly about our motivations to run, the rigors of campaigning, working with lobbyists, developing a fundraising style, and the role of money in our elections.

I captured some attendees' stories for this column, hopeful their words will inspire more nurse practitioners (NPs) to run for office and include campaign training as an essential part of their preparation.

Talking the Talk

This first "Healing Politics" cohort had a varied political and campaign background. Some had spent decades phone banking, door knocking, and working the polls for candidates. **Patrice Little, DNP, NP**, of Atlanta, Georgia, had held a unique role as a content producer for *Lawmakers*, Georgia Public Broadcasting's daily in-depth coverage of the state legislature. Regardless of their previous paid or volunteer involvement, the group eagerly soaked up sessions that included campaign finance compliance, calculating a "win number," navigating negative campaigning, creating an initial contributor list, overcoming fundraising hesitation, and handling media interviews.

I was curious to know what prompted these accomplished NPs and other nurses in practice, education, administration, and business to attend campaign school at that precise moment. Was it serendipity or something else? I got some interesting answers to the question, “Why now?” Recent political events had created a sense of urgency for two attendees:

Suzanne Wertman, MSN, CNM, Wilmington, North Carolina: *“From time to time throughout my midwifery career, I’ve thought I should run for office. I’ve always been curious about it, but thought I could best serve from the sidelines and behind the scenes. The Dobbs decision and the ensuing legislative changes to limit abortion access in my state have given me a sense of urgency about running now. As a nurse and a midwife, I believe my community should have expert representation if healthcare decisions are being made in the state legislature.”*

Lou Bartolo, DNP, RN, Chevy Chase, Maryland: *“Maryland will have open seats in 2024 due to a Senator retirement, potential US House of Representatives’ retirements, and House members running for US Senate. This was the perfect time for me to join the inaugural class.”*

Campaign school was a timely development opportunity for others:

Steven D. Powell, MSN, RN, Houston Texas: *“As a member of the original 2020 cohort, I had been ready for years for the campaign school to be held. The main motivating factors were my experiences in volunteering for different legislative/political groups since 2018 and the desire to be more proficient in those areas.”*

Mark Miller, DNP, NP, Nashville, Tennessee: *“I’d love to be a part of the solution to our healthcare problems at the legislative level. I’ve been working to become a thought leader in a policy advocacy role with the hopes of being an elected officials’ health policy advisor and then Commissioner or Secretary of Health one day.”*

And some were motivated by dissatisfaction and dismay with the status quo:

Deborah Tedesco, DNP, NP, Orlando, Florida: *“I am frustrated by the divisiveness of the current political climate. More nurses in elected offices will bring a much-needed human touch, helping to bridge divides and build consensus. Nurses’ voices and experiences are essential for crafting inclusive, effective, and compassionate solutions to complex challenges.”*

Rachel Spaulding, DNP, NP, Evansville, Indiana: *“I am tired of the division and know that nurses have a unique voice and set of skills that allow us to bring people together for a common cause. We are uniquely skilled at having difficult conversations with many different people from many different walks of life. Our states and our nation desperately need this type of leadership.”*

Walking the Walk

On the final program day, I glanced around the hushed room, struck by the extent of the assembled potential. A mix of would-be candidates, campaign managers, and political activists was hard at work, translating their aspirations and new knowledge into actionable next steps. They were looking ahead, pondering the existential question, “What next?”

When I reached out to alumnae less than a week later, I was impressed by how swiftly some plans had been acted upon. Following the faculty’s advice to build a nonnursing resume, **Deborah Tedesco** had applied for appointment to a city advisory board. **Mark Miller** had reached out to state party officials for the first time. **Lou Bartolo** was mentally assembling his “kitchen cabinet” in anticipation of a 2024 race. **Suzanne Wertman** had completed a contributor list stretching back decades over her personal, professional, and civic life.

You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know

Political campaigns have become increasingly sophisticated since my first local race in 2007. Gone is the almost cultish devotion to direct mail and 30-second television advertisements. Two developments are particularly noteworthy:

Social media. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have given candidates with modest finances the ability to raise their profiles and target voters with relatively inexpensive digital ads. Social media has not supplanted direct mail and is no substitute for a strong field campaign, but it has become ubiquitous in contemporary campaigning.

Big data. Use of voter demographics and prior election statistics to tailor messaging, budget resources, and monitor the impact and progress of campaigns is relatively new in down-ballot races (legislative and local offices). It is used to guide decisions as varied as which doors to canvas and the verbiage of polling questions.

Social media and reliance on real-time data have quickened the pace of campaigns and steepened an already impressive first-time candidate learning curve. There is little time (and even less patience) for on-the-job training. Campaign school has gone from “nice to have” to essential for serious candidates. Just as NPs seek competence and confidence when changing practice settings or patient populations, they need the special knowledge and skills acquired from formal campaign training.

“Healing Politics” is a unique campaign school. Created by nurses for nurses, it uses our common experiences and shared language as context for imbedding new campaign-specific content that builds upon nurses’ core skills and abilities. That said, timing is all-important in politics, and your timeline may or may not align with a future “Healing Politics” offering. Ultimately, the choice of campaign school may not be as critical as the decision to attend one. Campaign training is about preparation and contemplation. Here is what I know: the sooner NPs start thinking like a candidate, the sooner they begin seeing opportunities and possibilities like a candidate. Campaign school combines new skills with “new eyes.” What were some of the most impactful takeaways for these “Healing Politics” graduates?

Celia McIntosh, DNP, NP, Rochester, New York: *“Nurses and midwives can apply their advocacy skills to engage in broader social and political issues, such as social determinants of health, environmental justice, and equity.”*

Rachel Spaulding: *“It brought to the forefront the importance of ‘right time, right seat,’ and helped me understand the correct timing to be successful in running myself and in helping other nurses run for office.”*

Lou Bartolo: *“The campaign school gave me the understanding that it’s not necessary to be career politician, attorney, or come from a high-profile family to win a race. It also influenced me that the time is now.”*

Mark Miller: *“While considering a run for elected office was always a secret thought, participation in the campaign school has moved this thought into an active part of my plan.”*

Deborah Tedesco: *“Before attending, I had planned to help other nurses run for office. While I still want to help other nurses, after this experience I have the desire to run for an elected office myself. The campaign school helped to instill confidence that I have the skills needed to run and gave me a concrete plan for getting started.”*

One of my favorite “Healing Politics” moments came during the closing ceremony, as each graduate received their certificate and made brief remarks about their experience. **Kelly Willenberg, MBA, RN**, of Greenville, South Carolina, challenged her new colleagues to step out and *“Take the trip; buy the shoes; eat the cake; run*

for office!" To that advice I will add, "Grab a seat on the front row. Go to campaign school!"

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Gale Adcock, MSN, FNP-BC, previously served 4 terms in the North Carolina House of Representatives and is in her first term in the North Carolina Senate. Senator Adcock can be reached at galeadcock@gmail.com.

Note: All of the direct quotes included in the column were provided by actual participants who were informed of potential use in this column.