

How Polly Baca Became a State Representative

I'd been very active in the local Democratic Party in Adams County, and I got a call from a newspaper reporter. He said, "Polly, I was just talking to Shirley Whitten, the vice-chair of the Adams County Democratic Party, and I asked her who might want to fill the vacancy that is in your house district."

We had had our nominee, [but] the Democratic Party nominee Stan Bender had gotten a new job as city manager of Northglenn. He had to leave as the nominee for state representative in our district. The reporter said, "When I asked Shirley who might be interested, she mentioned ..." And he named three men, three white men. "And then she said, she thought that you might be interested in running for state representative. So, are you going to run?"

And out of my mouth came, "Yes." I had no idea what I was doing, I had never thought of running for state representative. I thought maybe I'd run for city council first eventually. Because I knew that I would eventually run for office but had not planned for this vacancy, which meant that I had to get the nomination from fifty precinct committee people in the district.

I hung up the phone and I said, "What in the world did I just do?" You know, here I am, my husband and I are having a reconciliation. My daughter's three years old. I'm just doing consultant work, I don't have a whole lot of money, and here I am going to run for state representative.

But I know how to do it. I've been in enough campaigns, I know what I need to do, and I've made enough mistakes that I know what I need to do. I sent a letter to every single precinct committee person and then I made calls to each of them and asked them if I could meet with them. It was the days when there had never been a woman from Adams County or a minority ever elected to a partisan office in Adams County.

I went to see this one gentleman, precinct committee man, George DeTullio, and I called him for an appointment. He said, "Polly, you don't need to come see me because I'm not going to vote for you anyhow."

And I said, "Well, may I ask why?"

And he said, "Because I don't believe women should serve in the state legislature."

I appreciated the fact that he was honest because that meant I wasn't going to have to spend any time on him. I just crossed him off my list and went on to the others.

I also went to talk to a gentleman who was a mobile homeowner. [There were] lots of problems in the mobile homes at that time because they had a lot of vendors who were selling mobile homes and then they would take off. They were fly-by-night companies that were leaving shoddy mobile homes and didn't take care of them and weren't fulfilling the warranties at all, if they even had warranties. So, a lot of problems in the mobile home parks at that time. And I had quite a few of them in my district.

I went to visit the precinct committeeman, the precinct committeewoman was a good friend of mine, but the precinct committeeman said, "Are you one of those Corky Gonzales La Raza Unida people?"

And I said, "Well, Corky's a good friend of mine, but I'm a Democrat." In those days there was a La Raza Unida political party running candidates. And I said, "I'm a Democrat. I've always been a Democrat. I worked for the White House with President Johnson and with Sen. Robert Kennedy and the Democratic

National Committee. I've got good credentials as a Democrat, I've just never belonged to the La Raza Unida party.”

He said, “OK.”

So we sat down and talked. After that meeting, the precinct committeewoman, Judy Kahle, went to meet with him, and the two of them decided that they would vote for whichever candidate it was that understood their problems and could help mobile homeowners.

By the night of the election, there was a meeting where they invited all the precinct committee people. And by that time there were only two white men and me. We sat in a panel, and we responded to questions. When they asked about mobile homes, I was the only one with a plan. I said that I wanted to initiate a mobile home licensing board so that we would regulate those mobile home dealers and make sure that they were reputable business people.

At the end of the meeting, they were all voting, and my friend Judy sat right next to Bill and watched him as he marked his ballot and made sure she said, “Remember, Bill, we agreed to vote for whomever knew our problems and could provide the solution.” So she watched as he marked an X by my name.

That night I won the nomination for state representative in that district by one vote. It was Bill Kennedy's vote, and the rest is history.