



Political Grooming Starts Early

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Roll Call Staff

When lobbyist Susannah Wellford Shakow founded the Women Under Forty Political Action Committee in 1999, she expected it to be a successful vehicle for getting women to run for and win political office. While the PAC did help some women get elected — Reps. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) and Mary Bono Mack (R-Calif.) owe some of their success to the organization — Shakow wasn't seeing the numbers she'd dreamed of.

"We couldn't get around the fact that no matter how well we did with raising money or supporting these candidates, there were still such a tiny number of candidates running in the first place," Shakow says.

Out of this frustration, the idea for Running Start was born. Launched in 2007, the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization is designed to nurture young, female politicians — beginning with high school students.

"We got this idea to start at the beginning and really change mindsets about what running for office really meant," she says. "So we'd get a new generation of young women growing up thinking of themselves as candidates."

The organization began with a weeklong Washington, D.C., summer retreat that focused on leadership, media training and other facets of the campaign process, called the Young Women's Political Leadership Program. Each July, the girls stay in the dorms at American University and spend their days in seminars learning how to network, raise campaign money and speak in front of a camera.

"When we started this, we really felt strongly that this was the right thing to do, that this would work, that if you talked to a high school girl about this and demystified it she might grow up and run for office," Shakow says.

The program, which is free to participants and funded by corporate donors and individual sponsors, started off somewhat quietly. The inaugural summer saw only 20 applicants, all of whom were from the D.C. area. Shakow says the success of the program in recent years is due in part to these students telling their friends and teachers about how much they enjoyed the program. In its third year, Running Start received a whopping 30,000 applications.

"Something happened, whether it was the election season with Hillary [Rodham Clinton], [Barack] Obama and Sarah Palin or if it's some other shift, but young women are feeling like they need to get engaged," she says. "Frankly, it was kind of heartbreaking for us because we got these fabulous applications and could only take 50."

These 50 students hear from guest speakers such as Clinton White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers, Democratic fundraiser Julianna Smoot and Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.).

In some cases, the speakers inspire students to change their plans. For instance, Camille Henderson, a 16-year-old high school student from Newark, Del., never had any political aspirations before she attended the retreat. She always planned to become an obstetrician-gynecologist — that is, until she heard Mishonda Baldwin speak during the summer 2008 session.

Henderson says Baldwin, a one-time lawyer for the military, spoke about being discriminated against for being a woman, working as a minority in her office and becoming overwhelmed with work.

"It was her story that inspired me. I could relate. She was someone who has gone through what I'm going through at the moment and has some insight into what to do, what you're feeling and how to overcome those feelings," Henderson said.

Now Henderson is pondering how to combine her love of medicine and politics when choosing a college major. "I'm stuck between pre-law and pre-med," she says. "And I'm like, 'Why did you do this to me?' I'm really aggravated that I have to choose."

Should Henderson decide to pursue a political career, she would be eligible for the next step: the Star Fellowship Program, a branch of Running Start that places college students in internships on Capitol Hill. Currently, seven women are interning in the House four days a week.

"It is the dedication of these organizations like Running Start that are changing the face of power, politics and leadership in this country," says Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), who staffs intern Anna Hidalgo in her office.

The program is open to women who are juniors or seniors in college or recent graduates. And like the leadership program, the fellowship program is free to all applicants thanks to a large donation from Walmart.

The interns are given a stipend for their work and assigned student housing for a semester. They are placed with young female Members such as Wasserman Schultz and Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-S.D.).

"We went around to the women Members who we thought would be the best role models for the girls," Shakow says. "We're totally not issue-oriented and we're nonpartisan, but we looked for younger Members."

On Fridays, the college women attend seminars featuring guest speakers on a host of political topics including fundraising and polling. The program aims to teach the interns how the legislative and political process works and to inspire them to one day seek office.

While it's too soon to see results from the Star Fellowship Program, it does appear to be inspiring the current fellows.

"I, for one, have met some really great people," says Elizabeth Andrews, a recent graduate of Allegheny College who was placed in Herseth Sandlin's office earlier this fall. "It's making me want to stay out here and get involved in politics."