

Judith Kelley: Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I am Judith Kelley, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Carmen Castillo has worked as a housekeeper at the same hotel in Providence, Rhode Island for nearly twenty-five years. In that time, she's done far more than change bed linens and vacuum carpets. Carmen helped organize a union for other hotel workers, and she led the negotiations between managers and employees. She also ran for Providence City Council, and was elected not once, not twice, but three times!

Carmen Castillo: Three times.

Judith Kelley: She's still in office, and she still works as a housekeeper at the same hotel. Carmen, welcome to Policy 360.

Carmen Castillo: Thank you for having me here.

Judith Kelley: Tell us a little bit about your backstory. I understand that you immigrated to the US with your daughters from the Dominican Republic in 1994.

Carmen Castillo: Yes.

Judith Kelley: Why did you come to the US?

Carmen Castillo: When I decided to come to the country because the situation I got in my country's really bad. Also, my little daughter only four months old, she's really sick. They don't find out what did she have. They say you have ... because I want to come, because I have a visa for me and my three daughters, but I don't have a visa for my son because my son's disabled. They don't want to ... My son come here, because they have to pay a lot of money in the hospital and stuff like that. It's a hard decision, I have to take. Left one of your kids behind, especially the special one. But we know-

Judith Kelley: Right. So you had to choose between leaving your son behind who was sick and needed you there, and then taking your daughter who was sick and needed care here. That's an excruciating choice. I can't quite imagine ... So when you first come to the US, how did you get on? What kind of work did you do?

Carmen Castillo: My first three or four months in US, I work in different factory. I do putting part together in different factory. After I find job in the hotel couple months when I was here.

Judith Kelley: How did you find the job in the hotel?

Carmen Castillo: My mom have a friend say they open hotel in downtown and they need a lot of people to work, that I can be a housekeeper. It's much better pay like they pay in factory. I'm decided to go to the hotel and then started working on ... room attending here. And I started to work in deep clean person because the hotel gets open. We clean floor by floor.

Judith Kelley: How long were you at the hotel before you started this union, and why did you decide to start a union?

Carmen Castillo: I been in the hotel almost a year, and it's a lot of abuse in there. When I'm ... people mention to me word union, I'm thinking about a union in my country. Union in my country is not a reality union. It's people fight with violence and after they sit down at the table with all the people to take money and let the people win that. The first thing someone talking about to me union, I say, "You crazy?" I don't understand what is a union mean in that country. When they explain to me what the union mean, and I be abused in the hotel ... I worked three months, not a day off. I call out because I'm really tired, and they send a supervisor to get me at home and bring me to the hotel to work.

Judith Kelley: Wow.

Carmen Castillo: I don't know that's illegal. Verbal abuse, sex harassment. Overwork. And I started work at 7 o'clock in the morning, and sometime is still in the hotel 11 o'clock in the night, because they want to open the hotel and they don't care. They give you 20, 25 rooms to clean for the day.

Judith Kelley: Too much.

Carmen Castillo: That's just too much.

Judith Kelley: So you decided to lead a staff walk-out.

Carmen Castillo: And I started organizing that hotel, even I don't pronounce any words in English, only yes and no. That's really hard to me, to be an organizer. I go little by little and get someone translate it for me, and I say it really quiet. When we decided be out like union, we got 99.9%. Only one person say no to the union. We are really strong when we got the union in this hotel. And we continue to be really strong to today.

Judith Kelley: Were you worried about losing your job?

Carmen Castillo: Every time when you organize the hotel workers ... of course we got terror losing the job. Especially me, I have three daughters. In the same time, you need to get union scare away, because if you are scared for everything you want to do in your life, you never do nothing. You can live in the same situation and make complaint always and always and always. I say, "Okay, and in this country I lose this job I can get other one. But we have an opportunity to get my better and stay here, it's much better ... stay here in the abuse. Or I need to get out.

Judith Kelley: Did anything change in the hotel after you formed the union?

Carmen Castillo: Okay, change a lot! When we got union negotiation ... I'm the only one Latina don't speak English and sit down at a table. I need to weigh what I discussion

and everything and that someone come to explain to me in what I want for my department and everything. What did I think about the contract and everything. I explain what we want, because I organizing my coworkers, and we decided what did we want. When we have a union in the hotel our first contract, we go like [exhale] that's it. After that day, we working in peace. Now we have job security. I know I can be asleep really well because next day I know I wake up and have a job.

Judith Kelley: After you had had that success at the hotel, you decided to run for city council. What brought about that decision?

Carmen Castillo: I really don't decide it in that moment, run for city council. I always be in the city hall to pass law for the hotel workers. Especially when we have negotiation for contract, we need political power to get our contract come through. We were in the political to force the company to get us good treatment and good contract and labor in peace. I always be ... we're political. When my city council passed away, that's one seat we have for sure in the city hall. He's a minority man, Latino. He fight really hard for justice. When he pass away ... And he's my personal friend. I help him to run in the ...

Judith Kelley: In the previous election.

Carmen Castillo: I help him in the election and everything, but I help him to do something in the neighborhood. It's basically the balance with the kids, support their mothers. And be like community meetings, so how can be organized.

Judith Kelley: Organizing, right. Was it a hard decision for you to decide to run?

Carmen Castillo: It's really hard because I'm pretty scared.

Judith Kelley: What scared you the most?

Carmen Castillo: I am scared because I'm the housekeeper in the hotel, I'm woman, Latina. I see a lot of lawyers ... My city consul Miguel inspired me because I say ... People are starting to call me because I have a one week cry in my house because he pass away. He's one of my best friend and also one of my mentor, one of my person I believe. People started call me, "Carmen, see who's people running right now. You need to run. You need to run." And I refused, refused ... After I say "Okay, yes. I will run, but only if you promise you behind me because I don't know how I can do it." It's really hard. You support the political person, you [inaudible 00:09:22]. You get it then, the position, but you nice, you don't know what really happen inside here.

Judith Kelley: Was your family supportive of you running?

Carmen Castillo: Yes. My brother ... When I got to get communication with my family, I am running for city council. My daughter's okay. That's just my immediate family.

My mom say yes. My family support me a hundred percent in every step I want to do in my life. Now I've decided to be a union organizing and organize the union in the hotel. My daughter saw a leader. Even my baby in the ...

Judith Kelley: In the crib, yeah.

Carmen Castillo: I bring them to the picket line. My daughter with four years old is screaming like crazy. My other daughter, too. They know how that work, because they grow up see me like every fight. It's not only for the hotel.

Judith Kelley: It's for them.

Carmen Castillo: It's for immigration, for women abused. They know me. I grow up my daughters like that. They support me a hundred percent. That just something I want to do in my life, I say, "Okay, I want to do it."

Judith Kelley: You were representing the ninth ward. Can you describe that?

Carmen Castillo: It's the part for the city ... poor people like me, we don't have, really, opportunity. When I'm running for the office, I want to change that view.

Judith Kelley: When you think about the campaign, what was ... Was there a moment that was really hard? What was the hardest moment you had to ...

Carmen Castillo: My first campaign, I'm running with four more. We are fight for one seat. In that moment, my English is not fluid like I have right now. I spoke English but it's not really fluid because I don't have to use so much. Also the really hard part is you need to work really hard to get the primary, because when you got the primary you got the election, because we are all most Democrat here.

Judith Kelley: When did you know you had won? Was that when you won the primary, was that when you felt like you had your real victory?

Carmen Castillo: Yeah. When we won the primary, we can have a real victory, because we are Democrat city. Also the more hard part is be door by door, after eight hours to work. Get out, do your job, and get five more hours in the street knocking doors and let the people know what are you do and what are you want to continue to do. I don't make any promise to people, like, "I can get you a job, or I can get you this and that." No, I promise to them to fight really hard for our neighborhood and get them more resource. It's possible for me to get it for them.

Judith Kelley: Now you're a councilwoman, and we talked a little about this before, but how do you balance still having a real 8 to 4, 8 to 5 job and then also being a councilwoman? Can you talk a little bit about how you manage that?

Carmen Castillo: Because when I'm in the hotel I'm the room attendant Carmen Castillo. When I get out the hotel I need to put my other uniform, like I say, of the city councilwoman, and also have a family, my daughters and my grandkid. And I've got my mom and everything. You need to separate everything from the other. City councilwoman and housekeeping hotel is almost the same because I need to fight really hard for whatever I want and whatever I want to give to my community, give to my coworkers. But I need to get a balance to be a mom, grandmother, daughter, and friends and everything. It's just ... something like you need to be really clear where you are and what do you do. When I'm in the hotel I'm room attendant. When I'm in City Hall, I'm the city councilwoman. When I'm mom, I'm mom. When I'm daughter, I'm daughter. When I got friend ... you know, friend.

Judith Kelley: Many roles.

Carmen Castillo: You need to be clear in that moment what role you doing in this moment.

Judith Kelley: Here in the Sanford School of Public Policy, one of our faculty members, Professor named Nick Carnes, he has done some research that shows that working class people almost never really become politicians, because they don't run for office. What is your perspective on what is it that keeps working class people from running for office?

Carmen Castillo: We need to change that mind. We can do it. We know what do we need. We continue to let the rich people to manage everything. They don't care how the money's going because they don't be affect. They affect poor community. So we don't raise our voice, we don't organize the community and say, "We need to let the people know we are here." And be a political person give you power. The power you can get with the political is that you can make the right decision for the people you represent.

Judith Kelley: What can we do to make it easier for working class people to run from office?

Carmen Castillo: The first thing is to be organizer. We need to be part of something. For me, when I'm running for city council I don't want to do it. They push me, they like, "You have to do it. You are our hope." And in that moment I'm really scared, and I say, "No no no, I can't do it, I can't do it, no no no." But go to this person little by little, say, "Okay, let's try. We can help you. We are here for you, we are ..." That's just the support that people need. "Don't worry about it, we are here for you, we got to support, we do different things, we knock on doors, we do stuff." But they need someone can be behind.

Carmen Castillo: At that time I having my union, I having my coworkers, a have a lot of people in my neighborhood believe in me because they see me all the time to help the other cause, they say, "You can do it, Carmen." I say, "No, I'm not prepared for that." But you know, you thinking about it, you don't prepare for anything happen in your life. They come and there, you decided. Move on or stay here

and don't do nothing for it and die, or disappear or whatever. That's what I say to the people, don't ... You'll always be scared to do something new, but if you don't do something, why are you complaining all the time? Nothing change. Stop complaining and do something.

Judith Kelley:

Thank you very much for joining me today. Carmen Castillo is a member of the city council, and a hotel housekeeper in Providence, Rhode Island. She's also the subject of a new documentary film called "Councilwoman". I mentioned the Sanford faculty member who researches this topic. His name is Nick Carnes, and his book is "The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office". You can find a link to both the book and the documentary at our website, policy360.org. Carmen Castillo's visit to Duke was sponsored by several organizations, including POLIS, the Center for Political Leadership, Innovation, and Service, and the Sanford School of Public Policy. We'll be back soon with another episode of Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley.