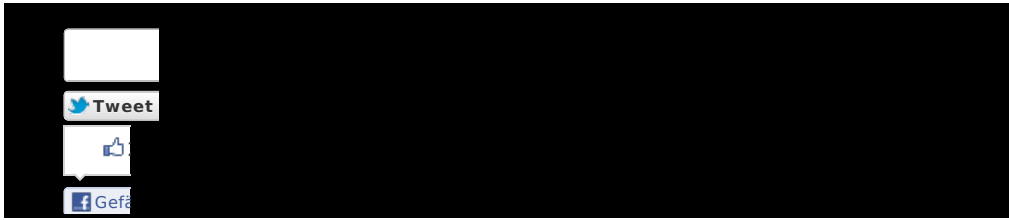


Articles from Inspire Portland

Alison Smith, Political Activist, Maine Citizens for Clean Elections

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The kitchen of Alison Smith's West End home doubles as her office and headquarters when she's not on the road and at the legislature in Augusta. (Fitzgerald Photo/Brian Fitzgerald)

Editor's Note: Alison Smith is president of the board for the [Maine Citizens for Clean Elections \(MCCE\)](#) and helped lead the effort to make Maine the first state in the union to adopt the Clean Elections Act more than ten years ago. A mother of three and not entirely comfortable with the public spotlight, Smith has shown that a so-called 'average citizen' can make a huge difference in Portland, in Maine and beyond.

IP: So [the kitchen] is where you do most of your work at this point?

AS: Yep. Well, I have an office upstairs, but I can't get out of the kitchen.

IP: Tell me about your association with Portland. How long have you been here?

AS: I grew up in New Jersey and have lived most of my adult life in New England. But I moved to Maine in 1977 and lived up on Mt. Desert Island for five years. I then lived in Connecticut for 10 years and when we came back to Maine we moved to this house in Portland. That was 1992. Before that I had just gone through [Portland] on the way to and from Mt. Desert Island. When we lived in Connecticut, most of my husband's family moved up to Maine. Even in the years we weren't in Maine, we had a lot of Maine connections. We came to Maine all the time.

IP: Why Portland?

AS: We wanted to get out of our cars. We wanted our kids to grow up in a place where they could walk

places and not have to be driven everywhere, and have a little of that independence kids like to have. They were in third grade, seventh grade and ninth grade when we moved here.

IP: How did you get involved in political activism?

AS: When I was in Connecticut I got involved in civic life after this developer drained a wetland next to my house. So when I moved to Maine, my colleagues in the League of Women Voters in Redding (CT) bought me a membership in the League of Women Voters up here. So before I got here, the League had a letter that 'Alison is coming.' So I moved here thinking I wouldn't be involved or be over-committed to anything. I'd just get the kids into school and start living life. Very soon the League was knocking at the door, so I did get involved.

IP: Were you dealing with voting issues right away?

AS: Yes. Pretty early on, the [League of Women Voters] was involved with a nascent Clean Elections effort. And the League was a founding member of [Maine Citizens for Clean Elections]. I wasn't personally involved. My first involvement was when we went to collect signatures to put the bill on the ballot after the bill had been drafted and vetted by constitutional experts. It was Election Day in 1995. I got a call from somebody on the campaign, calling through a list of league members and he said, would you collect signatures in your precinct on election day? I said I would. He said, "Great...would you be the precinct captain for precinct 2-2 in Portland?" So I went down to get my stuff and set up at the polls and as people came out of the voting area, I and the other people who were there asked them to sign a petition to get the big money out of politics.. That was the beginning for me.

IP: Did you ever think you'd be doing what you're doing now? Involved to this level?

AS: No. Basically, the league was pushy. They kept pushing me to do more things. [On Election Day] there were coalition partners from various groups. It's now called EqualityMaine, but back then was called the Maine Lesbian Gay Political Alliance (MLGPA). There was the Maine People's Alliance, and a bunch of other groups. Those groups had members in this neighborhood so I was working alongside activists from those groups and different social justice groups. That was the first flavor of what the effort was really going to be. After that I would get a call once in a while to come down and make signs and whatever.

IP: How did you make the jump to becoming the public face for Clean Elections?

AS: As I was starting to know these folks, and carpooling with them to Augusta to meetings and so forth, they did a poll. They asked, 'who is the best messenger for this issue. Who does the public trust on this?' Of all the coalition groups, which groups are well-respected and have name recognition?' So it turned out, people wanted to hear from regular people, not professional, polished politicians, and the League of Women Voters and the AARP were the only coalition partners that were recognized and respected. So that just put me right in the crosshairs. They had me do things—like talk to the press, etc.—that I would not have ever done in a million years. The League ladies have always been pushy.

IP: Are you glad they pushed you?

AS: Yeah. I sort of came of age in the Watergate era. That was not a time in America where you really thought about government in a very warm and fuzzy way. I grew up in a house of staunch conservatives—big Republican conservatives—and their politics didn't speak to me at all. After Watergate I [thought], 'The president's a crook, they're all a bunch of crooks.' Watergate was so seedy. As it unfolded, it was so dark and disgusting, I didn't want to have anything to do with politics. But I always voted. The first presidential election I voted for was Jimmy Carter. I guess I figured out that I was a lot more liberal than my parents.

IP: How did you make the leap from simply voting to getting more involved?

AS: Because I stepped out at that town meeting in Connecticut, talking about the developer who drained the wetlands, I was appointed to the conservation committee in the commission in that town. I had no idea how government worked, especially local government. Once I got involved, one thing led to another. When I got on the conservation commission it was a tremendous amount of work. I had to learn all sorts of stuff about due process and hearings and all of that, but it was my civic education. I never had a civics class in high school; there was just no such thing where I went to school.

IP: Connecticut is one of the other Clean Elections states too.

AS: Well, the system is modeled on Maine. They have more statewide offices than we do, but it's a voluntary public funding program. They also lost their [matching funds in a lawsuit](#) so are dealing with that. But they have a Democratic governor who was elected using Clean Elections.

IP: Maine was technically first.

AS: We *were* first. We passed it in 1996 and it went into effect in 2000. Arizona was next after that. They passed it in 1998 and theirs also went into effect in 2000.

IP: Why was Maine first?

AS: You know, we have this wonderfully participatory political culture in Maine. We have an enormous legislature given our population. When I moved here I just couldn't believe it, that right here in my neighborhood I could practically throw a ping-pong ball out the window and hit my state senator and my state representative's house. Everybody seemed to know who they were. I don't ever remember living in a place where average people were so aware of who their representatives are.

IP: Is this a political neighborhood?

AS: This is one of the most progressive precincts in the state. There are a lot of lawyers in this neighborhood. Our state representative, when I moved here, was Jim Oliver. He quit in the middle of his term, so we had a special election and immediately there were four people running. I was like, 'wow!' They were all great people and would have made fine state reps. The one who won, Michael Saxl, ended up becoming the speaker of the House a few years later.

So, why Maine? People care, I think, in Maine. We still have the Town Meeting form of government in most small towns in Maine.

IP: How is Portland important to the state's political process?

AS: I think the whole state is important politically. When you live in Portland your worldview is a little bit different. So Portland is an incredible engine for the state. It's a creative engine, it's an economic engine, it's an educational engine. Portland is incredibly important, but I think the whole state is important politically. Overall we have a very inclusive participatory political culture and you certainly see that in Portland. Since I've lived here, Portland people have made a lot of changes to their city government. I've seen a lot of locally-created leadership ladders where people are getting involved in city government. I've

always kind of regretted not being able to be involved with city government. For a long time I thought, 'what I really want to do is get more involved in Portland.' I feel like I haven't been. I love Portland. When we moved here I'd never lived in a city before and I was a little concerned about it. I'm used to it being dark at night and not noisy. One of the reasons we liked this neighborhood is that not only can you walk everywhere, but the bus stop is right at the corner. I've never yet taken the bus, because really, by the time the bus would come, probably I could walk where I was going.

IP: What's going to happen to Portland in your view?

AS: I think a continued flourishing of local initiatives and businesses, and locally-grown efforts to expand the things that are already here and the stuff that people already like. I don't see any end to the growing food culture. I think that's going to just get better and better.

IP: How would you describe what you do to a five-year-old?

AS: I feel like I do two things. One is I work on getting big money out of politics. But I feel like what I really do is I really work to help people get involved in their own self-governance. That's what motivates me. If we had been doing a campaign finance initiative that was about having spending limits or contribution limits, or saying people can't make political contributions, I don't think that would have spoken to me at all. That would be all restrict, restrict, restrict. To me the beauty of the clean elections system is that it's about opportunity. It's basically opening the door. It's the one reform that actually provides resources to challengers which says, just because you're the incumbent doesn't mean that anybody owes you your seat. And it's worked. Voters have more choices.

IP: So it's been a success?

AS: In terms of the opportunity it's provided, there's no question. We've had so many people run and serve with the Maine Legislature who would have never run. Either they felt they couldn't raise the money, or didn't want to raise the money. Clean Elections let people say, ok, I actually can run.

IP: Who are some examples that stand out in your mind?

AS: [Deborah] Simpson was a single mother in Auburn trying to finish her college degree, waitressing. She was one of those people who really cared about what was going on, and so people would come in to her restaurant and would say, "Deb, you should run for office." She was struggling single mother of an African-American child in the whitest state in the country and thought, it's never going to happen. One of her friends brought her to the statehouse for a day, and she thought, "It's a bunch of old white men, mostly. How could these people understand my life?" It just struck her.

Deb Simpson came to my workshop on Clean Elections. That workshop allowed her to imagine herself representing Auburn in the house. She ran that year, one of the pioneering clean elections candidates in 2000, using this untested system that nobody in the country had ever used, and she won her house seat. She served for four terms, and then won a senate seat. She lost in the Republican sweep two years ago. She brought the issue of domestic violence to the legislature in a way that it had never been represented before and raised the consciousness of her colleagues and peers up there, passing some important legislation and was an effective legislator. She was one of the first non-lawyers to chair the judiciary committee. So Deb's one example, but there are probably hundreds of examples.

IP: What are the big challenges Clean Elections is facing?

AS: We have a diminished Clean Elections system. There won't be matching funds and before the court struck down matching funds, the legislature cut five percent of the distribution. So we are going into the cycle with lower distributions—they are so low, they are back to where they were in 2002. The legislature has entirely failed to address our concerns about PACs. We've put forth PAC reform bills in the last three cycles and they haven't gotten anywhere. We are one of the only states that has no contribution limits to what you give to a PAC. That's where the special interest money now goes in Maine. As we diminish the public clean elections system, it just makes the private money more important. So we're going to see a bigger influx of outside money coming in.

IP: This is a busy time of year. When do you sleep?

AS: It depends on whether I have to go to Augusta or not. Oftentimes I'll be in my pajamas until 1 o'clock in the afternoon because I got up and phone started ringing before I could finish my tea.

IP: Are you working late at night?

AS: Yes, I'm a night owl.

IP: So what's bedtime for you?

AS: Almost never before midnight.

IP: What's something not many people know about you?

AS: It's funny. I've never had a big garden, but I really like the idea of gardening so I've always composted. Back in 1992 or '93 I bought myself a worm bin so I could compost food scraps inside the house. It's called vermicomposting. Not a lot of people know that I have worms in my basement. But those worms have been eating my food scraps for 19 years. It's like the bazillionth generation of earthworms there, eating the tea leaves and cabbage peelings or whatever.

IP: Why have you been so successful?

AS: I have no idea. I'm a reluctant leader, I would say. I would never in a million years have ever thought I'd be on this path at all. I really don't know.

IP: Maybe you just say yes too much.

AS: Honest to God, my first reaction to almost anything is no. Why I stood up in the town meeting years ago in Redding (CT) to talk about that developer and the hypocrisy of what was happening in the room... I have no idea what moved me to do it. But it was just the beginning and started knocking over a lot of dominoes, I guess.

IP: What's next? Running for office?

AS: No. I've been asked. I wouldn't say never but there are a lot of reasons why I say no now. One is that I feel like I have kind of an important job right now. We have been an all-volunteer organization that's worked very hard to build up to the point where we can have some staff, and I want to continue us on that trajectory to make a transition to a professionally-run, fully-staffed organization. We'll need a strong board. So today I'm president of the board, and I want to be there long enough to raise my successor and make sure that when I step back we have something stronger.

IP: Sounds like you're in a good position.

AS: We're stronger than ever, just when the issue is more important than ever...and where Maine's leadership is more important than ever. We're not getting it from the 125th Legislature, but I believe we will get it from the people of Maine.

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