

LCLD Alumni Spotlight: A Q&A with Dawn Smalls



Dawn Smalls is a 2017 Fellow and a Partner at Jenner and Block where she provides strategic advice and legal counsel on complex legal, policy, and regulatory matters. Dawn currently serves as the Monitor of a tier-one global financial institution and leads investigations into workplace misconduct and culture.

Outside of her practice, Dawn is a recognized civic leader with experience in politics, government, and philanthropy. Dawn previously served in the Clinton and Obama Administrations in the White House and Department of Health and Human Services respectively. From 2015 to 2018, she served as a Commissioner to the New York State Joint Commission on Public Ethics, where she provided oversight to the state agency tasked with ensuring that state elected officials and lobbyists comply with the state's ethics and lobbying laws and regulations. Dawn currently serves on the national board of the American Constitution Society and the Roosevelt Institute, and previously worked for the Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation. Her publications include "Black Mothers' Lives Matter: Time to Address the Disparities in Maternal Care across Race and Neighborhoods," *New York Daily News* (2019) and "Linguistic Profiling and the Law," *Stanford Law & Policy Review* 15, no. 2 (2004).

In 2019, New York City had its first citywide special election ever upon the election of Attorney General Tish James to that office. Dawn ran as a first-time candidate in a 17-person-wide special election. While she didn't win, she placed sixth, beating a number of sitting elected officials, and obtained over 17,000 votes in all five boroughs. Given her impressive showing, Dawn's name has been floated for a number of leadership positions on a local and federal level.

What inspired you to run for office?

Honestly, Trump's election. I often said in my campaign talks that I truly believe that we are living in a time when our children will ask: "Where were you? And what did you do?" I did a lot of thinking on what my answer would be to that question. I had a career that spanned politics, government, and philanthropy but my role at that time was a partner at a law firm. While I did work that I was proud of in my practice - I was co-lead counsel for one of the largest Fair Labor Standards Act class actions in history - I knew I needed to be and do more to address what I saw as a direct attack on the communities and democratic institutions that I held so dear. So I decided to step out of my comfort zone and run for what I thought was an important office, designed to make city government work better for everyone, but particularly the vulnerable communities that rely on it most.

What did you learn during the process, good or bad?

I learned so much! About the process and about myself. First, I learned that campaigns are start-ups. You literally start with your family in your living room and say I want to do this. There's a long way between that moment and what you see on the other side: a campaign office, staff, and campaign ads and materials. You have to raise the capital (e.g. fundraise) to make any of that happen.

Personally, the campaign pushed me way beyond what I thought I could do. As one example, I have always had a fear of public speaking, and was nervous every time I did it. The largest group I spoke to was over 1000 people. I walked in there and literally wanted to bolt. But the end goal was too important to let that be an impediment, and I just pushed through it. And it was empowering. At the end of that campaign, I knew that I could do just about anything.

In my campaign I was required to get up to speed on a range of issues relatively quickly. For me, there was never enough time to fully research the issues the way I wanted, and would do so outside the confines of a campaign. Yet, the consistent feedback I got was how substantive and knowledgeable on the issues I was, generally and in comparison to other candidates. So it was a lesson that research shows a lot of women need to learn, you are often more ready to do something than you think you are. Go for it!

And that leads into my last lesson. We need more women to run for office. In New York City all of the top positions are men and next year less than 10% of the NYC Council may be women. As LCLD members, we know diversity matters. Women bring a different perspective and lead differently. So if anyone in the LCLD network is thinking about running, I encourage them to reach out. I've had a number of people reach out to me after the election that were inspired by my run and I am always happy to talk.

How has running for office affected your career?

My purpose in running was truly because I thought I could be of service; it also had the unintended effect of elevating my career. People don't always appreciate that running for office is a job interview - a long one - but a job interview nonetheless. People see you in all kinds of settings—your ability to think on your feet, and how well you understand the issues and respond to different viewpoints. And everybody sees it. I didn't know that would be the effect until after the fact. After the Election, I was approached by a number of people in the private and public sectors for roles on boards, as general counsel, and heading legal departments. People who had seen my leadership first hand were interested in bringing it into their organization.

What advice do you have for anyone interested in this path?

Do it! Democracy only works if everyone participates in it. We too often complain about the state of our country or current leadership, but are always looking to someone else. I ran on the strong belief that politics doesn't have to be a career in and of itself.

There should be a space for people to jump in, offer their expertise and their leadership for a particular job or a particular role, and step back into private life.

New York City has an almost unlimited supply of talented people with impressive credentials and experience that would be of real value to their government and their local communities. I think we all benefit if more of these people - like the people in the LCLD network - run.

Do you plan to run again? If so, what would you do differently, if anything?

I don't know if I plan to run again. I think there are many ways to serve and elected office is just one of them. For me to run again, I'd have to really believe that I had something to offer or was uniquely qualified for the job, and had a path to win.