

Matt: Welcome to Cooler Than Me, First Ascent Design's series showcasing the people that are without a doubt cooler than we are. We're so lucky to work with and surround ourselves with amazing members of the local community that are trying to make the world better in their own way. We're open to bring their stories to you. So let's jump in.

How's it going, everybody? My name is Matt. I'm an intern here at First Ascent and today I'm excited to bring you our next episode of cooler than me. This interview was conducted by John a few weeks back and he was lucky enough to interview Lauren C.W. Vella from Mary Ann's List. Now, Mary Ann's List works to represent, recruit, and elect Democratic pro-choice women throughout the great state of Delaware. I'm excited to share Lauren's story and advice and I think you'll see pretty quickly why she's cooler than we are. So check out the Instagram hashtag cooler than me to see more content.

John

Hello everybody my name's John with First Ascent Design and today we're interviewing someone who is most definitely cooler than me: Lauren C.W. Vella from Mary Ann's List thank you so much for coming in and chatting today.

Lauren: Thanks for having me.

John: Absolutely. Lauren is a co-founder and director of Mary Ann's list, she's a University of Delaware graduate with an honours degree in Political Science. Currently she's pursuing her master's in public administration at Penn. After first getting involved in politics as an intern for the Delaware General Assembly, she then went on to join the staff of the House of Representatives working for House leadership. Currently she lives in Wilmington and is an active member of the Delaware Democratic Party. So jumping right in. Like to start with something fun, something soft, start the interview off on the right note... so if you won a million dollars what would you do with it.

Lauren: I would help fund political campaigns that I believed in here in Delaware.

John: Very on point.

Lauren: Yeah and I would do that. I would also probably go to some nice restaurants a couple times

John: Amen to that. Some more of them popping up in Wilmington. So next question, what is one interesting thing that most people probably don't know about you?

Lauren: I guess I'll say a fun fact about me is that I tap danced when I was in high school and I actually was in an adult tap class here right here in Wilmington Delaware which is really a fun way to exercise and enjoy yourself. Unfortunately it's the same night as my graduate school class right now but I'm excited to join back up next year when my classes are done. So not many people expect to hear that I tap dance

John: Where do you do that?

Lauren: Anna Marie Dance Studio up on Philadelphia Pike

John: Excellent, excellent. So what's on the bucket list? What is something that you want to do they haven't gotten to do yet?

Lauren: Well I'm sort of risk averse so I'm definitely not jumping out of a plane or scuba diving any of those sorts of extreme sports are not on my bucket list but I would say traveling and seeing more parts of our country and our world would be something I'd like to do. And I am happy to say I get to do a lot of things I enjoy right now. So that's really fun. My regular life but certainly traveling I would put on my bucket list

John: Awesome. So we know each other largely through Mary Ann's list but I imagine and we're working to make sure that that's not the case the more people know about it, but perhaps someone listening who doesn't necessarily know what Mary Ann's List is, so can you give us the two sentence: "What does Mary Ann's List do?"

Lauren: Mary Ann's list is modeled after Emily's List and it's designed to recruit, train, and support pro-choice Democratic women for political office here in Delaware. Our vision is to get more pro-choice Democratic women elected and serving us as our elected officials.

John: Fantastic. So I imagine... it's a new organization so I imagine you wear many hats going back and forth. So I imagine this to be a big one. What's a favorite part of your job right now.

Lauren: So, I certainly do wear a lot of hats but the most exciting part is meeting people interested in running for office and helping them through the through the process. Demystifying what it means to be a candidate. Also meeting people that want to support these candidates. So not everyone wants to run for office but we meet lots of women who are really fired up and want to help in any way they can. There are a lot of folks have been newly activated since the 2016 election some have been activated for a long time but just looking for some direction. So connecting volunteers with really amazing candidates has been really rewarding and giving folks the tools to be successful in the political arena, especially if they're new to the scene. Delaware politics is a really small world so if you are interested in getting involved you can and it's not so difficult and you can really meet a lot of people quickly but it always helps to have some friendly faces giving you some direction.

John: So even as a new organization you've had a few success stories come through recently in the last cycle is there anything in particular that stands out. The first thing that comes to mind that you enjoy doing or like seeing come to fruition?

Lauren: Sure. This was like the first election cycle Mary Ann's List was at was actively involved in supporting candidates. And I think the sheer number of women that were on the ballot was incredible and the amount of new candidates we have there that won and are sitting in their seats now was amazing. We have statewide and we went from having two women out of nine statewide positions having five women out of nine. So that's just incredible. And then in the Delaware General Assembly we net gained two more women. So we now have 15 women out of 62 seats but we have six new newly-elected women who just got sworn in in January. So. Watching their progress and I mean these candidates really work incredibly hard has been really rewarding.

John: Good. So you studied politics. So is this what you imagined yourself to be doing when you were initially studying? Is this the career path you imagined?

Lauren: That's a really good question. I think when people think about being a political science major, it's hard to exactly say what kind of job you want. At least for me, I wasn't really sure what the jobs were. When you studied political science. I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer. My parents are both attorneys and I just wasn't what I was interested in doing. But I had I knew I wanted to do something in the public sphere in public service and I wasn't exactly sure what that would look like but I was lucky enough to be a part of the legislative fellows program when I was a junior in college which is an internship at the state capital. And that was when I really knew. I certainly wanted to work for the Delaware General Assembly. You got a front row seat to how legislation works and how people interact with their government. All of our local levels of government really have a huge impact on people's daily lives even if they don't really think about it that often. So being involved in that kind of work around public policy I think was something I was drawn to and I now want to continue making a career out of.

John: For someone who's just getting started that maybe has the same idea that you have where they want to be involved but don't necessarily know how to get started. It sounds like the internship was a good first for the door but is there any other general advice you can give on how to get into this sphere of public policy?

Lauren: Sure. I really think it's an accessible field and I encourage people that have an interest to get involved. The real way you get involved is by showing up right? To attend your community meetings, go to forums that are happening, like pursue your interests. So whether you're interested in a particular cause there's there's lots of organizations built around issues that care about the environment you care about social justice you care about women's rights like there's lots of organizations doing that kind of policy work so I would say get involved in those kinds of places. I also found it really rewarding to work on campaigns. So to volunteer with candidates to help them communicate their vision to their constituents and to really hear directly from people and in particular neighborhoods about what they care about and you'll find certainly neighborhoods have unique challenges. But generally people really care about the same things right. They want to live in safe communities. They want quality education. They want affordable health care. They want to be heard and have representation that looks like them. You know

people generally perhaps want to meet their regular human needs right. They want to improve their quality of life for themselves and their kids. So I think if anyone has an interest and they're new to the scene don't be shy, talk to folks and and show up

John: I think 80 percent of a lot of things is showing up and being available, absolutely. So jumping into, you know taking a half a step back and breathing for a little bit. What movie character would you say you're the most like?

Lauren: A movie character... so I'm not really a fan of superhero movies I'm going to lay that out there. So this is tough. Can I just tell you my favorite movie?

John: Yes. That was the backup question.

Lauren: I don't have an answer for that one...,my favorite movie is The Godfather. I have seen it far too many times to really admit the amount of hours I've spent watching The Godfather. Just a family favorite, a movie I really enjoy and I am always still shocked to come across people who have not seen it. And they are missing lots of references in your daily lives If you have not seen The Godfather so I highly recommend it.

John: You know I have to admit I have never seen the Godfather

Lauren: John, come on.

John: This is one of those things.

Lauren: Your homework assignment is to watch Godfather 1 and Godfather 2.

John: Excellent, excellent. I grew up living under a rock. Just didn't get there. Excellent. So one of the things that I like to try to establish in what we do is that admitting that people are not perfect and that embarrassing things happen and life moves on. Even from teaching to working in client service businesses politics etc. as well. So here is a fun one: What is the funniest or embarrassing moment that you've had in the first two years or so that you've been working at Mary Ann's List trying to get everything going.

Lauren: First of admitting when you mess up is always a good plan and you're going to make mistakes along the road. So you have to be open and honest about that. Luckily I work with my team is a group of amazing women who are incredibly compassionate and nice to one another so like even if you make a mistake no one is going to be too hard on you because we're all very close and supportive. I don't know that we've had any major gaffes. It's hard to think of. We've definitely scheduled board meetings and then not actually checked if the meeting room we're planning to have our meeting and is available and then were "like oh no we really should do that." So maybe that's something that's not big.

John: It doesn't have to be big like tripping on stage.

Lauren: No I haven't tripped on stage. That would be nerve wracking. I have tripped in my full time job certainly have like tripped in legislative hall, fallen down some marble steps which is, doesn't feel too good. And I've seen people have witnessed that I'm definitely klutzy. So that's on the list of things I certainly have done

John: So besides avoiding marble stairs, what's next for you? What do you see coming in the next couple years and if you had... If you're one that believes in five-year visions, what does it look like?

Lauren: So I'm continuing to work in Delaware politics and doing work that I think is meaningful. So I'm passionate about the state. I think we have a lot of really incredible opportunities here because of our size and our ability to collaborate. So I'm certainly going to continue my work in Delaware politics. I have lots of visions for Mary Ann's list than the next five years. It's a it's certainly a new organization but we've gotten so much support through the 18 election cycle that we're really trying to capitalize on and build this organization to something bigger. We want more people involved. We want more people from diverse backgrounds involved. We want the organization to be sustainable in the long term because we see this work as it's not something you do for two years then you pack up your toys and go home. We really have to build a deep network of professional women, of working women, women from all walks of life all sectors that are a pipeline to run for office not just in 2020 but in the future. So certainly for Mary Ann's list I see in the next five years that organization growing and blossoming with lots of new folks joining and I think I know myself and our co-founder Megan Wallace we see we see a sign of success

for Mary Ann's List is going to be when we are no longer at the helm. Right when, when we can pass on this organization we still would always want to be involved but we can have have transition and have new energy come in and push the vision even further but we have a lot of work planned ahead of us to do that.

John: Good. So if someone did want to get involved or get in touch with you particularly get involved with Mary Ann's List, or get in touch, what's the best way to do that?

Lauren: So the best way is to go to our new website which is really beautiful thanks to John and your team we are really excited to have a website that better reflects all the work we're doing and an easier way for folks to get in touch with us but certainly fill out a form so that we can reach out to you and we can get together because we'd love to add folks. We also have a nomination portal so if you're thinking about running for office or you know someone who you think is really talented I always say there's like so many women in our lives that are we know are all stars. They're special. They are. They have it all together and sometimes they don't really see it in themselves that they would be a good candidate for office. But the people around them certainly do. And sometimes they need a nudge so nominate those folks and we will nudge them and we will reach out. And sometimes there is not an office that fits but they can they can certainly start thinking about that and maybe one day there is an elected office that they're interested in running for or maybe they know that there's other ways they can use their talents. But we definitely want to ask the women that we know are talented to run for office. They say it takes three asks for a woman to usually accept a request to run for office. Women are much more likely to need to be asked. Unlike her male counterparts who are more willing to throw their hat in the ring just on their own you know a lot of times the research has shown that there's a confidence gap for women not necessarily they have just as good qualifications for office. But they sometimes don't see those qualifications translating directly to political office. So they might be great at leading a nonprofit and they are great at organizing their civic association and they don't necessarily see that those are absolutely transferable skills into the political arena. So it's about breaking down those barriers.

John: Good good though I think that's a great way to have an organization help, that the organization that your best interests will give you that little nudge. I think we've seen studies around the same sort of thing just job applications that if you if you meet 80 percent of the

requirements many people, men and women but heavily women from those studies would self censor and say we don't want to apply for that whereas some might throw their hats in anyway. There is no job listing for a politician. Right. So you don't even know what the requirements are.

Lauren: Yeah. And I think that's what's what I think people think there is one particular type of personality or type of skill set that makes you a good elected official and actually the best folks are really different. Right. You've got members that are scientists and teachers or there were in nonprofits or business or you know you can have any background you also can have any personality type. We've got really outgoing legislators we've got legislators who are introverts. And so there is not one prototype that says this is what you need to be like. So it's really being authentic and having and having a burning passion right. Like you need to... It's a hard job. You need to want to do it. You need to have a vision for how you're going to make the lives of your constituents better. And if you have those things and you're passionate you know you could do anything. So yeah my my advice to folks is not don't get hung up on checking of a certain box or making sure life is perfect to before you think about running. I think people think well my kids need to be older or I have to have everything in my career finalized, my job has to be perfect or you know I can't do it when I've got you know whatever the issues are in everyone's daily lives all sorted out. My house needs to be clean. No. Well you can you can do it with the messy house and actually you're probably not campaigning hard enough if your house is clean while you're running.

John: So I think we mentioned this in the previous conversation but you would say that there's benefits to have a run even if you don't win, right?

Lauren: Absolutely. It's such a unique experience to volunteer on a campaign. Work on a campaign or run for office, win or lose you learn so much about yourself about others you meet so many interesting people that you might not have ever met. But I talked to candidates often who have run and who have lost and who have shared the impact it's made in their lives in such a positive way. It's opened doors. It has taught them about their own resilience and strength and their ability to get up in front of a room and talk about what they care about. So there's lots of benefits. Certainly you should be running for office. Wanting to win and believing you can and and that's and that's what these candidates do. But you know there are times you're going to



lose and which it's not easy but there there are. Lots of silver linings in a loss. And you can really learn a lot about yourself and your community.

John: Fantastic. So one of the motivating factors for wanting to get people like you that are definitely cooler than us sitting down and having a conversation with us because we get to interact with so many different people that same sort of thing with the current campaign. They might not get a chance to interact with each other before. So we're hoping that those who listen and those that we know will come in and hear this, learn a little bit about you and then the last question I want to ask you is what help do you need if someone listens to this and says oh I could do that. What is that? That could really help you out.

Lauren: So I sort of think we need more people being those connectors. So. I think everyone gets really caught up in their silos. We've got a we've got so many organizations in our state and who are all doing really amazing work and having folks to connect us is incredible. What I found is the women's organizations are incredibly collaborative. First off no one wants to be doing duplicative work. So if we can help with scarce resources if we could help make sure we're not overlapping and and supporting each other when we're doing really great things that's wonderful. I just I just think we need to probably communicate with each other more right.

So how do we connect our organization through our members so that we're we're collaborating effectively? I really hope that people are listening to this interview. They think about what they are passionate about and they pursue it right. So if they've never been to legislative hall they're interested show up and call your elected official and meet some folks if you're interested in the Democratic Party and encourage you to come to a Democratic Party meeting. If you're interested in getting more involved in your professional organization show up to your professional organization meetings and start meeting people. But I just hope that people stay fired up; The 2016 elections have brought out a lot of passion and I think people are genuinely concerned about the direction of our leadership in this country and so that's on all of us to stay involved. You can't just be upset and not do anything about it. We say a lot at Mary Ann's List: "don't agonize, organize" so we really believe that you know you can't just sit on the sidelines and be upset. You've got to get involved and have your voice be heard. And sometimes I think people think it's fruitless. Right that they're. Showing up that they might not have the power that they really do. I know from working in... having worked in Legislative Hall members really do listen to their constituents. So when you call..

John: It's good to hear

Lauren: When you call they are interested in what you have to say. And I hope to kind of encourage people to speak up about their about their views

John: Awesome. Well thank you very much for coming in for giving an hour of your time or so to share some of that story. Looking forward to sharing it at a wider base.