

Interview with the Caplan Family [Transcript]

Describe your political involvement with the Liberal party:

D: My involvement began when I was about 8 years old, my parents were very active even before they were elected in supporting many Liberal candidates, I remember going to a number of different campaigns and putting up signs or folding letters on doors. At the age of 14, which is the earliest time when you can officially join a political party, I did so, I guess I was 14 or 15, and we had started a Liberal Youth Club in Don Valley East when we had just elected David Smith. That was my first official involvement as a member of the Liberal Party and as a young political activist.

M: I was 3 or 5, my earliest memories are of campaign offices. We started off as regular volunteers, like everybody else, because our conversation at the dinner table was probably unique to a lot of our friends. We had an interest in politics growing up. I was a member of the Youth Club in Willowdale. And then I went away from it for a little bit and then I came back to it when I was in my 20s again. I first became involved with the Women's Commission (which is both provincial and federal in the Liberal party) and then I was the EVP [of the LPCO]. I am now currently Victory Fund Co-Chair for Ontario – which is more of a fundraising role.

E: I joined the Liberal party and was a Riding Association President before I ran for municipal office, and I was a campaign manager for David Smith. So I've kind of done all of the different roles and functions before I was elected to Queen's Park in 1985.

Where did your family's Liberal partisan affiliation originate? Who was the first Liberal in your family?

M: I would say it was my father who ran in 1977. [My mom was the riding president and my dad ran provincially against the Minister of Education (he was the sacrificial lamb). My mom actually grew up in a Conservative house and married a Liberal. And then we all grew up in a Liberal house. I went through a time where I questioned am I really a Liberal because of my family, or because of my values. And I decided – no, I really am a Liberal based on the values of the Liberal party and my own beliefs.

What role did your mother play in your decision to become politically involved?

M: My parents never pushed or encouraged or suggested even that I get involved or run or do anything. I think for both David and I maybe they were even surprised when we decided to run for different positions. But once we decided on our volition that this is what we want to do, they were 100% supportive. I think what they did was to really let politics be an everyday part of our lives – conversations at the dining room table, involving us in the campaigns. I think by exposing it to us. But there are lots of people whose parents are involved in politics and they never get involved themselves. So I think it has to come also from within.

Do you hope that your children will one day become involved in politics?

D: I encourage my two boys to follow their own interests. Right now, they're 17 and 12. One is quite an athlete, and that's where he spends a lot of his time, and the other is an artist and he spends a lot of his time pursuing artistic endeavors. If that was something they wanted to do, I would be encouraging. But I would be encouraging of any involvement or any activity as long as it was a healthy one in their lives. If they chose to have different ideologies or philosophies or values and principles, I would certainly respect and honor those and encourage them to follow whatever they feel is right for them.

M: A little bit different from David, I *would* encourage them to get involved because it has been such a positive part of my life. But I wouldn't push them to do it. I would suggest it and encourage it, but I wouldn't push. Similarly to David, if they grow up and their beliefs are different from mine, I'd accept that as well. I'd be happy that they are civically engaged. I think that's something that is a good thing to encourage in your children but to allow them to pursue their own interests as well.

Why do you think political engagement is important for the Canadian Jewish community?

E: Democracy is at its best when people are involved. If people disengage or are not participating, democracy is diminished for everybody.

D: I feel the same way. Choosing not to be involved is a choice. But understanding that the rules and values of society, that that is going to happen anyways for any community. I think it's important that the aspirations, values, the different ways that that can be expressed, without the active involvement of community members, is not going to happen on its own. I know from my years in public life that many will identify causes near and dear to their heart. Unless the community steps forward, those values and those aspirations are not going to be realized just because of the good will of others.

What advice would you give to young Jewish adults seeking to become politically active?

M: I would say the very best way to get involved in politics is to volunteer on a campaign. There is no better way to throw yourself into it. Also, no job is too big or too small. Often people want to be a policy chair right off the bat. But it's really important to do and try everything, and see what your niche is. People who work hard and prove themselves to be smart and capable can go really far at a young age. A lot of staffers at Queen's Park or in Ottawa are so young. And you wonder how did these young kids get these jobs? And most of them started off on a campaign somewhere. If they're in university they can always join a Riding association or a Youth Club at the university. That's another good way to meet people with similar interests and values, and a good way to get involved.

How have your Jewish values been expressed in your political involvement?

E: The values of my Jewish heritage, which would be the importance of community, the sense of active participation, and the ethics of honesty and integrity, were all part of what I attempted to practice when I was in elected office. In fact, someone one day asked me, “what were my goals?” and I said my goals were always to make my children proud of me and I think that was also part of our Jewish community heritage was encouraging our kids to not only share the religious experiences but to feel proud of themselves and proud of their community.

E: That was just part of who I am. I was really surprised when I was told that I was the first Jewish woman cabinet minister in Canadian history when I was appointed to the Peterson Cabinet in 1985. It had never occurred to me to look at it through a Jewish history lens, but then I realized that that was part of who I was.

M: I would also just say I think it’s important, just as it was important for black people to see Barack Obama as President, for us to see members of our own community as representatives. I think that’s an important thing that we have representation in Ottawa and QP. But I would also say for me and my Jewish roots. My interest in being involved at all comes from my sense of equity and charity and that there are people who have a harder time in this world than others and that we need to do things in society to level the playing field to make it more equitable but also to make a society where people can achieve their potential. And where there is good education and good healthcare and all those kind of Liberal values that I think are synonymous with Jewish values: education, teaching our children well, and making sure that all members of society are taken care of. And that’s what I learned in Hebrew school and also what I feel the Liberal Party best represents for me.

D: That’s an interesting question to ask and I’ve often thought about the influence of some of the teachings, which culture has had in the way that it shaped me. When I was a little boy, one of the Rabbis had suggested to my parents that they should think about sending me to rabbinical school and then that should be a path that I would be on. I wonder very much how my life would’ve turned out if my parents had heeded that advice. I was always struck by the 3 questions that Rabbi Hillel asked somewhat rhetorically. If I’m not for myself, who would be for me? I’ve always thought that my involvement in public life, that there was a selfish aspect. Wanting to ensure that the community that I lived in was reflective of my values. That I was really putting myself into making it a better place for me and my family. The second question though I think is really important as well, that if I’m only for myself, then what am I? And there is a sense of you do this for a higher purpose, and that there is a larger societal role, a larger involvement that you are trying to have. It’s not solely for yourself, but it is to try and bring about a better community, a better world for your fellow citizens and neighbours. To really ensure that others have the same kinds of opportunities that I’ve been fortunate to have. The last question is, “if not now then when?” I think that that is really relevant. For me I decided that now would have been the right time to get involved in order to make the changes, in order to bring the coalition of people, to build the support, to

literally realize the vision that I had of a better local community and a better constituency. Very much as I look back on it, sort of those early Jewish culture and teachings and values lent some shape to the path that I chose and the way that I walked that path in public life.

E: I think David and Meredith have said it really well and part of our dinner table conversation was always that public life was about public service and not about self. That's also very much the teachings that both David and Meredith have referred to.

What was your most satisfying or rewarding experiencing in public life/political life?

E: Well I had so many it's hard to choose one. I think for me probably the most rewarding was being elected. You know, I remember election night at each election – this wonderful amazing feeling of people having confidence in you and being in a place where you could actually have a positive influence on public policy– but it was the amazing feeling on election night that people went out to vote and voted for me- that was probably the most rewarding

D (story): This is a very hard question to answer because there are so many wonderful memories and things that I've been able to be a part of and some were large government and literally transformative, province changing things. The most satisfying for me is quite a bit different than that. One day I was knocking on doors for reelection – I was in an apartment building in the parkway forest area – and I knocked on the door and 2 little kids opened the door and I tried to introduce myself and – they got very excited, more excited than I thought was really warranted about the fact that I was there- they kind of slammed the door in my face and went running back into their apartment. I thought well you know I must have offended them or maybe nobody's home. So I started to walk away and then the door burst open and their father comes up and this man threw his arms around me and started to embrace me. It was not the usual kind of reaction that you get at the door. This fellow started to say 'you are my guardian angel' - I must admit I wasn't really sure that we had ever met before and I couldn't really place him at the time. Once he let me go and he said you don't remember me do you? And I said, "would you please remind me". And he said "I came to see you about 2 ½ years ago. We were newly here from a country in the Middle East and my wife was in the hospital and she was pregnant with our 3rd child. And I came to see you, and it was unclear that she was going to live and that our unborn child was going to survive. And we had been presented with a bill from the hospital for literally tens of thousands of dollars because we weren't here for very long. We were only here for a month in Canada. And he said, you helped me- I want to introduce you to my wife and to my 2 year old. It was the most heartwarming thing in my entire life. To know that I had affected this family in such a fundamental way. For me, that the most satisfying thing that I can remember in my entire 20 years of public life.

Given that politics is your 'family business,' do you have any funny family stories regarding your political involvement?

M: It was David's first election (byelection)– my mom had left her seat to run federally- And David, he was the school trustee and he ran provincially. And it was the night before Election Day and we always do a sign blitz that night. So we were out in the truck putting up vote today stickers. My mom was driving the truck. And there were other people, from the other side let's say, who were knocking down David's signs, and we saw them as we were driving by, and my mother [Elinor] put her head out the window and started yelling at them "I see you, I know what you're doing, you better stop that!" She's yelling at them. They look around and they see Elinor Caplan's yelling at them. It was hilarious.

M: When my mother and my brother were both cabinet ministers at the same – you try not to be arrogant about it- but you certainly are incredibly proud of what your family has been able to achieve.

D: People always used to assume that my mother and the late, great Bob Caplan were married. (Includes a few more stories about people thinking they were married)