Cynthia Wolken Seeks Greater Role for Women in Politics

By Gary Libman

CYNTHIA WOLKEN, JD ’05, runs training schools in Montana for progressive women seeking political office. She devises campaign plans, shows women how to talk to voters while going door to door, and helps the candidates raise money.

“We send fundraising letters to progressive women across the state asking them to give money to our candidates,” she says. “We’re like an Emily’s List in Montana,” she adds, referring to the national group dedicated to electing pro-choice Democratic women to office.

The project has elected nearly 15 women to the state legislature, and another candidate became a state superintendent of public instruction.

And Wolken isn’t stopping there. She hopes to find female candidates for Montana’s governorship and U.S. Senate seats. “It’s called a pipeline,” she says. “The more women we plug into state offices, the better our chances will be to support a woman who can get elected to the Senate.”

Prospects to elect female progressives in Montana might seem reasonable because the state’s current governor and U.S. senators are Democrats. Nevertheless, finding women to run can be challenging, “Women are sometimes more used to support roles,” Wolken says. “They don’t always think of themselves as candidates.” To address this, Wolken’s seminars convince women that they can run for office and win.

Wolken learned campaigning skills working for a year before law school in former St. Louis Congressman Richard Gephardt’s office in Washington, D.C. She once campaigned door to door with Gephardt in his St. Louis district. She also took days off from Gephardt’s office to help candidates in Virginia and Maryland with their campaigns.

Her experience in Gephardt’s office—and through both a 2004 law school summer internship and a subsequent clinical research project—led Wolken to a career in public policy law, she says.

The internship was part of the law school’s American Indian Law Program. During the internship, Wolken helped codify the laws of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe at its reservation in Eagle Butte, South Dakota. The laws, written by a tribal council, “were in several places with no central receptacle,” Wolken says. “If you got charged with a crime, you wouldn’t necessarily know where the law was codified. We wanted to make the law more accessible.”

WOLKEN SAYS that the experience “absolutely” influenced her career. “The internship was one of the first times I realized that I could use the skill set I had learned in law school to help marginalized communities empower themselves,” she says.

After Wolken finished her internship, she further honed her advocacy skills through the Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic, where she collaborated with the clinic’s director, Karen Tokarz, the Charles Nagel Professor of Public Interest Law & Public Service, on a project aimed at combating human trafficking. Wolken continued her work on the topic as a research assistant for Tokarz, former Clinical Education Program director and current director of the law school’s Dispute Resolution Program.

Tokarz and Adjunct Professor Steven Gunn, director of the American Indian Law Program, then helped Wolken win a coveted Skadden Fellowship. After graduation, she worked as a Skadden Fellow and staff attorney at the Montana Legal Services Association in Missoula during 2006–08, helping combat human trafficking in the rural western United States. When the fellowship ended, she began consulting with Montana women running for office.

“I was excited and humbled by how well democracy and grassroots politics still work in Montana,” says Wolken, who grew up in St. Louis. “You can still run and win a political race based on your ideas about policy. You can also run a race for between $5,000 and $15,000, which makes it accessible for people who aren’t wealthy. Democracy is still relatively pure.”