

Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Episode 5: Young people: here's how to run for office—and win

Dwayne Betts:

I've wanted to be many things in my life and the one thing I've never confessed to wanting to be is an elected official. I wanted it so bad. When I was young, I wanted to run for class president. I was afraid though, so I ran for class treasurer. Because I figured, who wanted to be class treasurer?

And I won, but I ran against nobody. I forgot this. It was in the recesses of my brain until recently when I heard about an exhibit in a local Connecticut museum about the Black governors of Connecticut. It turns out that there have been multiple Black governors in Connecticut and the last one was in 1856. This was a tradition that existed during the Antebellum period and ended before the Antebellum period ended.

You're probably thinking like I'm thinking, "Yes, Dwayne. Be a governor. Be a Black governor in Connecticut." And then, you're thinking like I'm thinking, "But how would I do that?" I've got an answer for you. Today, we'll be talking to Amanda Litman. Her solution? Run for something. Anything. Specifically, one of the 500,000 elected offices that exist in this country.

Amanda Litman:

One of the coolest things has been working with local leaders who go from normal person to candidate to public servant who gets things done, and then gets to ride their bike down the bike lane they helped build. Or send their kids to the school that they got more funding for. You get to live the impact of your work every day.

Dwayne Betts:

At Run for Something. She doesn't just encourage young people to run. She gives them the absolute roadmap. Honestly, you'll learn that you could go to a website, put in your zip code, and it tells you every office that you could run for in your community.

Since 2017, Amanda and Run for Something, they've helped elect hundreds. Over 750 candidates across 48 states. It's not that I left the conversation feeling hopeful, though I did, it's mostly that I left the conversation preparing to be a Black governor.

Thank you for joining me today. I think that out of everybody that I've talked to, I'm always impressed on how the conversations seem to overlap, but also have tremendous amounts of space. You are occupying a space that I've never really engaged with anybody before, which is essentially, "Who should be running for office?" But I don't want to go there yet. What I want to go to is asking about, what is your earliest memory of becoming aware of US politics?

Amanda Litman:

My answer to this is really disappointing, which is that I don't remember a time in which I didn't care about politics. I grew up in Northern Virginia, just outside DC. My family was not political. I'm the oldest of four kids. There was a lot of chaos in my home and I always thought politics was interesting. I used to read the paper over breakfast. It was very obnoxious as a kid.

When I was in middle school, maybe, my best friend's mom used to take us to protests. She used to take us to rallies. Particularly, she took us to pro-choice Virginia rallies, which in the early 2000s was a pretty radical thing to do. When I was in high school, I used to volunteer for Virginia Democrats running for office. I used to knock doors. I used to make calls.

In my junior year of high school, I skipped a day of school to go see this guy Barack Obama speak. Before he was running for president, he was doing a tour of Students For Obama and he spoke at the university across the street from my high school. So I skipped a day of school, which was very transgressive of me as a 17-year-old or 16-year-old, and went to see him speak.

At the end of his speech, I knew. This is what I wanted to do. I wanted to work to elect people like him because, wow, if someone could make me feel like a part of the process the way that he did, what a gift that would be. What a joy. What a thrill. Also, what an intellectual challenge to build a movement like that. That was it. That's how I knew.

Dwayne Betts:

I want to ask one follow-up question, because if Barack Obama made you think, "This is what I want to do. I want to support people like this who are running for office ..." Do you remember any other presidential election before Obama?

Amanda Litman:

Well, that was the first election I voted in. It was 2008. Because I was 18.

Dwayne Betts:

Me too.

Amanda Litman:

Yeah. Pretty good.

Dwayne Betts:

I was a little bit older than 18, but luckily I had got out of prison. I went to prison when I was 16, and I did eight years and I came home when I was 24. Now, I got locked up in Virginia, but because I moved to Maryland when I came home, I just had to be out of prison and off probation.

I was doing so well on probation that my probation officer let me off two years early. So I was actually able to vote in that 2008 election, when I wouldn't have been able to vote had I been living still in Virginia or several other states in the country that had different laws around people with felony convictions voting. 2008 was the first time.

Amanda Litman:

Sometime in the last four or five years, Governor Terry McAuliffe personally hand-signed ... Because the Virginia state legislature was controlled by Republicans at the time. Refused to pass restoration of rights to people with felony convictions. Governor Terry McAuliffe personally signed something like 13,000 restoration of rights for folks in Virginia. Now it's getting screwed up by the new governor, but proof of how leadership really does matter there.

Dwayne Betts:

And the Virginia governor, he streamlined the process a lot. I had my voting rights back in Virginia now and it was literally going to the internet, filling out one form, and getting the answer within a month. Before that, it was taking seven years.

That's why I'm saying it's unlikely that I would've been able to vote in Virginia. I was just saying, in Maryland, I didn't have to apply to vote. I just had to not be on probation or parole and be out of prison.

Amanda Litman:

That's a very concrete example of how who's in charge locally changes who can engage in the process.

Dwayne Betts:

You went from doing that to thinking that it's important not just to be engaged in politics, but it's important to be thinking about who is engaged in politics. Now, you could have looked at that in all kinds of different ways, because other people do it different ways.

They say, "I want to get this underrepresented group to run for office." But you have sort of taken a different approach. Can you talk to me about what that approach is and explain why? Particularly, because I don't trust young people. And so, I want to know why you keep trying to get younger people to run for office.

Amanda Litman:

I think it's worth explaining how I got to this point. I went to college near Chicago at Northwestern. My senior year of college, I got an internship on the Obama campaign, his reelect in 2012, and then stayed working through the election. Worked for his nonprofit for a year. Moved down to the Florida governor's race in 2014 and worked for that. And then, moved to New York where I lived and worked for Secretary Clinton's presidential campaign. That was the best, hardest thing hopefully I'll ever do.

About a week after election day, I am crushed. I am spiritually, physically, emotionally crushed. I start getting messages, and in particular one from somebody I'd gone to college with. "Hey, Amanda. I'm a public school teacher in Chicago. I'm thinking about running for office, because if Trump can be president, it seems like anybody can do this. You're the only person I know that works in elections and normally in campaigns. Who do I call? What do I do if I want to do this? Who will help me? I'm 26 years old. I don't have a ton of money, but I think I can do this. Tell me what to do."

I didn't have an answer for him. Because at the time, if you were young and you were newly excited about politics and you wanted to do more than vote and more than volunteer, there wasn't somewhere you could go that would bring you into the process. That to me felt like a symptom of really big problems. Not just with my political party, but with our democracy. That there isn't an on-ramp for people outside the system to enter means that we are having the same old, same old.

And as an operative, I looked around and looked at the kinds of candidates I could be working with moving forward. There was a few stars, but mostly I was pretty unexcited. So I went on a really depressing vacation, where one of the things I did was read the book about how they created the organization, EMILY's List, which exists to elect pro-choice Democratic women. When they created EMILY's List back in the 80s, I believe, women were not seen as viable candidates.

Women were a risky bet to get into office, so what EMILY's List tried to do was make them seem viable by helping them really early. Early money is like yeast, it helps the candidate and dough rise. They tried to get engaged early to make women seem viable. And I thought we could do something like this to help young people, to help people like my friend from college who want to get involved. We could create an organization that is the entry point.

I reached out to a whole bunch of folks. One of whom connected me to the person who'd become my co-founder, his name is Ross Morales Rocketto. I wrote a plan and I built a website, and then we launched Run for Something on Trump's inauguration day. That morning. We thought, "Cool."

Dwayne Betts:

That is action.

Amanda Litman:

One, a depressed, out-of-work political operative can get a lot done in seven or eight weeks, but two, what a fun hobby this will be. What a cool way to spend our time on weekends. Or when I get a real job, this will be the way I stay in touch with politics to help people run for office.

We'll get maybe 100 people in the first year. Cool. In the first week, we had 1,000. As of today, we're up to more than 130,000 young people all across the country who've raised their hands and said, "I want to run for office now."

Dwayne Betts:

Now, I think that what happened with that answer is that you showed us how quickly things move. You're trying to build out something that'll be a hobby for when you get a real job, and then suddenly, it's like the Field of Dreams. "When you build it, they will come." And so, you build it and they came.

But it's a crucial question. Everybody that's listening is going to want to know the answer to this. I particularly want to know, not that I want this to be about me, but what qualifies as young? As somebody that's in their not yet 45, not even yet 43 area. I'm in the Jackie Robinson space. Can I run for office?

Amanda Litman:

Everybody. All ages can and should think about running for office. Run for Something in particular exists to help people under 40. 40 and under. Now, this is not to say that if you are 42 or 45 or 55 or whatever you might be, you shouldn't do this.

It is just to note that we exist for a very particular subset of people who are wildly underrepresented in government at every level, and who are at a very particular stage of life. The challenges you face in particular in your 20s and 30s are very different than those in your 40s or 50s or 60s.

Dwayne Betts:

For real. I literally got out of bed the other day and I pulled my hamstring, and that is not something that you deal with in your 20s.

Amanda Litman:

Mm-hmm.

Dwayne Betts:

I was going to ask you if people accuse you of being ageist?

Amanda Litman:

All the time.

Dwayne Betts:

I wanted you to answer, but it seems like that's your answer though. That you have carved out a space for people who actually don't have the supports that's necessary. It feels like you're telling me that the

support is the biggest barrier to entry into politics for somebody that's under the age of 40, who hasn't come through the rankings working for a state legislator, working for a member of the House, a member of the Senate.

And then, being mentored into that space where they often run. Even if it's when they're under 40, they've run with the kind of supports that have been built over a decade. Is that what you're telling me?

Amanda Litman:

I think it's a big part of it, which is that if you are a 20-something or 30-something, or even an 18-year-old who wants to run for office, and you go to the state party or the gatekeepers that exist for the office you're trying to run for and say, "Will you help me?" They'll be like, "No. Pay your dues. Wait your turn. How much money can you raise? Not a lot? Because you're in your twenties or thirties? Sucks. Good luck. God speed."

Or they'll be much more aggressive about it and proactively keep you out of the ballot. That has led to a government that is broadly unreflective of the American people. The average age in the House is 58, 59. In the Senate, it's 63, 64. The median American is 38. This is not reflective of the American people. The average mayor of an American city is in their late 50s.

That is not to say that older folks do not have wisdom and experience and deserve a seat at the table, but right now, all of the seats at the table more or less are taken up by people who live a very different experience. Especially, in issues like housing and reproductive rights and childcare and student loans and criminal justice reform. All of those things and countless others are experienced very differently by young people than they are by older folks. We need all of those perspectives at the table.

Dwayne Betts:

Also, people talk about having a deep bench. I think the only way you can have a deep bench and thinking about it in terms of a deep generational bench is to have different generations working alongside each other.

Amanda Litman:

That's right.

Dwayne Betts:

The wisdom that seasoned politicians have is all for naught if they're only talking to people in their same generation. I think one of the biggest barriers to entry is, "How do I even start this, so that I'm not so discouraged by the prospects?" Can you tell me about some of the profiles of the folks that you work with?

Amanda Litman:

One of my favorite things about the candidates we've worked with is that no one thing unites them except for a desire to make change. They have such wildly different backgrounds and experiences. A couple of examples for you. In Allegheny County around Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania, we worked with Bethany Hallam. Bethany Hallam tells this incredible story of how she woke up around election day, I believe in 2016, in the county jail.

She was a lacrosse player when she was in high school or an athlete when she was in high school, was given prescribed opioids, ended up addicted as so many people do, unfortunately, was arrested. Spent

some time in the county jail. Went into recovery. Ultimately, got the help she needed. She was homeless for a period of this time. Struggling with her family.

Four years later, after waking up that morning in the county jail, she was elected to the Allegheny County Council overseeing the same jail system that she was a part of. One of the things that she has done now in that leadership role is made that experience better for inmates in that system. Changed the way that they were charged for making phone calls. Changed the way that the county provided healthcare and services.

It has been really cool to both see her rise and lead with such integrity, and also not to let her past be a barrier to her entry, and in fact be a value-add to her campaign, because she can really speak to the struggles of so many people in her community. I could do this for hours and I won't, but I will just say that all of them have these stories. And the thing that makes them so extraordinary is that they are at their core totally ordinary. They're normal people.

Dwayne Betts:

What is the thing that you provide that they need? I get that some of it is the technical knowledge of what it means to run for office. Probably, some brass tacks. How do you get on a ballot? But what are the other things that you're able to provide for folks that they have no idea of when ... Because they don't tell you that when you read the paper.

They don't tell you that. It's not like we have a civics education that believes that part of it should be a tutorial on, not just how a bill becomes a law, but how a potential candidate becomes a candidate, becomes an elected official.

Amanda Litman:

Running up for office is a really hard thing to do and some of the things that are hard about it are hard because it's hard. You're putting yourself out there into public. You are exposing your personal life, your family, your friends, perhaps, to public exposure. You are making the public your boss, and that is really scary. You're basically competing in a very public popularity contest.

Some of the things that are hard about running for office are hard because it is meant to keep people out. It is meant to keep especially young people, young women, young people of color, young LGBTQA folks out of these structures. We try and help navigate for the things that are hard because it's meant to keep young people out. How can we break through those? How can we help you figure out how to get on the ballot? How can we help you write a campaign plan?

You need help finding a campaign manager? Great. One of our partners does staff training. We'll connect you with a manager. You need access to the voter file, which is the list of voters that you talk to help you win? Great. We can wrangle that up for you, find you a discount, and help you figure out which vendor to go with. Don't even know what the voter file is yet? Great. We will teach you what that is.

The biggest thing that we provide honestly is community. 60% of candidates told us their greatest resource was a relationship with another candidate. It's really lonely. You can't complain to your partner, you can't complain to your volunteers, you can't complain to your staff. But having someone you can commiserate with in something that can be a very isolating experience is incredibly meaningful. I often say that our regional directors are one part coach, one part consultant, one part therapist. So it's a little bit of all three.

Dwayne Betts:

But you keep saying, "We provide." How big is your team? Who is the we?

Amanda Litman:

Oh, man. We just grew exponentially. We are now over 50 people and still growing. I just got back from maternity leave. While I was on maternity leave ...

Dwayne Betts:

Congratulations.

Amanda Litman:

Thank you. While I was on maternity leave, the staff doubled in size, which was a cool thing to come back to. I grew a person and a team.

Dwayne Betts:

Congratulations again.

Amanda Litman:

Thank you.

Dwayne Betts:

Has that changed how you think about this work? Your relationship to it?

Amanda Litman:

Yes. I would say that my work has never been more important in the macro sense. What we are doing to build a better country ... I have a daughter. Especially, for young girls who are thinking about the world and what is possible for them. It has never been more important on a macro level.

And on a day-to-day level, it has never been less important. I work so hard on the nine to five that I've got, or however long she's at daycare for, because I want to make this a better country for her. And the second I'm done working, she is my whole world. She's really cute. She's a good baby.

Dwayne Betts:

No. I'm telling you. I remember and one of the things that I think is connecting this notion of politics and parenthood and really working is my wife was in school and my oldest was born on November 19th. And it was a perfect time to be born, because it was right on the cusp of the Thanksgiving holiday. But the next semester, my wife was back at school. And so, we had to find a daycare that would take a kid that was no more than seven or eight weeks old. First, it was family members, but then it was a daycare.

But it makes me think about the sacrifices that parents make to run for office and the way in which the sacrifices that you would have to make might discourage you running for office. I think your candor is needed on that front. What does it mean to be able to live in those two spaces? Do you find that the people who run for office can realistically do that? It feels like running for office is a 24-hour-a-day job.

Amanda Litman:

We worked in 2018 with a young woman named Erin Zwiener. She was running for Texas State House. Shortly after she announced her campaign, she found out she was pregnant and she had a really miserable pregnancy. She was very sick. She had was throwing up all the time. She tells the story of how

she was knocking doors on a college campus in her community and kept getting mistaken for a college student, because she kept stopping to throw up in a trashcan, which I completely relate to.

She went into labor, I believe, at a protest. After getting the epidural at the hospital, she was writing fundraising emails. And then, six or eight months later when she won her campaign, she brought her daughter Lark to the Texas State House floor with her and was able to show her daughter, "Look what mommy can do. Look what mommy can fight for. Look who mommy is fighting for." It is so hard. Now that I'm a parent myself, I'm even more amazed at these women who are able to do this.

Jennifer Carroll Foy in Virginia, who gave birth to twins and then was knocking doors all day and visiting her little baby boys in the NICU at night when she ran for Virginia House. The delegates. It is impossible for me to imagine, but it also is I think even more important especially for new parents or for parents of young kids to be running for office.

Because the experience of being a parent of an infant or a toddler ... Especially right now, trying to find childcare is so different than even when we were kids. Or older folks who are thinking about high schools for their children or colleges for their kids. It is a very unique moment for this generation that is unfortunately universally miserable.

Dwayne Betts:

This raises one other point. We're talking about the challenges that young folks have and younger candidates have. Particularly, mothers we're talking about right now. I've taken it as a given that young people will govern differently.

We know in fact that none of us are part of a homogenous group and our age is just one factor in our identity. But do you find that these folks govern a bit differently? People seem to really be bringing ideas into politics that were, if they existed at all, just bubbling beneath the surface.

Amanda Litman:

We had a number of folks elected to the Pennsylvania State House over the last five years who have then gone on to create the first ever student debt caucus, a group of legislators tackling student loans and tackling student debt, which Pennsylvanians carry the highest on average student loans of any state.

We've had down in Florida, Representative Anna Eskamani who's in the State House. Anna is iconic. She ran for office as a former Planned Parenthood staffer. Her mom passed away of cancer. The fight for healthcare, especially for women of color is very personal for her. She's a daughter of immigrants. One of the things she did when the pandemic started was take to Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and personally answer DMs from any person who would respond. And then, often tagging in her team.

Basically, over DMs, she and her team took in and processed over 30,000 requests for help with the broken unemployment system in the beginning of the pandemic, which is not say it's a different way of governing, but it is definitely a different way of communicating. In a way that is not to say older folks can't do it as well, but the fluency that young people have with the internet and the way that they present themselves and are able to communicate definitely changes the dynamic there.

Dwayne Betts:

I told you I didn't want to make this about me, but I have to ask. And it's really because I know that Pablo Neruda was a statesperson. In the United States, we really don't have artists who are prominent artists and prominent elected officials. What do you think a artist, a poet, might be able to contribute to US democracy?

And I ask specifically because what you've been talking about is what ordinary people bring, what people who are just a part of the fabric of the community bring. Sometimes what they bring is a reminder that we are all just regular folks, just citizens. I wonder if you have thought about the different things that people could bring who are young? Besides just their youth and their awareness of the change in landscape of the world from where they stand.

Amanda Litman:

I think we absolutely need more artists in office. The expression is, "You campaign in poetry, you govern in prose," but poetry and prose are both art. Those are both the way of bringing emotion to the front and center, which is not to say you don't need facts and logic. You obviously do. You need to be grounded in reality, but so much of politics and governing in particular and communicating about governing is about how you make people feel. And that's what art is.

Dwayne Betts:

You've given me a sense of some of the people who run, but can you talk about what are the literal steps that you take? I want to run for office and I am 29 and I'm a high school English teacher and I live in Mississippi. I reach out to you.

First, what are you vetting for? Because I know that you can't take everybody. And so, it looks like you're taking maybe 10% of the people who reach out to you.

Amanda Litman:

Yes. Just about.

Dwayne Betts:

What makes that 10% different from the people you say no to? And then, once you and some potential candidate agree to work with each other, what happens next?

Amanda Litman:

Okay. You go to runforwhat.net. You can see all of the offices that are available for you to run for in 2023, maybe 2024, if we have that data so far. Let's say that you are, as you said, a 29-year-old high school English teacher in Mississippi. We're going to ask you to first start with three simple things.

One, what is the problem you care about solving? What is the thing that gets you out of bed in the morning? Or makes you angry? Or the thing you want to make even better? What is the thing you care about solving? Two, what is the office that gives you a place to solve it? Because the answer is probably not Congress and certainly not the president and probably not governor. It's probably maybe city council or state leg or a school board or tax assessor or sheriff or probate judge. Or whatever it might be wherever you are.

And then, three, why should voters want you to win? Which is very different than, "Why do you want to win?" You want to win because winning is great and losing sucks. Voters want you to win, because you're going to deliver something for them. You're going to do something to make their life meaningfully tangibly better.

If you can answer those three questions, that's the heart of your campaign and everything else is logistics. From how to get on the ballot, to how to write a campaign plan, to hiring staff, to how to communicate with the number of voters you need before the deadline of election day. All of that is just logistics. That's not rocket science.

Dwayne Betts:

I've got to make a confession.

Amanda Litman:

Yeah.

Dwayne Betts:

I knew part of that answer, because I had already gone to the website. What was so cool is ... I also knew you weren't ageist, because I put my real age in. Just to see if it would kick me out and say, "Sorry. You are past the age line."

What was wild is I didn't know even how to identify what I could run for. You just answered the question that I ran into when I stopped my search. I put in my name, I put in my birthdate, I put in my address, and it came up with the 15 offices that were available for me to run for.

Amanda Litman:

Yep.

Dwayne Betts:

And that's more knowledge I had about civics and the way local politics runs in my community than I had before I visited that website.

Amanda Litman:

Love that.

Dwayne Betts:

I appreciate that. But before you get to those logistics, do you guys help people craft the answers to those fundamental questions?

Amanda Litman:

I think, for us, one of the things my co-founder and I often say is we want to open the door for everyone to run for office. We don't want to push anyone through it. You've got to want it, because it sucks. I want to be really honest with people about this. Running for office, especially if you are not what a quote, unquote, "Traditional politician," looks like, sounds like, is like ... It's going to be really hard.

You have to want to do it not just for you, but for something bigger than yourself. For your community, for your people, for your family, for your friends. Whatever the answer to that question is, "What's the problem you want to solve?" You've got to do it for that. Because most of the time, it's going to be pretty miserable. And to a T, 99% of the people that we talk to when we debrief with after election day, regardless of the outcome, will say that it was worth it.

Dwayne Betts:

Can I tell you something that I hate to admit?

Amanda Litman:

Mm-hmm.

Dwayne Betts:

When I did this on the website and I put up my address, a lot of offices came up, but president didn't come up. Senator didn't come up. House of Representatives didn't come up.

Amanda Litman:

We delete those for a reason.

Dwayne Betts:

It seems like very intentionally. You're telling me that I could have a role in this, that we can have roles in our communities by being on the town council. By knowing that our town is organized by districts. Can you talk a little bit about what the experience has been when people who weren't aware of politics, they choose to run for one of these local offices?

Amanda Litman:

There are more than half a million elected offices in the United States. Most of them are not in DC and they cover the things that make day-to-day life good or bad. The quality of the roads you drive on or bike on or take a bus on. The cleanliness of the water that comes out of your pipes. The types of restaurants that open in your neighborhood. The businesses that can get licenses if they need. How easy or hard it is to vote. How easy or hard it is to get the healthcare you need. What kind of books are available at your public library?

This is the kind of thing that local government touches. One of the coolest things has been working with local leaders who go from normal person to candidate to public servant who gets things done, and then gets to ride their bike down the bike lane they helped build. Or take the bus as part of the free transit pilot they helped set up. Or recycle their house goods as part of a program they helped fund. Send their kids to the school that they got more funding for, increased pay for teachers at.

You get to live the impact of your work every day. You also get to move faster than federal government does. We often say the further down the ballot, the closer to people's door. That's often quite true. Literally, your trash pickup is determined by your local government.

Dwayne Betts:

I feel like I'm learning a lot. Thinking about running for office? No. Also, I just recognize that I'm no longer young. I have enough gray hairs. I want to create some space for young folks to run for office. I should tell you this though. I'm really emotional and I don't know if I could deal with losing. You invest so much in the campaign. How do you help people deal with that?

You are selling this vision and you are trying to convince people. It's actually worse because you're pouring your heart out to folks and you're really making this emotional appeal. And it can't be technical, because you might have 10 seconds of a person's time. You get so accustomed to that, so that you too get connected to that emotion. That's what is driving you. I have two questions. The first is, how do you help people deal with the emotional aspects of losing a campaign?

Amanda Litman:

We have put together a really cool program with the help of some mental health practitioners. We do resiliency workshops for people who've lost. We bring together a dozen or so candidates who recently ran for office and lost and come together for six or eight hours on a weekend over Zoom to talk about

the experience, to process it. That loneliness that happened up through the campaign experience, it's even worse when you lose.

Dwayne Betts:

I know the person that inspires some of this work for you has some experience losing. President Obama had experience losing his first campaign. He might be an exception, but I don't think he's an exception in terms of experiencing defeat. But how many people who you work with that lose decide to run again?

Amanda Litman:

About two-thirds tell us they want to run again. Many go on pretty quickly to do so.

Dwayne Betts:

That's fantastic. Because that means that you're not just encouraging people to do something because it's a feather in their cap and that they'll go search for new feather, but you're actually encouraging them to change the way that they think about being in community. I appreciate that.

Let me ask you this though. It sounds incredible ... Wait. No. Let me change that. It sounds absolutely daunting. It's important. It makes me wish that I was younger and that I could try and fail and then try again. What does it mean when you hear the phrase, "Almost there," in the context of your work?

It's the night after an election. The person who was running didn't win and you want to tell them something that's meaningful. You think about this phrase, "Almost there," and it's not hokey. But how would you phrase it when you hear it? How would you describe that to a person?

Amanda Litman:

Almost there? It's really hard to answer, because the reality is that the, "There," for us keeps moving. There is always another election. At least, as long as democracy keeps going, which hopefully will be for a long time. I will fight hard for that. There is almost always another election and we are so close always to having the power we need to make a difference.

One of the things that can be really discouraging about this is that sometimes the goal is not to win, but to just lose by a little bit less each time. Because the only way that you go from an 80-20 or 70-30 or 60-40 margin of victory for the opposing side is to knock off a few points until finally you will hit a moment where it's 50-50 or 51-49. And that is where it gets fun.

So it's hard sometimes. We're never feeling making people feel like they are sacrificial lambs, because they are not. There's so much more that comes out of running for office than just the outcome on election day, but we are always just almost there to the power we want and the power we need.

Dwayne Betts:

One more question. Are you running for office?

Amanda Litman:

I get this question probably once a week. I think you should run for office to solve a problem you care about. And this, what I'm doing right now, is solving the problem I care about. That's not to say never.

Dwayne Betts:

That isn't.

Amanda Litman:

I love New York City. I would love to fix New York City, but right now ...

Dwayne Betts:

Governor? Governor or mayor? Wait. Wait. Are you announcing your candidacy to be the next governor of ... Actually, I can't say that.

Amanda Litman:

No. The answer to that is a hard no. That's mostly to say I think you should run to solve the problem you care about and this is the problem I care about solving.

Dwayne Betts:

That is a beautiful answer.

Amanda Litman:

Thank you.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, this was fantastic. I appreciate your time, Amanda. Thanks for coming on and thanks for helping me play a role in encouraging younger folks to run for office.

Amanda Litman:

Thank you for having me. If you decide to run, even if Run for Something can't help you, I will help you. Don't worry.

Dwayne Betts:

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Nuzum at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Paul Schneider, and Kristin Mueller, along with Patrick D'Arcy, Alex Simon, and Amy Low from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliott. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.