

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 0:03

Hello, and welcome to the first episode of Toward a More Just Future, a podcast from Rutgers School of Social Work. My name is Marla Blunt-Carter, and I'm an Assistant Professor of Professional Practice at Rutgers School of Social Work. I will be your host for this season's episodes. Today, we will speak with Lisa Blunt Rochester, a Congresswoman from the state of Delaware, the first African American and first woman to serve in this role. Lisa is no doubt a change maker. And she's also my big sister.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 0:41

Congresswoman, thank you for joining us today. Can you briefly tell us about your journey to becoming a Congresswoman?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 0:49

Well, first of all, thank you so much for having me to Rutgers University. It's a special, special place for me and my family. And and it's also special to be with you, Professor Marla Blunt-Carter, who is one of my-- just one of my SHEroes.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 1:11

I will tell you a little bit about the journey. And it's kind of funny because I you know, you don't want to kind of go in chronological order. But I feel it's it's important to. To start at the beginning and mention the fact that I was a kid that grew up in the 1960s. And I think that's significant to who I am today, because, you know, there was this era of, you know, Civil Rights Movement, you know, the 50s, and the 60s, watching individuals around us and watching the change in the environment. And so you had the Civil Rights Movement, you have the Black Power movement in the 70s, you have Vietnam that we're dealing with, as well as the Women's Movement. And so like, I remember as a kid thinking, you know, "Hey, I am woman hear me roar," you know, Black Power, saying loud, "I'm black, and I'm proud." I mean, these were things that were embedded in the three girls of our family.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 2:11

And so that shaped who I am and who I was at that time, and even remembering the seventh grade leading my first protest, you know, because the boys got gym time and the girls didn't. And we just refuse to leave the playground the girls chanted, "You gave it to them, now we want gym." It became sort of a part of the DNA to to fight for those who seemed like they didn't have a voice.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 2:38

And so as I went through, and I look back at my jobs that I've had everything from the summer youth employment program coordinator, when I was in college, to working on employment and training programs through state government and then becoming, working in a congressional office as an intern. And then as a caseworker. Casework, also is part of, I think, my DNA being that problem solver.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 3:08

And then left the congressional office, he became Governor Tom Carper. And then I worked in the governor's office as a policy advisor, focusing on strengthening families and communities and left his office to go work in an agency.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 3:28

The Secretary of Health and Social Services asked me to come and be her Deputy Secretary of the largest department in state government. And I think this is one of the lessons that I learned. I was afraid and so I said, no, when she offered, I said no, twice. And then the third time, you know, me, more or less, opened up the Bible, like help, you know, what should I do. And it was the story of Jonah and the Whale. And I got so scared, I said, I'm gonna take this job, there's, there's something to Nineveh here for me. And it was the best decision I've ever made. Because I got to deal with major, major issues. And it prepared me for the next job, which was Secretary of Labor, which was one of my favorite jobs, because I was helping people to live their purpose, and also fighting for discrimination. And then from there, head of state personnel, you could look at the bio, but you see this connection, this connectivity between people being able to live their purpose, and being able to have a voice.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 4:28

And it wasn't until after many years of marriage, a divorce, getting remarried, moving to China, writing a book. And, you know, living the life that I had always dreamed of that unexpectedly, my second husband Charles, as you know, passed away. And that totally shifted everything for me. And I remember the year after his passing, thinking, I have, I'm blessed, I'm okay.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 5:00

But I can still serve. And I decided on the anniversary of his passing to run for Congress, having never run for anything in my life. And we had never elected a woman in Delaware to Congress, or a personal color. And so it presented with that different challenges.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 5:24

Right, and that's, that's what I want to ask you next, is being the first woman and the first person of color to represent Delaware, what does that mean to you? Like, tell me the significance of that, and how that plays out every day, in your work?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 5:45

Well, you know, Marla, it's funny, because, you know, one of the questions that used to like really boggle my mind was when people would say, what's it feel like to be the first?

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 5:55

Be the first. I know. I know.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 5:58

And you know, because we've had this conversation many times, and for me, it wasn't a feeling for a long time. As a matter of fact, I, as you know, too, for a long time, I almost diminished the significance of it, and how hard it was the fact that, you know, it was a reason nobody, it had never happened before, you know. It required things that sometimes...

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 6:16

That Black women don't have access to.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 6:28

Exactly, you know, whether it's money, whether it's the right team, I mean, I was fortunate for you to have connections with Emily's List. And Emily's List is an organization that helps women candidates, and that really did make a difference for me, as well as the internal struggles of you know, can I do this?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 6:50

And what it means to me is that it's sort of something our father talked about was, you know, being able to see it, to see somebody in a position so that you could envision yourself in it. And so, the beauty of it for me is, I'm a woman. So if you're a woman, yes, you can do it. If you're Black. Yes, you can do it. If you're over 50. I was like, 54.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 7:18

Right

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 7:19

First time I ran, you know, like, and so the first is important. And I think it also presents with it a responsibility, you know, to not be the last.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 7:34

Exactly, exactly. And the inspiration that you are, you're creating so much of a movement of Black women running for office in Delaware, we've seen that number just like go through the roof recently. And a lot of them look to you as their mentor.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 7:53

And you've inspired many people. I mean, you've inspired me my whole life, you're my big sister, you know, and I share with many people, the inspiration, that just your example, gives us all.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 8:07

So let's talk about the work. Here you are, you were first elected 2016. We are 2020 you've been through a lot. In those four years, you the country, many people. What are some of the pieces of legislation or just issues that you've worked on, that you are really proud of that you feel are significant that people know?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 8:35

Yeah, well, you know, first of all, I want to go back to the statement that you just made about the women or the Black women who have come since I think that also was the thing that made it real for me, the impact, and I, you know, to see them, working on issues and standing up and just running. We had some some incredible firsts in Delaware just recently as well. And so that really was important to me.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 9:04

Another thing is to work on issues that I've been, you know, working on all my life, but actually be able to be in a position to say, you know what, let's work to get the funding for that or less work to get legislation for that.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 9:15

And one of them is clean water. I mean something that people take for granted. Over 20 years ago, I, you know, met with and worked with people in southern part of our state [Delaware], like in a town called Ellendale, which hadn't many residents had no running water. And so to advocate and be on the Energy and Commerce Committee in Congress. That was one of the big moment for me, was the Energy and Commerce Committee.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 9:44

Yes, explain. Explain that to our listeners who are not familiar with the significance of the appointments to certain committees and the work that the committees do?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 9:56

Yes, I mean, you know, that's really where the rubber meets the road. That's, you know, where the work is done. And in my first term, I was able to get on that the House Committee on Education and Workforce, because that's my background. But we were in the minority. And I was also able to get on the Agriculture Committee and a lot of people were like Agriculture? Well, anybody who knows Delaware knows that farming is our second largest industry, it is important to us as a state. But also the Ag [Agriculture] budget at over 80% is SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program], right. And so for social workers, it's very important to know that one of the proudest moments for me was to be able to work on the Farm Bill and to make sure that these there were proposals for these punitive work requirements that weren't really tied to uplifting people, but more, ultimately, just cutting people off. And so to be at the table, and to work on the Farm Bill and ensure that there were not those that was an accomplishment for me. We got on, and I was the first person in 120 years from Delaware to make it onto the Ag [Agriculture] Committee advocate to get onto these committees of your choice.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 11:06

But what my vision, my goal, my hope was to get on Energy and Commerce, because that is the Committee for healthcare. Number one issue that is the Committee that has environment and climate change, which was also my second subcommittee to get on it, it is a place where you can see the intersectionality between health, jobs, the environment, and also today, equity.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 11:34

Absolutely.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 11:35

Across the board, we are now focused, all of our Committee work on equity is so to me, it was really important to get on that Committee because it was the place where I could get the job done for Delaware and for the country.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 11:50

So speaking of jobs, I know that you do have initiative or your focus is on the future of work, being a former Secretary of Labor, how is that work related to social justice?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 12:06

Hmm, such a great question. So, you know, it's funny, because initially, I, you know, I'm on my Committees, I'm doing my work, and I'm having these meetings with people. And I start to notice there's

a lot of conversation about technology, automation, machine learning, autonomous vehicles. And I saw this presentation, that was showing the number of jobs and displacement that could occur with autonomous vehicles. And as I thought more about it, you think about, these are jobs that might not require a college degree to drive a bus or truck. They are good paying jobs. And if they go, what's going to happen? And I started to notice that the connection between jobs and Black and brown people hold jobs that women hold, whether it's, whether it's retail, and if, what the impact would be if the job shifted without us being forward thinking and preparing.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 13:09

And so instead of being afraid, my thing was lean in and focus on how do we prepare for the future of work. But it was really this pandemic, COVID-19, that pushed the future of work.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 13:21

Absolutely.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 13:22

You know, now all of a sudden, people are doing Zoom for work, if you can get that kind of work, right. Not everybody can work like that. It was the COVID-19 that pushed distance learning. You know, people have been talking about this and doing it a little bit here and a little bit there. Same issue with telehealth, you know, and so, that gets to the digital divide, and making sure that people have access to broadband internet and the tools to be able to do it.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 13:23

And so, for me, the future of work has been initially it was about the technology and the displacement of jobs. But now, this also has to be looked at with an equity lens, because we don't want people to get left behind. And we also as a country want to be competitive and want to be able to, you know, have the best quality of life for folks. And so I created I founded a the first of its kind bipartisan, future of work caucus in the Congress. And so that's an interesting way to look at a vision for the future of our country.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:23

Absolutely. And I'm glad you brought up the bipartisanship work, because you came into Congress with President Donald Trump as our president. And now President Biden is in the White House.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 14:37

Yeah.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:37

And and I know, but I don't know if the viewers know that, that you played a part in that, being on the Presidential Inaugural Committee, the National co-chair one of four or five, I believe?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 14:51

Yes, four.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:53

As well as, serving on the vetting Committee for the Vice Presidential selection. So, I know that you went to the inauguration that you witnessed it with your own eyes, this country's peaceful transfer of power.

How does it feel to be in a Biden era? In Congress? Is it different than the Trump Administration? And what are your hopes?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 15:25

Yeah, it is drastically different. You know, first of all, like you said, I came in with Donald Trump, and I'll never forget election night, because it literally was a moment of high when we won, and then disbelief in the election results. And, you know, spending the last four years with a real oversight role that Congress also plays yet beyond legislation and appropriating money, we have an oversight role. And and there was a lot of oversight. I also, you know, as part of history participated in two impeachments.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 16:06

Right

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 16:07

And even the first one, you know, that was a moment that will forever be etched in my own personal history, because of the gravity and the magnitude of it. But to be, but when Joe Biden decided to run and asked, If I would, you know, endorse prior to, you know, I look at that moment compared to today, and who he was, then when he decided to run, you could feel the pain of Charlottesville, all over him. And this feeling that I have to do this at this moment. And I, you know, I didn't take it lightly, and I didn't just automatically, we had a really interesting conversation about what would you do if you got in and why now, why you why this, and, and I knew at that moment that he was the person who could bridge the divides, and actually make it to this point, and to see what they're doing as, like, right out the gate, to crush this virus, this pandemic. And to do it in a way that is responsible, and that is bold. And that's, that is incredible.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 17:30

But the thing that has been most exciting to me, is to watch the focus on social justice, and on saying, you know, what, all these folks that brought me here, I hear you, I see you, we're working on climate change, we talked about that they're already working on climate change, getting us back into the Paris Accord. You know, the focus on making sure that in the first 200 days of this administration, they're going to have every single agency, do a deep dive look at the institutional and structural racism and an equity issues that exist.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 18:11

That's amazing

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 18:12

That to me, is like we've never seen or heard anything like this before. And I think, you know, to right now, in Congress, we are working with the administration to come up, you know, he's created this rescue plan. And we, we know that we're going to have a limited amount of time, and a sense of urgency, and I'm one of the members in Congress, one of the few that represent a whole state, but also is I'm in the New Dems Caucus, which is sort of our very much economy, business friendly caucus in the Democrats. And I'm also in the Progressive Caucus. And so even as recent as yesterday, you know, Bernie Sanders came in and spoke to our Caucus. We, what I'm loving about this moment is that we have an opportunity to do the things that we've talked about the things that would be important to social workers, because it is about equity, justice, people being able to thrive, and opportunity, real

opportunity. And we have to seize this moment. We have to seize this moment. And and I'm just proud to be there.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 19:30

Well, you work hard, and we appreciate you here in Delaware. And, you talk a lot about the bipartisanship and the work that you do across the aisle and just bringing people together. One of the core values of social work is the importance of human relationships. And I know that you value relationships, these are not just individuals that you work with, you build relationships.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 19:55

Another core value, of course, is social justice as as you have spoken about. And then the other one is dignity and worth of a person. I think for me, when I think of your work, the work shows that you respect different constituencies. All constituencies. You work with everybody. And my question to you, and this might be my final question is, what advice would you give to social workers who seek to play a role in creating change on a policy level?

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 20:30

Because social work and politics have the same goal in mind. And that is to create a better society. But social work has not seen how they actually fit into the policy making work in the political arena. So what role could they play? Can we play moving forward knowing that the President that we have now sees us. He sees social workers. He understands our value. So what advice would you give social workers that want to be more engaged in policy? And in politics?

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 21:13

Yeah, I'm going to answer this question from a work perspective and also, from a personal perspective, personal and professional.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 21:25

From a work perspective, I actually am the product of a social worker, our dad, Rutgers grad, MSW [Master of Social Work]. I am the sister of a social worker, my sister Marla, MSW. And I'm the mother of a social worker, my daughter, Alyssa, also graduated with a Master's in Social Work from Rutgers. And so I watched you guys from both a micro and a macro level, deal with social work. And then me as the caseworker, I'm always like grounded in this casework position. And so from a professional standpoint, there are so many different entry points in which you can impact- and that's my word for the year, my whole team knows the word is impact.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:20

Right

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 22:20

If you're not having an impact, go home. So that's my thing. So there are so many different ways in which you can have an impact on people's lives and improve their quality of life. As a caseworker, I still remember over 30 years ago, people whose lives, because I was advocating for them with the Social Security Administration, they got their benefits and they were homeless.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:45

Yes

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 22:46

That matters. That one-on-one matters. But from that job, I started finding that I'm putting people on waiting lists.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:56

Right

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 22:56

Like, oh, my God, you know, and then I'm getting depressed. Because, you know, and I'm like, oh, my God. And so I advocated to get a new position in the office to be responsible for special projects and grants works, so that I could find money to build the housing so that people didn't have to be on waiting lists. Yeah, so there's the personal one to one, then there's the okay, what can I do to help bring the resources and then as I move further into my career, that's when I worked in the agencies.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 23:29

In the agencies, I become the technical expert, I become the one that the Governor's Office or others that might be the elected officials are relying on for the information. That's valuable. As a Congresswoman, I value when, you know, the social workers come into my office and tell me this is this is the impact of SNAP, and you putting those work requirements. It wasn't like I made this stuff up in my head.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 23:59

Right

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 23:59

Experts, like you, that gave me the data, the research, the background, so that I can and real world touched it, felt it as Bryan Stevenson said, "being in proximity" to what it was. And then the the other piece I would mention is where I am now, which is running for office.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 24:23

Absolutely

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 24:24

Social workers can run for office. Social workers can help make sure that people with the right vision, the same mission, the same goals, get elected to be able to carry out you know. And then on a personal more personal side, I would say as an individual, make sure you know your why. Make sure you know your why. It helps to keep you going when the when the storms come. You can stay rooted in that why also, you know.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 24:59

I'd say stay curious. The fact that I asked a lot of questions, you know, helps me to stay informed. And it helps me to like, be able to make good decisions. And like I even said to my team recently, you know, come to me and say, here's the problem. Here are your options. Here's what I recommend to you. And

here's why. You do that little thing right there. Okay, I can now weigh this and make a good decision, so stay curious. I love traveling the world. I love eating different things. I love learning new dances. All of that helps me to connect to people, even people who I might not like or might not like me. So the other thing is to just care.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 25:48

Yeah

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 25:50

Love. Marla, you know, that's my word- love. This is all about love. That's what I learned when Charles, my husband, passed away. It we are on this earth to love, love ourselves, love each other, love this planet, and if you believe in God, love God. When we do those things, and I'm talking about ourselves to when we do those things, you don't want to see homelessness, you fight to stop it. You want to see people thrive. And I think that's why even when people ask questions like what's your greatest accomplishment? It's hard for me to think of that. I just think about what Maya Angelou, I think was Maya, that talked about, "people won't remember what you said or what you did, all they'll remember is how you made them feel."

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 26:38

That's right. That's right.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 26:40

That's the bottom line. Whether you're a teacher. I know if you care about me. Whether you're a police officer, I know if you care about me. Whether you're a social worker, I know when you care for me.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 26:53

Oh, I am so glad that you were my first guest. My first role model, my SHEro, Lisa Blunt Rochester.

Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester 27:06

And my inspiration Marla Blunt-Carter.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:10

Thank you, Lisa. Thank you, Congresswoman.

Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:21

Today's conversation with Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester was inspiring and motivating. She shared her wit, her wisdom, and her work with all of us. And we can see how it connects to social justice and social change. That's why she is a changemaker in the spotlight.