



**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 00:03**

Hello, and welcome to the third episode of Toward a More Just Future, a podcast from Rutgers School of Social Work. My name is Marla Blunt-Carter, and I am an Assistant Professor of Professional Practice at Rutgers School of Social Work. Today, I will be speaking with Valerie Biden Owens, a media consultant, political strategist, and so much more. She also happens to be the sister of President Joe Biden. During her 50 year career, Valerie ran numerous political campaigns at a local, state and national level. And for this, and many other reasons, I consider Valerie a changemaker.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 00:49**

Valerie, thank you so much for joining us today. And let me personally thank you for being an inspiration to me. It was important that I had you on this podcast so that others could learn the many lessons that you taught me. I just really appreciate you. And I'm glad that you got here to join us today.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 01:12**

So, tell the listeners who is Valerie Biden Owens.

**Valerie Biden Owens 01:19**

Well, first of all, thank you, Marla, and you are my friend, and I appreciate you. Valerie Biden Owens, I am the daughter of Jean Finnegan Biden and Joseph R. Biden, Sr. I'm the sister of Joe, Jim and Frankie Biden. I'm the wife of Jack Owens. I'm the mother of Missy, Cuffe and Casey Owens. But I just want to set everything straight from the beginning- I am Valerie Biden Owens and on my own Marla, I'm a hell of a woman. Okay?

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 01:54**

That I know.

**Valerie Biden Owens 01:55**

Okay, now we can proceed.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 01:58**

Yes, there's a quote that was shared with me that the best way to describe you is that you are an iron fist in a cashmere glove. And I think that that is true, that you are tough as nails, but you are also classy, graceful, brilliant, beautiful. But you are one badass woman.

**Valerie Biden Owens 02:25**

Thank you. Hey, can we keep this interview going for a couple hours? That sounds really- that sounds really good. Thank you.



**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 02:32**

You know, but I think that people need to understand that the change makers aren't just those that we see on television. They are powerful people doing great work behind the scenes and you've worked behind the scenes for years. And I personally pattern myself in the work that I do after you.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 02:55**

So, let's go back to 1970. Let's go back to when it all began. And you and then your big brother Joe, made the decision to run for county council. Did you have any idea? What was next that you wouldn't become a part of American history? Did you have any idea?

**Valerie Biden Owens 03:19**

Well, I knew that my brother was going to make an impact. I knew that my brother's commitment to public service was part of his DNA. So I, I knew that we were in the game to make things better. We were in for the long haul. In truth did I think that he would be President of the United States- that didn't occur. I mean, that wasn't the goal. Of course- I mean, he could have been he was my big brother Joey, God, he could have been anything. But that wasn't foremost and in my mind in 1970. I just knew that what ever he did, I would be doing it with him either behind him, giving them a little push, in front of him, giving them a little pull, or walking alongside him as his equal, because that's the way it always was with us. We were always a team. I mean, from the time I was a little girl, I can I open my eyes and he put out his hand and he said, "come on Val." He said we have things to do, places to go, and people to see. And off we went on this journey.

**Valerie Biden Owens 04:31**

And Edith Wharton said it best I think- and not about me and Joe, but about our view- and she said that there are two ways to spread the light. One is to be the candle and the other the mirror that reflects it. Either way, you are responsible for spreading the light. Sometimes Joe was the candle when I was the mirror, but he always flipped it and made sure that sometimes, you know, I was the candle and he was the mirror where we we've been best friends and confidant since, I said since the day I can remember. So, did I know we were going to go end up in the White House? No, but I knew that we were going to that, he was going to do great things, and that I was going to be with him.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 05:25**

So, you were 20-something years old? What was your major in college?

**Valerie Biden Owens 05:32**

I was an English- I was an English and history major.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 05:36**

Okay.

**Valerie Biden Owens 05:37**

Yeah. I loved history and I loved literature and writing. Yes, so, I was an English and history major. I was one of the people in growing up that wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I knew I didn't want to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or an astronaut. I just knew that I wanted to be an achiever, to make a difference, to be financially stable, that I didn't have to depend on anyone. And I decided in my last year, my last semester in college, to take a course in student teaching at Mount Pleasant. I took a course which allowed me to student teach, which at Mount Pleasant

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 06:27**

-High School.

**Valerie Biden Owens 06:27**

Yeah, yeah. You know that.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 06:30**

Yeah, I went to Brandywine. That's the Brandywine School District. Yes.

**Valerie Biden Owens 06:33**

Yeah, and I taught seniors and sophomores at, at Mount Pleasant High School. And I loved it. So when I got out of college, I said, that's what I'm going to do. I went to, into teaching and that's where the career started in 1970 with Joe and county council, I was a teacher at Willmington Friend School down the street in Delaware.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 06:56**

So, how did you learn how to run a campaign, then? I mean, you were not a political science major. You are not someone that was born into a political family. You were a teacher. What was it that gave you the belief that you could run a campaign?

**Valerie Biden Owens 07:18**

Well, what I've said whenever I have an opportunity is that confidence is the number one prerequisite for success in life. And I had the great advantage of having a big brother, who told me from the beginning, that whatever he could do, I could do better. He said, I was smarter than he, I was more athletic than he, whatever it was, he said there was nothing that he could do that, or that any woman couldn't do, but particularly me. He used to bring me with him and his friends would say, why'd you bring a girl? And his answer was, "she's not a girl, she's my sister." So, I didn't know enough to know what I couldn't do.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 08:03**

Right.

**Valerie Biden Owens 08:04**

I didn't know enough to be intimidated. And you're right, when we ran for county council, and then for the US Senate.



**Valerie Biden Owens 08:11**

We had no power, we had no influence. We had- I mean the Democratic Party was not a firmly constructed party at that time. We had no money. As matter of fact, you know, we owed money, personally. So I said, Joey, I can't. I mean, I one thing running county council. That's a small district. And you know, we could we go door to door and we meet people one on one. But I said, running that for, the United States Senate. I can't do that. I don't know how to do it. And he said, of course you do- we'll figure it out. He said it's just the same thing. Politics is personal. We built this, these many concentric circles around for county council. And we just expanded for the US Senate. And he said we'll figure it out. And we did. He's the first US Senator that he and I ever knew. And I'm the first campaign manager I ever knew. So sometimes it's good to not know everything, because it had I known the unwelcoming environment for women in politics at that time when all the men were- all the pundits were men, and they thought it should be that way that women were only supposed to open and close headquarters. They were able to talk to the volunteers answer the phones and, you know, bring you the mail.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 08:11**

Right.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 09:33**

Not make the decisions.

**Valerie Biden Owens 09:34**

Yeah, and so had I known that, I probably would have been intimidated. But I didn't know. Joe said we could do it. He said he could be senator. So if he could be senator I could be his campaign manager. I mean, he picked me first to be on his team my entire life. So, you know, we just jumped in and the rest is history. I mean, there's a lot of- it wasn't just LaLa Land. You know, you want it to be that you know what these campaigns are like.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 10:03**

That's what I was gonna say. So I, one of my best memories of watching you in action was in 2007 in Iowa. And we were at a university.

**Valerie Biden Owens 10:18**

Yes.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 10:18**

And your brother, President Biden, hadn't arrived and was late because of a snowstorm or something. And so there were over 100 people, 100 kids in this room, and they were waiting to hear from him. And the two of us were just...

**Valerie Biden Owens 10:35**

For hour and a half



**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 10:36**

...for an hour and a half and we were standing there like, okay, what do we do? What do we do? And you just jumped in like, Okay, I know what to do. And you were the best surrogate I have ever seen. I mean, that's when I said, I need to start taking notes right here, right now. Because your ability to act on your feet, and to really share his message. It was as if he was there. By the time he got there, you had already won the support of the whole room. And, you know, I wonder, did you learn that over the course of running the campaigns? Is that something innate that your parents taught you to be? Be that confident in yourself, that self assuredness was so- it was more than impressive- it was inspiring, you know? What...

**Valerie Biden Owens 11:33**

So you're leaving out half the story, which is you. Because we have that auditorium of 100-150 kids for an hour and a half of college students who were impatient on a weekday night, they had other things to do. And you and I pass the baton, the mic, you know, back and forth, and we entertain them. We told jokes, but we talked about, talked about things that mattered to them. We listened to them. And you asked me like how did I get that confidence?

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 12:08**

And how did you just learn how to do that? Again, you were not a political science major. You did not learn- I watched my father, I watched your brother, I watched you. Who did you watch? Like, how did you learn that? Where did that come from?

**Valerie Biden Owens 12:26**

I didn't learn it. I look, confidence is not part of one's DNA. I mean, I didn't actively take notes to learn how to be confident. I hung around with my brother. He told me, I could be anything that I wanted to be. And my parents who said you can be anything and they were always encouraging. It's wonderful to have a mentor, somebody who, you know, when you're down, who says, come on, you can do this. Confidence is not something as I said, it's not it's not part of your DNA. It's something really hard to get ahold of some people get it a little bit more easily or a lot more easily than others. And look, Marla, once you have it doesn't mean it stays. I mean, sometimes I don't know about you, but sometimes I just feel it slipped right through my fingers. Like, hh, my God, what do I do now?

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 13:28**

Right.

**Valerie Biden Owens 13:28**

And I think that what we did that night, because I remember clearly, we paid attention and listened to the pulse of the room. I think to be a good listener or a good politician, which by the way, being a good-- politics is a noble profession.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 13:52**

I agree. It's service.

**Valerie Biden Owens 13:53**

And it is the art and science of living together peacefully and what what we did is we stood there and we listened we spoken, you can feel the texture you can almost taste what's what's going on. And I think the other thing is that we were respectful, and acknowledged, you know, thanks for staying here, guys, but-- he's my big brother, so I could, you know, tease and make fun of him and saying, Okay, well, this is what I've been doing my entire life. You think you've got to bad you're waiting an hour and a half tonight. I've been waiting my entire life, you know, for my brother. It's not easy raising, you know

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:30**

Right, yeah.

**Valerie Biden Owens 14:36**

I don't know if I answered your question because I forget what the question was.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:38**

Well, very much so and you spoke about the politics being the art and science of living peacefully together. There's a thought that social work is the art and science of helping others, so it really is a marriage of art and science, you know, a lot and I think that understanding best practices when it comes to politics is just through experience. What works and what doesn't work. And watching what works is, is pretty humbling because it, it puts you in a place where you realize that you can change someone's life by what you say. And I think we I think we changed a lot of people's minds that night. And I know today that you and your brother and your family are changing people's lives right now, especially, you know with some of the things that President Biden is doing in the White House. Changing lives, you've influenced so many lives, and you've inspired so many women, to show them how to engage and influence others in the political process. I know that you've traveled the world, teaching women about leadership, so what's the difference now? Versus then when you began. Over time, have you seen more women be as successful in this field of politics? How has that happened? What have you seen?

**Valerie Biden Owens 16:28**

Well, yes, the answer is we've come a long way, baby, but we still have a long way to go. Women have decided, you know, I'm not playing by those old, I'm not playing by those rules anymore. I mean, what we had to do to get in the game is we had a suit up.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 16:48**

Right

**Valerie Biden Owens 16:49**

And we ought to say, you know, not, you know, in, in, in anger or, you know, robust bravado. I'm not taking this anymore. We said, you know, things aren't going so great. I'm going to, I want to step in, I want to do something about it. And women are no, inherently, we can be just as venal and as unpleasant as men.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 17:15**

Right

**Valerie Biden Owens 17:16**

But you know, what we are, the reason that it's so important to have women involved in the political picture and actual structure of making things work, is that we have a different approach shot. Like, you know, what they say in golf, you know, you got to get off the green, you have to get on the green, we have a different way to approach problems. That's why there are men, and there are women, we think differently. Together, we can make things work, but not when not one has to you know, what is it the Chinese philosopher said that women make up half the sky? Well, you're never going to solve the problems of the world when you stop half the productivity, half the creativity, half the joy, you can't yourself half the problems. So, what really happened there were good men encouraging women to step up. But women themselves said, you know what, I'm not doing this anymore. So, it takes a lot of courage to put yourself out.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 18:24**

Right

**Valerie Biden Owens 18:26**

And because it's become a rough and tumble sport. But we suit up in our heels and our skirts and our pantsuits and went out and said, you know, we're going to change things. And we sure have. And, you know, you mentioned social worker, you were talking about the politics, but to be a social worker is an art and a science. Because, you know, you have a social worker has the urgency of now. You see the problems, you have the knowledge and you want to change, you want to bring about change. So there's an urgency of now.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 19:08**

Right

**Valerie Biden Owens 19:08**

But there's also the realization that a social worker, you're kind of like, more like a tanker or a big ocean vessel.

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

Yes

**Valerie Biden Owens 19:20**

You know, you you're not a PT boat.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 19:22**

Right, it takes time.

**Valerie Biden Owens 19:26**

You cannot- that ocean liner that's loaded down with people or articles, it takes a long time for it to make that turn. Now a PT boat can turn into this tributary you know, can beat you on the side and and move quickly. So, you have enormous potential of seeing and ideas and vision of where we want to go, but you also have to have an enormous amount of patience because you got to bring everybody along with you. So you've got a very tough job to do.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 20:10**

Yeah, and I think, you know, understanding what you just said, the complexities of our profession, but also the versatility of our skill set. And that we can perform in the micro, mezzo and macro level. And that's why I love seeing social workers in politics, because individuals often assume that social work is direct practice, is therapy is, you know, case management. But social workers are very much needed in policymaking in social planning, you know, and looking at issues and addressing the issues in a way that it creates systemic change. And I think that you, training women, teaching individuals that have had gone through different trainings that you do on leadership, and helping them to understand their role in creating change is important. It's as if you married the English teacher with the political operative and now here, you are an educator. You're now at the Biden Institute or the Biden School for Public Policy at our alma mater, the University of Delaware. This is another...

**Valerie Biden Owens 21:43**

Kind of full circle?

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 21:44**

Yeah, that's what I was about to say, this is something you're back to where it all began. Right?

**Valerie Biden Owens 21:49**

And we have the opportunity to merge academia, which is the policy, the textbook, with the politics, which is the practice of the civic responsibility that you learn about, as in the textbook...

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:08**

I love it

**Valerie Biden Owens 22:09**

It's a great place to be and, you know, I'm a teacher at heart, you know, I started out. And, you know, serendipity plays such a large role in life. You know, I didn't, again, I didn't grow up wanting to be a teacher, but I took it in my last semester. And I, you know, I fell in love with it. So, and being a social worker and being in politics, you teach just by being involved and engaging in the system. It's not just the words you say.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:44**

Right





**Valerie Biden Owens 22:45**

It's what you do and how you lead. And women, by the way, which I which I tell the women any place any any country I am, you know, women say, oh, gosh, shucks, you know, what can I do? I'm not that powerful. What do you talk women, by our very nature, we are the primary force in nature. We were born powerful. It's not I always rub up against, you know, this is the time when we're going to empower women, nobody's going to empower women. Nobody's got to empower me, I already have the power.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 23:20**

That's why I love you.

**Valerie Biden Owens 23:23**

What we have to do though, is to collectively, the women who are able, we've got to create the opportunity, so that we can unleash this power. And this is, I mean, woman is the primary force in nature. You know, we're the first consciousness the first source of sustenance, we're the first breath, we're the first teachers. We're it.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 23:48**

We're it.

**Valerie Biden Owens 23:48**

So we have a responsibility. And, we got to do it the right way.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 23:57**

You sound like your mom.

**Valerie Biden Owens 23:59**

Oh, thank you. Great compliment.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 24:01**

It is a great compliment. I remember being at a Christmas party. And she came to me and at the time, and you know, I was known for having all kinds of crazy hairstyles, you know, I would change my hairstyle like I change the you know, change my clothes.

**Valerie Biden Owens 24:16**

I know, I was always so envious. You were always practical and glamorous. I never got the two together.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 24:22**

Oh, well, your mom was just the sweetest thing and just so feisty, and so honest, but so sweet. And she came up to me and she said, I love that hair. And I said, why thank you very much and she she turned around, and she said to your brother, she said, Joey, do you think I could do that to my hair and she just did that. And she, she just was so real. I think it's your authenticity. I think it's you being the same Val everywhere you go in every room that



you're in. That's what makes you so influential. That's what makes you a changemaker. Because when people know that you're telling your truth, and you will do what you say you will do. You always say, and so does your brother, that you give your word as a Biden.

**Valerie Biden Owens 25:24**

Yeah.

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

Integrity is one of the six core values of social work. That type of characteristic quality is something that people don't often associate with politics.

**Valerie Biden Owens 25:38**

Yeah. That's true.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 25:39**

And they don't. When you say, politician, it's got a negative connotation. But when you but as you too, you in particular with me, you've presented integrity in a way that makes me want to be in politics.

**Valerie Biden Owens 26:00**

Well you are, you are in the best sense of the word. You know, every aspect of our community. I mean, our life is politics, whether it's how we deal, the skills that we need to be a good politician are the same skills, we need to be in the business community, working in corporate America, working as a social worker, it's the ability to have vision, it's the ability to think out of the box, it's the ability to make decisions and know how to move them at a moment's notice. Know how to pivot when, you know, to keep going. So I think again, politics is a noble profession. I wanted to just clear up one thing you when you talked about my mom said she was sweet. And she was but she was no pushover is no, my mom. I made a speech. One said that, but my mom was like the rose of Sharon.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 26:57**

Yeah

**Valerie Biden Owens 26:58**

She was beautiful and she had thorns, but she never drew first blood. But if you drew first blood, watch out.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:08**

Right

**Valerie Biden Owens 27:10**

So that's, that's my mom.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:12**

Well, Val you have shared so much and I appreciate you sharing your time. I have one last question, though.

**Valerie Biden Owens 27:20**

Sure.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:20**

As someone that has always played a pivotal role in supporting policymakers and changemakers, what advice would you give to social workers who seek to create change?

**Valerie Biden Owens 27:35**

I would tell them, first of all, to listen up. They may have their masters or their extended degrees from the book learning, but where they get the feel, and to be so effective is when they're out in the community. So you need the book learning- you need the knowledge- but the most important thing is you need the empathy. And you can't fake that. Some social workers, like some politicians shouldn't be politicians some social workers shouldn't be social workers. It is empathy, which is a word that is becoming overused, but a quality that is underused. The ability to, to feel, and to taste and to walk in another person's skin like your Harper [Lee], you know, in the, To Kill a Mockingbird, you know, to be able to walk in somebody else's skin is a tremendous ability. And, and it's it's difficult to have so that feeling the empathy, having the knowledge, listening up. Again, a social worker has the urgency of now, I got to change it, I want to move it now. So it's such a realistic, almost a damper to realize that I can't do it like a PT boat, I got to have patience. And I got to bring other people along. So you as a social worker, you have to teach- it's about values. It's not about particularly it's not about a particular step you have to take it's you. It's about education, it's about values. It's about empathy. And you have a very hard job, but my God, what a rewarding one. Look what you've done in the world and how you brought our culture and America around to the good that we've all the good that we've done. So keep up the fight. Keep giving them hell. And God bless you.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 29:50**

Oh, thank you. Thank you Val so much, and we appreciate you just sharing your time and your journey. And just your love. I can't thank you enough.

**Valerie Biden Owens 30:03**

Well, I can't wait to get out of the chair when you need some. You are my buddy on the trail when we were running for President, so I'll be your buddy on any trail you go on, ok?

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 30:13**

I'm gonna take you up on that.

**Valerie Biden Owens 30:14**

Alright



**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 30:15**

I promise

**Valerie Biden Owens 30:16**

Please do

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 30:17**

Thank you, bye.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 30:21**

There are two words that jump out from our conversation today. The first being authenticity. Valerie Biden Owens no matter what the room, she is, unapologetic, and 100% authentic. And the other word is serendipity. How in life, things have a way of playing out, if you'd let it.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 30:46**

This season was about shining the light on people who make change. All three of our guests embody the core values of social work: competence, integrity, the dignity and worth of a person, the importance of human relationships, service and social justice. I've shined the spotlight on Congresswoman Blunt Rochester, State Senator Sarah McBride, and the incomparable Valerie Biden Owens and now the spotlight is on you. Are you ready to make change?