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US activist Jessica Grounds wants to see more women in the running for Stormont

Ahead of a keynote speech in Belfast, top US activist Jessica Grounds tells Maureen Coleman that the seeds of political life need to be sown in schools

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US activist Jessica Grouns and her partner Wes McClelland

BY MAUREEN COLEMAN - 24 MAY 2013

Jessica Grounds' career resume makes for impressive reading, by anyone's

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standards. The Californian entrepreneur and political activist is the Executive Director of Running Start, a non-profit organisation set up to inspire girls and young women to run for elected office.

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She is also at the helm of Solid Grounds Strategy, a firm focused on assisting female candidates who have never run for office before. Hailed a 'Rising Star' in Politics magazine in 2009, Jessica has worked on numerous campaigns for female candidates seeking election and worked as the Training Lead for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign for the Iowa Caucuses in 2008.

In addition, she has completed a graduate programme in Women, Policy and Political Leadership at the Women & Politics Institute at American University, has published research on gender differences in leadership style within Congress and recently completed an Executive Master's in Leadership from Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business.

But what makes her curriculum vitae all the more remarkable is that she has achieved all this by the tender age of 32.

"I'm just back from a conference in Panama and they couldn't get over how young I was," she laughs. "I think they must have been expecting someone older.

"I told them I just used good face-creams."

Jessica, who was born in San Diego and graduated from Pepperdine College, is a woman who lives by her principles. As someone who became interested in politics during her student years -- working on a campaign for one of her college classmates -- she has devoted much of her adult life to empowering women to become political decision makers and leaders.

She firmly believes that the seeds must be sown in high school years and through Running Start, helps support the girls and young women who will shape tomorrow's world by providing them with the necessary skills and confidence.

"Of the last 19 presidents, 12 began their political careers before they were 35 years old," she points out. "It's an important dynamic to start young.

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"Women, on the other hand, tend to run for office later in life. They've had their children and careers and feel the time is right when they're older. What we've been missing is young women's voices in policy-making decision.

"I interned in Washington DC while at college. I was out networking and found out that a 27-year-old woman from New York was running for Congress. I was so impressed that someone so young was doing this, so I went along to meet her at a campaign fundraiser.

She adds: "There was a big sign that read 'Women Under Forty Political Action Committee' and I suddenly had my 'ah ha moment'. I had a real connection with what they were doing. That organisation is still around and Running Start grew out of it.

"I helped a lot of great women to Congress, like top Democrat Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Cathy McMorris Rodgers, who is the most senior Republican woman. Both started their political careers in their 20s and were supported by Women Under Forty Political Action Committee when they ran for US Congress.

"But it's not enough. Great strides have been made but in terms of numbers, there are still more men than women. For some reason, women don't see politics as a way of making changes within their communities, they tend to do that through non-profit groups or business. That's why we have to get to these women young, to plant that seed of interest in politics so they will run earlier and bring in new ideas to solve old problems."

Today Jessica is a key speaker at the Leaders, Leading Change, Women in Politics event at the City Hall in Belfast. The conference follows on from a US State Department initiative last year -- Women in the Workplace -- when 10 women from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland engaged with their American counterparts to examine strategies to support women in the workplace.

Other guest speakers include Nan Sloane, director at the Centre for Women and Democracy and author of the 'Sex and Power 2013' report, published earlier this year, and Yvonne Galligan, Professor of Comparative Politic and director of the Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics at Queen's University, Belfast.

Jessica will also address a conference in Dublin, 'Engaging Women: The Next Step Into Politics', before heading north to Belfast.

"I've never been to Ireland at all before, so I'm really looking forward to the trip and finding out about the issues that affect women there," she says.

"In the last few years I've seen a shift in momentum happening, with people in the US and around the world starting to realise the value of empowering women, not just in politics but in business as well.

"We are seeing the tangible benefits of that. In some countries I've been too, there are a lot more women running for office. In Ireland and the US it is still fairly low, compared to the rest of the world.

"But we are seeing more women coming forward now than 10 years ago and I would give a lot of credit to Hillary Clinton for that. For anyone in my line of work, she has been an incredible ground-breaker. I think Hillary, single-handedly, changed the gender factor in politics, not just politics, but for women in leadership roles."

Jessica says she had so much respect for Hillary Clinton that she was 'compelled' to leave Washington DC and go and work as the Training Lead for her presidential campaign for the Iowa Caucuses. Despite initial expectations that the former First Lady would coast to victory, she lost out to the-then rookie Senator Barack Obama, who made history as the first black candidate to win an overwhelmingly white state.

"My job was basically to train the supporters and show them how caucusing

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works," explains Jessica. "I had to develop a training strategy, outline why we caucus, how long it would last, what to expect.

"It was a pretty cool experience working with Hillary and Bill. She is such a powerful woman with so much integrity. I was delighted when she was made Secretary of State."

With speculation mounting that Mrs Clinton will run again for the 2016 presidential campaign, Jessica says she has hopes that the woman she admires so much could become the first female president in American history. And she says she would love to work with her again. "I would be very excited to be part of it," she says. "The thing is, I don't know if she knows whether or not she will run again.

"If she feels physically strong enough, then I think she might. It's all a bit up for debate at the moment." But does she have the potential to become the first woman president? "Absolutely."

The late Baroness Thatcher, who was as divisive in death as she was in life, was also a strong role model for women, she says, irrespective of what people thought of her policies or her approach.

"My goal is to see gender equality in politics," she says. "There needs to be more women leaders of all different stripes and backgrounds.

"We are still in a place where women are not seen to be as capable as men. That's why it is important that we have role models from across the political spectrum, women like Margaret Thatcher. I had the utmost respect for her.

"People can disagree with the way she approached things, like people have disagreed with Hillary, but that is a totally different issue from how she was as a leader."

She admits she has dabbled with the idea of running for elected office herself, but came to the conclusion her skills were best used 'helping other women find their voices'. She also points out that if she had decided to run for office, she would have wanted to return home to California to do so -- and that would mean uprooting herself from her work in Washington DC and moving away from her partner, Wes McClelland.

Not surprisingly, Wes is another political animal, who works on Capitol Hill. But while Jessica is a Democrat, Wes is a 'big Republican',

"We have a bi-partisan relationship," she laughs.

Does it make for heated conversations around the dinner table or do they avoid the subject?

"Oh no, we totally talk politics all the time," she replies.

While there is still much to be done to achieve gender equality in American politics, Jessica says she has noticed an increasing number of young women and girls getting involved and showing an interest. And through her work with Running Start, she hopes to continue encouraging, inspiring and educating the next generation of female leaders.

"You know, there was incredible research carried out by a non-profit group in New York that showed that when women are in top positions in business, they literally generate more money," she says.

"And in politics, legislation tends to be much more comprehensive when women and men work together."

Would the world be a better place if women were in charge?

"Of course," she laughs, before adding: "In the Senate, women in the Republican and Democratic parties work well together. There's greater collaboration, problems get solved quicker.

"That's what politics is about after all, setting aside differences to find commonality. And that's what women are much better at."

'We were captivated by Jessica in the US'

Lynn Carvill (41) is a women's sector lobbyist for the Women's Resource and Development Agency. She lives in Belfast with her husband Anthony and says:

Last April I was given the most amazing opportunity through the Boston College. On each side of the boarder there were spaces for 10 women to visit the US and meet women at very high levels of both the private and public sectors.

The aim was to investigate the issues facing women at work. For example there is not statutory maternity leave in the US nor is there regulated childcare -- Northern Ireland's childcare is very poor but not as bad as theirs.

It was a full-on trip where we were working from first thing in the morning until the evening. One day the group we were supposed to be meeting in the afternoon pulled out and Jessica Grounds came to fill in. We called the meeting after lunch the graveyard shift, everyone was a bit sleepy. Five minutes after she came in though the entire group was wide-awake and captivated by this incredibly dynamic young woman. Jessica is the keynote speaker of the Leaders Leading Change event at the Belfast City Hall today.

As only 19% of our MLAs are women we want to galvanize our political parties into recruiting women and we need about 100 Jessicas. Now is the time to put women on the agendas of the political parties."

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