

#WomenVotes Making History

By Nicole Wild Merl

For The Internet of Women

Wife, mom, and advocate for women and girls, Nicole is a master's student at Northeastern University studying Communications and Social Media. #Connecting the Dots

My name is Nicole Wild Merl, and for nearly two decades my goal has been to find innovative solutions to enhance women's employability and career success. For family reasons, I have resided all over the world. As I have continued on my path, I have always been surrounded by women and men who inspire and personally challenge me. I am so proud to be a mom, and to have a wonderful husband who supports me 100%. One thing I have learned from my own life transitions is the importance of a dedicated advocate who shares his or her valuable expertise and provides support in the dual roles of confidante and partner. For me, that person is Thomas Cook, entrepreneur, mentor, and philanthropist.

Connecting The Dots

We first met in our nation's capital during a meeting for the Women's Alliance, a national group of independent community-based organizations such as Suited for Change and The Career Wardrobe, which provide professional attire and career-skills training for low-income women seeking employment. Our experiences and outlooks on life just "clicked" and, since that time, Thomas has always been there for me in the role of an advocate publicly supporting and recommending any effort I became involved with. His dedication, commitment and caring for women's causes have fueled my own "can-do" spirit to always connect the dots.

When I moved to Charlotte, North Carolina in 2014, I made the decision to enhance my communication and digital-fluency skills with a Master's in Corporate and Organizational Communication and Social Media at Northeastern University. I turned to Thomas, who worked with me as a collaborator for an idea I had on an experiential learning assignment aligned with my own personal obligation as an advocate for women. As two people passionate about civic engagement, we worked on this idea until it eventually evolved into a social platform to empower all women to vote in #Election2016 and beyond.

I was able to connect the dots to the diverse parts of my life (and the lives of most women), the pull of our many roles: full-time student or employee, mother or caregiver, wife or partner. I could only think about how these fulfilling, yet exhausting roles keep women so busy in their daily lives. Are these women—like me—too busy to get involved in #Election2016? Indeed, am I too busy to share my voice about modern politics? The answer of course is a resounding “no,” when put in the context of women’s suffrage and the women who fought and died for our right to vote and the importance of civic engagement for society as a whole. At first I thought I could not take on such a big endeavor, but I was determined to find a way to combine my studies with a larger purpose.

With the help of Thomas’s valuable partnership support, our proposal for #WomenVotes was approved as the first-ever virtual co-op authorized by Northeastern University to research, develop, and implement a digital social-impact project as both an experiential and innovative learning experience. Our purpose is to engage women from all political affiliations to share their voices, empower #WomenVotes, and make a difference through a #ServeAmerica portal filled with non-partisan resources, candidate information, and volunteer opportunities. That is how #WomenVotes.org was created—to purposefully build a community dedicated to the importance of the women’s vote and how it will influence American politics now and for future generations. Voting is (and should be) patriotic, participatory, and celebratory! So, we plan to drive up a Reddit voting initiative to share, empower and amplify women’s voices on #Election2016 Day through their individual expressions of voting.

As we worked virtually to develop **#WomenVotes.org**, we determined that our social digital channels would include a substantive platform of resources to provide voter information, outreach, and education. Early on we identified a need for a multi-channel social platform—a one-stop-shop—that recognizes all political parties under one umbrella to #ServeAmerica.

According to the United States Census Bureau, there were 161 million women in the United States as of December 2013. Breaking those numbers down further, we see that 63.7% of female citizens 18 or older reported voting in the 2012 presidential election. There were an estimated 44.2 million moms aged between 15 and 50 in the United States in 2012. In addition, the number of stay-at-home mothers nationwide was 5.2 million in 2014. #WomenVotes hold the power to influence the 2016 presidential-election results based on voting ability and as related to the most critical issues affecting them. Women in particular are connecting online and would be able to use an online portal for non-partisan political engagement. As a subset of all women, moms

are uniquely engaged in social media in order to network and share their motherhood experiences during what is often an isolating, yet important time of their lives. And women at all socio-economic levels have a higher level of access to technology from mobile to social-media channels, than at any time in our political history. Finally, igniting millennial women's support is critical as it relates to their pro-social nature and shared passion for causes.

Collaboration on Social-Media Strategy

By digitally embracing the creativity, energy and promise of mass collaboration, we decided on using a Wordpress blog, a Twitter social media feed, and a Facebook discussion channel as our first step. Again, to fulfill our purpose to engage women to collaborate in #Election2016 and create our social-media platforms as the center of national conversations by women about the issues faced, we focused on the need to engage women by providing opportunities that are solution-based and create value. Specifically, we recognized that providing candidate-access information to increase participation in the political process across the board was a key goal in a grassroots effort.

We spent many months researching the best infrastructure, and finally, with the help of Will Donovan, entrepreneur, voting advocate, and expert in digital capability, Thomas and I created a clear path to adding another valuable element to our web site. Our big digital challenge was to create non-partisan conversational interest in our blog. With Will's digital expertise, we were able to introduce scrolling Twitter conversations based on #Election2016 and #WomenVotes based on Tweets with "Women or Woman or Mum or Mother or Mom," to ensure women's issues and voices would be heard and shared. Will freely shared his expertise with us and dedicated many hours to helping our project. Admittedly, a grey area was understanding how to tackle our content strategy from an audience and user perspective to maximize the impact of our social platforms. To embrace this challenge, Thomas connected us with Professor Amos Gelb at the Washington Media Institute to seek an important alliance. And here's what happened.

Millennial Advisory Board

#WomenVotes.org was officially launched on February 25, 2016, with Thomas and myself presenting the project with the support of Washington Media Institute leadership and Will Donovan, to 10 participant millennial consultants from colleges across the United States to gain their perspectives and assistance. Today, all now serve on our founding Millennial Advisory

Board with some talented Northeastern University students. An empowering objective for the Washington Media Institute alliance was to create an opportunity for our millennial consultants to expand their professional experiences and skill sets through supporting the start-up phase of our project with their expertise. As a result, with our Millennial Advisory Board, we developed our initial content strategy and launched our Twitter platform @WomenVotes. Further, the Millennial Advisory Board recommended the name “Women Votes” to increase our social presence, engagement, and partnerships with key organizations. That allowed us to gain a collaborative edge internally and externally for our project.

Blog articles such as Sheri Cole’s “Why I Vote. Why I Care.” at [#WomenVotes.org](#) present the issue at hand to our community members and supporters:

“And statistics tell the story of why women need to be engaged in the political process

- We make up 51% of the population of the United States and as we grow older, we start to radically outnumber men (66% of people over 85 are women).
- We make up 47% of the labor force. Think about that. Without women businesses would not only suffer from lack of employees, but see sales dramatically decrease because women’s independent earnings fuel their buying power.
- And more women are choosing to remain single, which can put an even larger economic burden on us and those of our children (if we choose to have them).”

Next Steps: Carpool2Vote App

Today, we are moving forward in creating real impact solutions to support #WomenVotes.org. By building our community and joining forces with women, moms, and caring organizations who want to and can make a difference, we again seek to harness the power of technology in service of our mission, which is to empower women to vote and run for elected office. It’s been only eight months since we launched our project. Our community of women and men is continuing to grow to 2,000+ on Twitter and some of our substantive followers include: Ellevote Network, National Association for Female Executives, Working Mother Media, The Women’s Debate, and the Internet of Women Community.

Importantly, we just launched Carpool2Vote and the first-ever free ride share app to polls. The app was designed by Justin Insalaco, the CEO of 3BDreams, with help of his team including Chief Architect, Matt Young. The app is now live and can be downloaded in the App Store (Carpool2Vote). In just a few steps, you can create a profile as either a driver or user. The team also took a thoughtful approach to the safety and accuracy of the app. The App ensures the rider is getting into the correct vehicle driven by the correct driver through a very simple authentication solution that's similar to the way warehouses work. Each driver will be issued a unique barcode based on their license plate and driver's license. When the driver's car arrives, that barcode will be displayed on the driver's phone, and the rider can quickly take a picture of the driver's barcode to ensure they are getting into the right vehicle. If the driver is as they should be, the passenger will receive a confirmation sound (beep) and vibration after they "scan." If the driver is not correct, there will be an alert on the passenger's phone.

A call to action is now in progress to recruit drivers from around the country. The call to action is asking for people to volunteer to drive as well as individuals to sign up now to carpool to vote. Since this is a volunteer-based initiative created and developed in America, the more drivers that exist, the more people we can get to the polls. To further spread the word, Carpool2Vote is being promoted by AMC Networks Inc., which will support outreach and inspire civic engagement through online support on its corporate website and network websites. AMC Networks Inc. owns and operates several of the most popular and award-winning brands in cable television: AMC, BBC AMERICA, IFC, SundanceTV, and WE tv.

So in conclusion, intertwining social competencies and digital fluency from an organizational perspective are required to support the continued evolution of our project as is leadership, business agility and innovative approaches that are solution-based. Expanding social channels, creating podcasts, digital events, and alliances to drive outreach to women will only strengthen our mission and increase social engagement. Building project advocates will be key to helping guide our community's purpose and collaborative opportunities.

Lessons Learned

Here are some great ways in which true advocates can support and influence women's advancement:

Listen well: don't have preconceived notions. Set a clear vision for how you can help. Focus on what is not being said so you can give support.

Mentor and sponsor women: the truth lies in doing it. Sharing examples and stories is a key driver for advocacy efforts.

Be inclusive: enlisting others is critical as we all share responsibility. Raising awareness is powerful. Learn from other leaders and cultivate their support to drive outreach.

Seek out ways to hire, promote, and advance women: consciously developing female leaders is a win-win in business and necessary to the overall process of advancing women for the betterment of the community as a whole.

Don't make gender an issue: lead by example. It is important to see the truth behind the person and connect with the quality and drive of each individual.

Auto-correct unconscious bias: in today's world, not to take a stand when bias shows up is counterproductive. You can help by being that one person in the room who pivotally stands for the greater good.

Increase the profile and visibility of leaders: if you want to be a true advocate, you need to place your full confidence in their mission and make every effort to ensure its success.

Network (formally, informally, and digitally): use communications technology to continually expand your connections through social-media sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.

Don't overreach: keep checking in. Make sure your efforts are being helpful, and that they are necessary. If you are going to be a good advocate, you need to take a little time to understand why and how you should take action.

Vote on the issues: our final message is that every vote counts. You need to dutifully demonstrate support for what you believe.

#WomenVotes is featured in: "The Internet of Women", the first book of its kind to profile women leaders from over 30 countries making historic contributions to the field of technology. Co-Editors [Nada Anid, PhD., Laurie Cantileno, Monique Morrow, Rahilla Zafar]. We thank Brian Rashid for introducing our project as a worthy initiative for inclusion in the book and Mark de Jongh, publisher, for his leadership. For more information please visit: http://riverpublishers.com/book_details.php?book_id=384