



THE
ASCEND
FUND

PROSPECTUS

WHEN SHE ASCENDS

A ROADMAP FOR A TRULY REFLECTIVE DEMOCRACY

WHEN SHE ASCENDS WE ALL RISE

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THROUGHOUT HISTORY, WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP HAVE FACED UNIQUE OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS FAR MORE NUANCED THAN THOSE OF THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS. AND PERHAPS NOWHERE IS THAT DISPARITY MORE CLEARLY REFLECTED THAN IN POLITICS.

Women represent more than half of the United States' population, but you wouldn't know that if you were to walk the halls of statehouses across the country.

While there are more women serving in elected office than ever before, true representational parity is still a point on the horizon—and the path to achieving it is as winding as ever.

That's where we come in.

As a collaborative fund, The Ascend Fund pools philanthropic capital and makes mission-driven investments in nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations that break down the barriers preventing women from running for office... and winning.

We believe parity is a noble goal. But we're also thinking bigger—to the impact parity incurs. Impact on our future legislative priorities. Impact on our future communities and families. And impact on the future of our democracy.

Because when women win, they're more likely to introduce legislation that benefits women, children, and families. They're consistently part of passing more robust climate policies. And they're more likely to introduce bills that address issues like education, health, and poverty.

In short, when women lead, our nation is transformed. That's not a rallying cry. It's a fact.

Today, women leaders in the political world statistically accomplish more than their male counterparts. They get more bills introduced. They get more policies enacted. And they do it by building coalitions, reaching across the aisle, and compromising.

Studies consistently show that more women enter politics because they identify a problem in their community and want to find a solution. Perhaps she was a doctor who realized her state was not effectively addressing racial disparities in maternal mortality rates. Or a factory worker who felt government had failed to help businesses adjust to a changing economy. Or a teacher who realized access to at-home Internet (or lack thereof) was contributing to inequity among her students.

Women choose to run for these reasons and countless others. And we see it as our responsibility to help them do so more often.

We're The Ascend Fund, and we're intent on accelerating the pace of parity. Not merely because we believe it's what's fair—but because it's what's smart. **A**

Diversity of leadership leads to diversity of ideas. So we're exceptionally dedicated to championing diversity, equity, and inclusion as a relentless pillar of our work—within our own organizations and through the partners and investors we seek. As part of this commitment, we believe in the advancement and representation of all women and all marginalized genders, including but not limited to transgender, intersex, Two Spirit, and non-binary people. The Ascend Fund, and our partners, strive to make sure that gender equity is intersectional and inclusive of all who have historically been oppressed.

THE GOALS

*Our three essential objectives
in the pursuit of parity.*

**2018 WAS TOUTED AS THE
“YEAR OF THE WOMAN.”
AND WOMEN CONTINUED
TO MAKE GAINS IN THE
2020 AND 2022 ELECTION
CYCLES—BUT PROGRESS
HAS SLOWED.**

We’re convinced of the power of a collaborative approach—and we’ve set three core objectives to guide our work. **A**



RECRUITMENT

ESTABLISH A PATHWAY

We have a pipeline problem. Women simply don’t run at the same rates as men. If we’re going to realize exponential change in the pace of parity, we need to normalize women’s leadership— and we need cohesive and repeatable pathways nationwide for women to realize opportunities.

THE FUTURE

PACE OF
PARITY

Many call 2018 a watershed moment. But in reality, the gender balance among elected officials has improved only moderately since the 1990s.

2138

The year women would reach parity if we were to **continue at the rate seen over the last century.**

2068

The year women could reach parity if we continue to **progress at the same rate as the past 20 years.**

2050

Our accelerated target for achieving parity. Together, we are committed to **realizing a representative democracy within 30 years.**

02

RESOURCES ▲

BRIDGE THE GAP

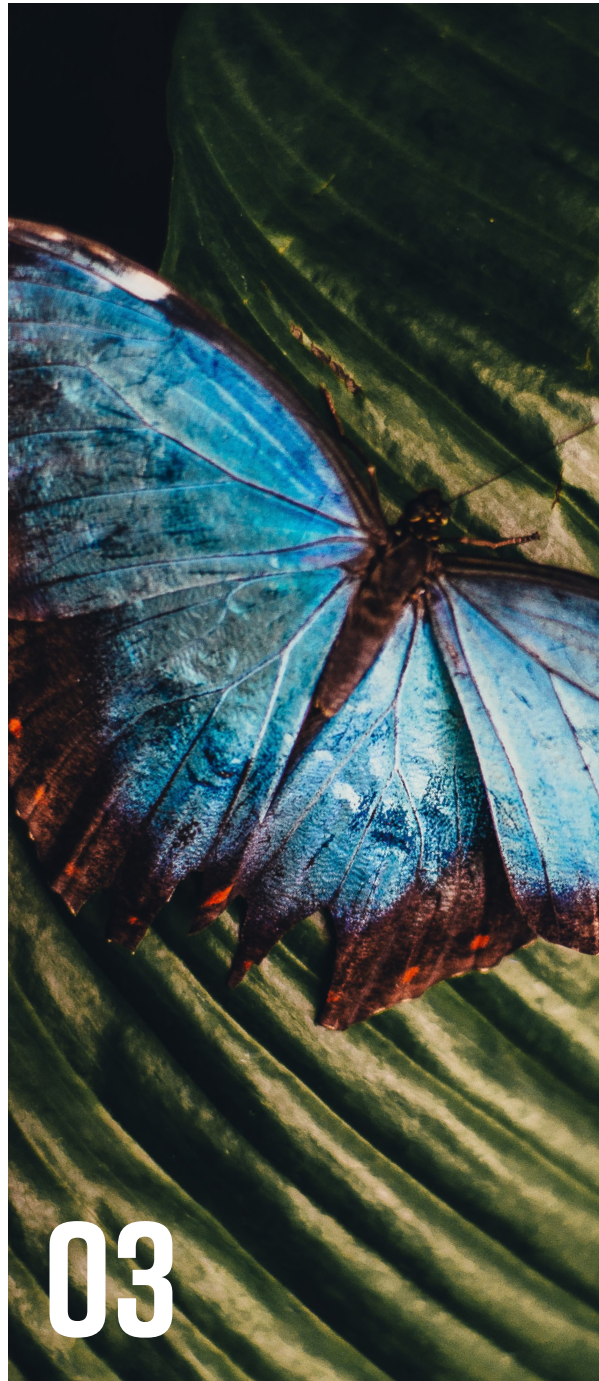
Women candidates often consider access to resources and training as a lever for their future success.

And while many organizations provide candidates with a high-level look at running for office, few equip women with the kinds of invaluable tools and gender-specific training needed to put them on an even playing field.

BARRIERS ►

TRANSFORM
THE SYSTEM

A myriad of systemic roadblocks makes it difficult for women to run. Our partners are poised to dismantle the underlying structural issues that exist within the political system.



03

THE APPROACH

Our multifaceted approach—built upon the right organizations and funders.



▲ **ABOVE ALL, WE BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF COLLABORATION.**

We've seen firsthand how detrimental periodic funding and investment in this space have been—and we're committed to connecting the dots.

So as we seek to bring change-makers the funds they need to accelerate the pace of parity, our work, strategy, and grantmaking are guided by the following principles. ▣

A DISTINCTLY FOCUSED LENS

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

CENTER SHARED VISION & VALUES

We envision a future in which women, who account for more than 50% of the U.S. population, also hold more than 50% of public offices. So we partner with organizations who share our belief that women's unique experiences are a necessary perspective in public policymaking.

BUILD A REFLECTIVE DEMOCRACY

We know the importance of ensuring every woman has a political home and have intentionally built a portfolio of organizations that is reflective of the women we seek to elect, including Black, Indigenous, and women of color, as well as LGBTQ+ women, and young women.

INVEST IN SYSTEMS CHANGE & TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS

We invest in organizations with a long-term vision who are committed to transformational systems change. We provide multi-year general operating grants to support their growth and stability—and fund fewer organizations at a higher level to allow leadership to focus on the big picture.

FOSTER COLLABORATION & JOINT STRATEGY

We recognize the power we hold as grant makers and seek to foster equitable and collaborative relationships with our partners. We seek partners who share this commitment to building catalytic coalitions. And to go farther, faster, we unite this field of organizations around a shared strategy.

EMPOWER CATALYTIC GROWTH

When we invest in women, we invest in democracy—but for too long, too little has been done to support the women holding up our democracy. We are committed to investing in the stability of our partner organizations as well as the personal health and well-being of their leaders and staff.

LEVERAGE EXPERTISE & EFFICIENCY

We efficiently deploy grant funding to organizations working to elect women, allowing for more impactful investments that truly move the needle. We further increase the efficacy of our work through deep knowledge and understanding of the issues, and close relationships with leaders and organizations in the field.

THE ORGANIZATIONS

PARTNERS IN PROGRESS

We celebrate strategists. Seek disruptors.

Cultivate connections. In fact, women who participate in our partners' programming are twice as likely to win their election.

TO DATE, WE'VE DISTRIBUTED OVER \$9 MILLION TO OUR PARTNERS.



Advance Native Political Leadership

Increasing the representation of Indigenous people in office.



APAICS

Promoting Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander participation and representation at all levels.



Higher Heights

Building a national civic engagement infrastructure for Black women's leadership at all levels.



Ignite

Sparkling a national movement of young women to become political leaders.



LatinasRepresent

Increasing number and diversity of Latinas in public service to transform communities and democracy.



Running Start

Giving young women the confidence, capabilities, and connections they need to run.



She Should Run

Motivating women to explore the possibility of public office.



LGBTQ+ Victory Institute

Increasing the number of LGBTQ+ people in office and providing tools for success.



Vote Mama

Breaking the barriers moms face and advocating for policies that allow working families to thrive.



Women's Public Leadership Network

Educates, organizing, and inspiring women to seek public office and become effective leaders.



NEW AMERICAN LEADERS

New American Leaders (NAL) empowers first- and second-generation immigrants to run, win, and lead.

OVER 1,600 TRAINED

- 160 NAL ALUMS ELECTED
- 107 APPOINTED
- 100+ TRAINED AS SENIOR CAMPAIGN LEADERS
- 86% AVG WIN-RATE OF ALUMS IN 2022



VOTE RUN LEAD

Vote Run Lead empowers women to shatter barriers, seize their political power, and ignite profound transformation in American democracy.

400% GROWTH SINCE 2015

- 53% OF PARTICIPANTS ARE WOMEN OF COLOR
- 14% OF PARTICIPANTS HAIL FROM RURAL AMERICA
- 287 ALUMS CURRENTLY IN OFFICE (34 STATES)
- 143 ALUMS CURRENTLY IN STATE LEGISLATURE (27 STATES)

We also support state and local partners, who work collaboratively to increase the number of women serving in state legislatures. For a complete list: theascendfund.org/who-we-are

THE BARRIERS

The top barriers women face in seeking public office—and what we'll do about them.

WOMEN ENCOUNTER COUNTLESS HURDLES IN THEIR PURSUIT OF POLITICAL OFFICE.

Collectively, these barriers come down to two core categories: structural and systemic barriers. **A**



OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, THE ASCEND FUND HAS WORKED WITH 30 PARTNERS AND MORE THAN 100,000 WOMEN. TOGETHER, WE CAN BANISH THESE BARRIERS.



A ROLE FOR THE ELITE & FLEXIBLE **STRUCTURAL BARRIERS**

From the unconventional schedule, often requiring long stretches away from home, to scant compensation, the fundamental nature of political roles is highly challenging for those without flexible, well-paying jobs. Add the likelihood of shouldering childcare duties, and women—especially those with limited means—are facing an uphill battle.

*FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT,
BY THE ESTABLISHMENT*
SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Centuries have passed with legislative halls predominantly walked by white men—and women, especially women of color, face entrenched challenges when it comes to surmounting intentional or unconscious biases held by political gatekeepers, donors, the press, and even voters. Our political system as it stands offers little incentive to address barriers to equal participation in politics.



WHERE WE CAN HAVE THE BIGGEST IMPACT

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Based on our experience in the field, we've identified three barriers which, if removed, would have the greatest impact on the rate of progress toward parity.



LEGISLATIVE MODERNIZATION

One of the top barriers to women running for office is their ability to afford to run and then serve in elected office. Improving legislative pay, ensuring adequate staffing, and providing external support and development opportunities are just a few things that could be done to allow women in political leadership to excel.



CHILDCARE & CAREGIVING

Only 5.3% of state legislators are women with children under age 18—and 7% of Congress—compared to 17.8% of the U.S. population of adults with minor children at home. Opportunities to challenge these statistics? Paid family leave, onsite childcare, proxy and/or virtual voting, and flexible session timing.



POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Women, particularly women of color, are more likely to experience political violence, including psychological violence and physical or sexual threats. Threats to women's physical safety, both on the campaign trail and in elected office, discourage women from running for office, and those already in office from seeking reelection.

*Successes—and opportunities—
from three states across the
spectrum of parity.*

WHEN WE LOOK AT REPRESENTATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY, WE SEE **OPPORTUNITY.**

By choosing three pilot states at various points of progress, we begin to see the path forward. And we are able to identify where there is still a lot of work to be done. **A**

PARITY TAKES PERSISTENCE

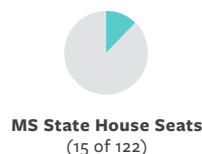
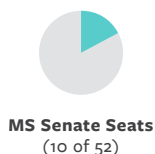
MISSISSIPPI (RANKED 48)

Women account for just 14.4% of state legislators in Mississippi—half the national average. Unfortunately, this isn't a new trend.

The number of women serving in the Mississippi State Legislature has never surpassed 20%—and the number of women elected actually declined over the past decade. Additionally, the state has never elected a woman governor and only one woman has represented the state in Congress.

Where Women Sit ▶

● Women
● Men



PARITY IS POSSIBLE

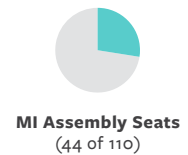
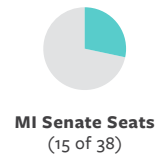
MICHIGAN (RANKED 14)

Propelled by the largest voter turnout in 50 years, women's representation in the Michigan State Legislature skyrocketed from 25% to almost 36%, as a result of the 2018 election.

Progress stalled in 2020 and is complicated by legislative term limits—but picked up in 2022 when the state crossed the 40% threshold.

Where Women Sit ▶

● Women
● Men



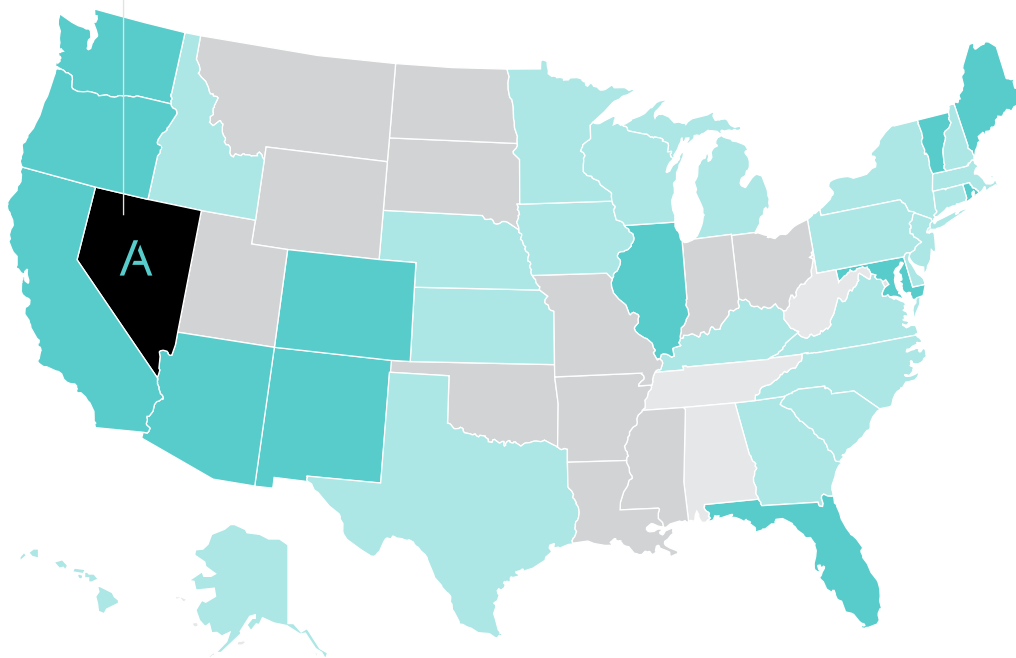
WHERE WOMEN LEAD

UNDERSTANDING THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AMONG STATE LEGISLATURES

PARITY ACHIEVED in Nevada with 39 women in state legislature of 63 total legislators

Percentage of women overall in state legislature

- 40-49%
- 30-39%
- 20-29%
- 10-19%



THE PRECIPICE OF PARITY

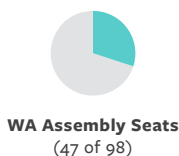
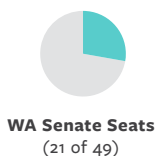
WASHINGTON (RANKED 4)

For more than a decade, from 1993 to 2004, Washington's State Legislature ranked 1st in the nation for women's representation.

But progress faltered from a high of more than 42% in 2000 to just 32% in 2011. Women now make up 46.3% of the state legislature and we plan to reach parity within the next two cycles.

Where Women Sit ▶

- Women
- Men



A STATE-LED STRATEGY



VAST POTENTIAL

There are 8,000 elected officials serving at the state level, compared to 535 members of Congress.



CRITICAL GROUND

Powerful policy decisions happen at the state level, and they have cascading influence upward and across our communities.



COMPOUNDING EFFECT

State legislative campaigns operate on lower budgets than congressional ones—so dollars stretch farther and impact more seats.

THE INVESTMENT

Breaking down the need, the approach, and the means required to help us succeed.



WHEN WE INVEST IN WOMEN, **WE INVEST IN OUR DEMOCRACY.**

When it comes to funding women, we've historically fallen short. 🗳️

A

“GETTING MORE WOMEN IN OFFICE STARTS WITH GETTING MORE WOMEN TO RUN. THE ASCEND FUND PROVIDES ESSENTIAL SUPPORT FOR ORGANIZATIONS ON THE FRONT LINES OF THIS IMPORTANT MISSION.”

— MELINDA GATES

HOLISTIC SUPPORT

HOW YOUR CONTRIBUTION CONNECTS THE DOTS

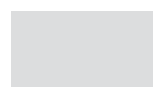

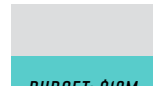


When we started out, the median budget of an Ascend Fund partner was less than \$1 million—but that number has grown as a result of our contributions. We must continue to take action in these critical ways:

-  FIVE- AND SIX-FIGURE OPERATIONAL GRANTS
-  TRAINING + WORKSHOPS WITH TOP POLITICAL MINDS
-  CONNECTIONS BETWEEN COMPLEMENTARY GROUPS
-  TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR DATA SHARING

THE FINANCIAL GOALS

A FUND FOR RIGHT NOW, A FUND FOR THE FUTURE

We're scaling our fundraising incrementally over the coming years.

 <p>BUDGET: \$1M</p>	<p>PHASE 1 (2018-19): LEARNING & EXPLORATION (COMPLETED)</p> <p>Developed a comprehensive understanding of the barriers preventing women from achieving political parity.</p>
 <p>BUDGET: \$5M</p>	<p>PHASE 2 (2020-2021): INVEST & DESIGN (COMPLETED)</p> <p>Built a portfolio of organizations working to elect women and collaboratively developed a strategy for achieving parity.</p>
 <p>BUDGET: \$12M</p>	<p>PHASE 3 (2022-24): IMPLEMENT & EXPERIMENT</p> <p>Invest in key pilot states, with varying levels of representation, to test and validate training and recruitment strategies.</p>
 <p>BUDGET: \$25M</p>	<p>PHASE 4 (2025-2030): REFINE & EXPAND</p> <p>Increase number of targeted states and apply lessons learned from previous elections to enhance our tactics.</p>
 <p>BUDGET: \$50M</p>	<p>PHASE 5 (2030-BEYOND): PATH TO SUSTAINABILITY</p> <p>Implement a 50-state strategy for achieving and sustaining 50% representation by 2050.</p>

THE APPROACH

POOLED FUNDING, COLLECTIVE PORTFOLIO

The Ascend Fund is made up of action-minded philanthropists whose collective investment is leveraged to maximize impact. Our method empowers three critical efficiencies.

COORDINATION

Ensures alignment and collaboration between partner activities to better serve the overall needs and priorities of the field.

DISSEMINATION

Allows for a targeted distribution of resources, increasing efficiencies and reducing redundancies.

DATA-SHARING

Empowers consistent measurement and evaluation across the portfolio to improve our learnings and outcomes.

OUR ADVISORS

THE TEAM

YVETTE ALEXANDER

Former D.C.
Councilmember

JANE CAMPBELL

Former Mayor
of Cleveland, Ohio

NELLIE GORBEA

Former Rhode Island
Secretary of State

SHARON JACKSON

Former Alaska State
Representative

DR. DONNA LYNNE

Former Lieutenant
Governor and Chief
Operating Officer
of Colorado

MEE MOUA

Former Minnesota
State Senator

SANDRA MORTHAM

Former Secretary of
State of Florida

FRANCES ROMERO

Former Mayor of
Guadalupe, California

DEBORAH RUGGIERO

Former Rhode Island
State Representative

EVELYN SANGUINETTI

Former Lieutenant
Governor of Illinois

FLORENCE SHAPIRO

Former Texas
State Senator

THE SUCCESSES

These women are creating a pathway for others at the critical state level.



CATALINA CRUZ

NEW YORK 39TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT & NEW AMERICAN LEADERS ALUM

A DREAMer now in her second term, Assemblywoman Cruz is an experienced attorney and advocate for tenant protections, immigration reform, and workers' rights. In her first term in office, she co-sponsored more than 530 bills, and she has led the charge on many historic pieces of legislation, including the Child Victims Act, the DREAM Act, and the Green Light Bill, which provides driver's licenses for undocumented New Yorkers.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IN DOING THIS JOB FOR THE POWER. I BELIEVE IN DOING THIS JOB IN ORDER TO CREATE THE CHANGE THAT PEOPLE NEED."

HOW DID NEW AMERICAN LEADERS INFORM OR SUPPORT YOUR RUN FOR OFFICE?

► New American Leaders has a training where you truly get a look at what it is to run for office. A big part of it for me was the finances and fundraising. I grew up with the idea that you don't talk about your finances outside of the home. So getting over that and practicing was critical.

WHAT DOES A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY MEAN TO YOU?

► How can you legislate about an issue properly if you haven't lived through the experiences in question? Whether it's experiences of people of color, or those of different ages, genders, or sexual identities—those who've had those experiences are going to be the most powerful figures in creating change. Those closest to the pain are closest to the solution.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER OTHER WOMEN RUNNING FOR OFFICE?

► If you're doing it for personal reasons, you have no business doing it. If you're doing it because your community has been forgotten—then go ahead, run. Just know that everything you do and every decision you make now belongs to your community.

FILL IN THE BLANK: WHEN SHE ASCENDS, _____.

► Her people are heard. **A**

ERIN MAYE QUADE

MINNESOTA SENATOR & VOTE RUN LEAD ALUM

A lifelong Apple Valley resident, Erin began her career in the Minnesota House of Representatives in 2016, when she was the only Democrat to flip a seat in the House that year after deciding to run because of the dramatic escalation in childhood hunger she had seen in her community (380% over the past decade). In 2022, she was elected to the Minnesota Senate, becoming the first black woman and first openly gay woman elected to the State Senate.



"STATISTICALLY, WOMEN HAVE TO BE ASKED SEVEN TIMES TO ASK FOR OFFICE. THEY CAN CONSIDER THIS TIME NUMBER ONE, FROM ME."

WHICH BARRIERS WERE THE MOST CHALLENGING TO SURMOUNT IN YOUR RUN FOR OFFICE?

► There are extra things they say about women that they don't say about men—about my body, how I dress, what I look like, how I'm parenting. And then there are the violent threats of sexual violence. You have to overcome that fear, and leave all that away from your heart and mind.

HOW DID VOTE RUN LEAD INFORM OR SUPPORT YOUR RUN FOR OFFICE?

► You really can't say enough about creating a space to have a foundation for your bravery. When you try to build something by yourself, it can tumble over. But if you do it with others, they can hold it up when you feel vulnerable or have a difficult experience. Building that foundation of bravery makes you feel less alone.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT IN YOUR TIME AS A LEGISLATOR WITH MINNESOTA?

► I was the chief author of the Read Act, which is changing how we approach literacy in the state of Minnesota. The act secured almost \$100M for literacy programming and resources for educators and students.

FILL IN THE BLANK: WHEN SHE ASCENDS, _____.

► She subverts the systems of oppression so others can join. **A**

**WHEN
SHE
ASCENDS
WE
ALL
RISE**

