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Positive Politics and Advocacy: Hope is Contagious The Lesson from New Jersey

by Louise Kuo Habakus

The state of New Jersey has a new governor-elect. Parent-driven advocacy helped carry Chris Christie to victory. This is a watershed moment. I want to share why and, more importantly, how it can be a turning point for the vaccination choice and autism communities.

THE NATION WATCHES NEW JERSEY

In terms of incidence, New Jersey is the "autism capital of the world," and it is the state with the highest number of vaccine mandates for

school admission. As such, all eyes have been on New Jersey. It is one of 32 states that lack the philosophical or personal belief exemption to mandatory shots for school admission. New Jersey parents will not quickly forget the year 2008, which marked a turning point in the vaccination choice debate. Eschewing the legislative process, Governor Corzine signed into law four more mandated shots, including the highly controversial seasonal influenza vaccine. Already in possession of the number one slot, this unilateral action solidified New Jersey's vaccine reputation. Today, the Garden



State requires more doses of more vaccines than any other state, fully 36% more doses than the next state in line, which is Texas. (Texans, however, enjoy the right to a philosophical exemption.)

Through extensive day-to-day organizing and an ongoing commitment to talk with people where they wanted to meet, we were able to effect high profile events. A small group of activists took decisive action, contacting legislators and organizing seminars, movie screenings, conferences, open houses, and rallies. And New Jerseyans responded in large numbers, assembling on front lawns and in libraries, schools, churches, mosques, bars, stores, restaurants, doctors' offices, and recreation centers across the state. We scheduled meetings, made phone calls, wrote letters, and sent e-mails and faxes. The country watched as greater than 700 citizens passionately protested in Trenton – New Jersey's capital – at the "Freedom of Choice" rally, an event that drew three dozen extraordinary speakers and garnered national media attention. In the halls of Trenton's legislative buildings, there could have been no question that New Jersey parents were demanding vaccination choice. And yet our bill, A260/S1071, the Conscientious Exemption to Mandatory Immunization, with 13,000 petition signatures, nearly 40 legislative sponsors, and bipartisan support, remained stalled in the health committees.

We closed 2008 in New Jersey with a handful of

holiday open houses and invited the community to bring their questions and concerns. Supporters were invited to pick up their cell phones and blitz the governor, assembly speaker, senate president, health committee chairmen, and district legislators. We gathered huge piles of signed letters, inserted a New Year's postcard, and told our political leaders what we wanted most of all from them in 2009 – vaccination choice.

DIALOGUE WITH THE GOVERNOR-ELECT

In Princeton, New Jersey, known for the prestigious Princeton University, we held our first meeting with a senior adviser to Chris Christie. Christie's advisor was there with a proposal: The former District Attorney was considering a run at New Jersey's chief executive slot. Would we like to tell him what was on our mind? As I drilled our contact with the reasons that we demanded – indeed, *deserved* choice – I could tell that he was taking it all in... the manicured community and the educated and largely well-heeled parents buzzing with activity. His trained eye likely told him what he needed to know. This was no fringe group. To the contrary, it was an intelligent, dedicated, passionate group of parents engaged in a bona fide grassroots movement. This is our power. We are not angry radicals. We are intelligent, educated, articulate, respectful, calm, and persistent. We are doing the work.

Another meeting followed several days after Christmas. The advisor wanted to hear more. I invited him to my home and a couple of colleagues joined me. We presented a small, succinct fraction of the material we wanted to share. His takeaway message was that we would not be a waste of his boss's time. He said he'd see if a meeting was possible. Our takeaway was that we should always take the meeting and never underestimate what we have to offer.

Months passed without much contact. Chris Christie worked to obtain his party's nomination. When asked about vaccines during the primary debate, Christie said, "Parents deserve choice."

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Left: Governor-elect Chris Christie in center foreground.

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Subtle, but there it was. Soon after, he was selected as the Republican gubernatorial candidate and was polling with a slight lead. It seemed our advocates might not be needed at all. But my contact and I remained in sporadic communication, sharing occasional articles and observations. News of the meeting finally came in August. And the nature of our relationship had changed. We were to meet on their turf. We had one hour to tell our story. Relationships develop over time, and I was gratified that we had kept in touch.

I remained respectfully focused and consistent on the topic of vaccination choice. It was a very solid meeting. Christie listened to autism parents tell their stories, and he reiterated their priorities so they could be sure he heard them. But he spent most of the hour talking about vaccination choice. It was clear that we had earned a right to a seat at the table on this issue.

CHRIS CHRISTIE’S STATEMENT TO OUR COMMUNITY

The rest of the election story happened in the last five days of the campaign. Despite incumbent Corzine’s massive personal and Democratic Party resources deployed in a solidly Democratic state, the two leading candidates were in a dead heat. I worked feverishly via a series of late night e-mail exchanges, quick phone calls, chaos, and a ticking clock. My objective was to obtain a signed statement of support from Christie. It arrived late Friday afternoon, four days before the election. An excerpt from Chris Christie:

I have met with families affected by autism from across the state and have been struck by their incredible grace and courage. Many of these families have expressed their concern over New Jersey’s highest-in-the-nation vaccine mandates. I stand with them now, and will stand with them as their governor in their fight for greater parental involvement in vaccination decisions that affect their children... Ending waste in state government in order to improve care and services for these unique children and adults, as well as giving parents the choice they deserve in their children’s health care decisions, will be top priorities.

Christie had just made an on-the-record campaign promise to us. And the quid pro quo was clear: It was now my job to deliver the strongest possible endorsement on the basis of his position on my issue.

Had Corzine offered a formal statement of support, a different message from me would have been appropriate. However, I also believe strongly that incumbents have a higher bar because it matters what they promised and what they did with their mandate of support. Corzine has told us that he receives more calls and letters on this issue than any other except tolls. In the past,

he committed to, received votes on the basis of, and subsequently reneged on his support of related issues including the removal of mercury from vaccines and the cessation of new vaccine mandates. His communication to us was crystal clear.

STATE-TO-STATE: TAKING IT HOME

Today, New Jersey has a governor-elect who supports vaccination choice. He is the first candidate vying for his state’s chief executive spot who made a campaign promise to our community and went on to win the election. He is also the first such candidate to say on national radio that autism parents concerned about vaccines must be heard:

We need to look at all the different things affecting autism in New Jersey because we have the highest rate in the country. Not just the environmental concerns but vaccinations.... Listen, I have real concerns about a lot of these vaccine mandates. I have to tell you, Don...I’ve sat with an awful lot of parents of children with autism who absolutely believe that it was vaccinations that caused these problems in their children and then they have additional children and they are being required go in there and go through that again, when they in their heart and in their minds believe this was the contributing factor to their children’s condition.” [Chris Christie on *Imus in the Morning*, Fox Business October 29, 2009]

This was not an accident. Chris Christie is not an affected parent. He did this for a reason. Yes, he wanted votes and saw us as a voting block. But he is also a father of four young children. Never underestimate the human side of our movement. I urge all of us to stay tuned and pay close attention.

This message, brought to you from New Jersey, is powered by the strongest support of our community nationwide, conveying both import and impact. Here is the takeaway message from this election that will not be lost on political candidates across the country:

Americans are organizing for vaccination choice advocacy. They will vote out incumbents who do not fulfill campaign promises and do not represent the needs and demands of their constituents. They will support courageous candidates who are willing to tackle the most difficult issues facing society today even though their solutions are neither politically convenient nor conducive to the expedience of a four-year political cycle.

POLITICS AND POSITIVE ADVOCACY

Our experience in New Jersey was a tremendously positive event around which our entire community can rally, gain traction, and demand progress. It is

also instructive for us understand the ways that we can leverage the political process to gain clout and influence.

The political process is a tool used to advance goals. Once every four years, we rehire or replace the chief executive of our state. Leading candidates are covered relentlessly on statewide, local, and national television, radio, and print media. If your cause is a campaign issue, it is an exceptional opportunity for exposure and coverage. If a candidate wants your votes, it is an incomparable opportunity for reciprocity. “You help me, I’ll help you” is the underlying premise of nearly all longstanding, successful relationships.

People wondered about my political party affiliations. On behalf of my children’s needs, I am party-neutral. I vote based on issues and leadership. I follow a simple principle of “issue advocacy.” Each candidate is asked the same direct question. Whoever gives the best answer obtains support *regardless of party*.

While the issue at hand may appear to be *just* vaccination choice, our supporters know that the ramifications are significant and extend far beyond the reaches of a typical single issue cause. We are talking about government and corporate accountability at the highest levels. We are talking about the use and abuse of authority, influence, and financial resources to pursue an agenda where there is an absence of transparency and billions of dollars at stake. And we are talking about the well-being of entire generations of children and the rights of individuals to make potentially life-altering decisions affecting their bodies and their health for themselves and their families. These are issues that transcend party politics. These are ideals worth fighting for: integrity, fairness, mercy, justice, compassion, civility. These are concerns that immediately bypass and bridge our differences and strike at the heart of what makes us human.

Two states ousted their incumbent governors on Election Day 2009. Your vote is sacred. We will get the government we deserve. An uneducated, biased, or dogmatic vote is dangerous. An educated vote, cast in support of specific issues, policies, and platforms, and cast in support of candidates with leadership, integrity, and commitment to societal progress and change, is a formidable act of advocacy.

SAYING THE UNSAYABLE

We must talk about what we’re seeing. We can’t be afraid to advocate for candidates who support us.

Polite society demands polite conversation. Decorum and restraint dictate the mild, mundane, and safe. It is acceptable to talk about the economy, sports, hobbies, food, and vacation plans. Topics to avoid include politics and selective vaccination. Normally agreeable people begin raising their voices, faces turn red, and guests leave abruptly. So, we learn not to discuss difficult and controversial topics unless we know we already

agree. But how can we expect to understand all sides, bridge gaps, and make progress if we’re unable to shine a light on these tough issues? How can we expect our political and industry leaders to do the right thing by us if we are unable to talk about difficult societal problems with our family, friends, neighbors and colleagues?

What is the alternative? We can vote quietly, not telling anyone who we’re voting for and why. We can sit on the sidelines and watch the process unfold. Or we can jump in with both feet, engage the system, and attempt to influence it for the better. I am a parent of two vaccine-injured children. I believe that chronic, autoimmune, and neurological disorders are the public health crisis of our time. I advocate for laws that demand greater transparency of risks and trade-offs, for corporate and government ownership of the problem, and for parental and individual freedoms to make the best choices for ourselves and our families. The issues affecting our community are neither well-understood nor embraced. Our issues are not typically raised during political debates or campaign speeches. Our community lacks political clout. Political clout is not obtained by passive bystanders. It is not obtained by those worried more about personal status and awkward silence. And it is not obtained by those waiting for the gentle opening, a wide berth to make the hopeful and innocuous statement that can be easily ignored.

It’s time for personal courage. We need it in government, we need it in our companies, and we need it in our communities. Much to our dismay, as we try very hard to find the heroes elsewhere, it is going to have to come from us. We need to be the everyday heroes whose time has come to step forward and say the things that must be said at cocktail parties, bible studies, PTA meetings, playgroups, business lunches, and elsewhere. And we must talk to our government, schools, doctors, and the media. We, the individuals who comprise society, must be willing to examine that which is uncomfortable, unfortunate, inconvenient, and messy. How bad does it have to get? Right now, it is 1 child in every 3.

There are passionate, determined, and driven advocates in many states doing this same work. The time for “hat in hand” advocacy is done. Seize your power and use the political process for your child’s benefit. And let’s commit to working together, sharing resources, platforms, ideas, networks, goodwill and moral support, so we can take this home. Because all states in our country deserve vaccination choice. Our children deserve a fair and just inquiry into the reasons why so many of them are sick and what we’re going to do about it.



Above: Voting booths

Below: Louise Kuo Habakus



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