

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 1 Episode 05: Cecile Richards
The Resilience of Women Is Profound, And It's Happening Right Now
Air Date: May 28, 2020

Cecile Richards: Just so you know, there's like birds in the background, I can hear someone it sounds like with a chainsaw or something.

Abigail Disney: That sounds like horror movies. If the sound of the chainsaw comes any closer, we'll become concerned. We just want you safe now.

I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears, my podcast about inequality. Each week, I get to call up some of the best people I know. And maybe even some I don't. We talk about the hot mess we've made of the economy and how this pandemic might just be our chance to address some of the huge problems Americans are facing. We've gotta start somewhere and sometime. So why not here, and why not now?

Okay, Ms. Cecile, how are you doing?

Cecile Richards: I'm doing well. I mean, all things considered. How about you?

Abigail Disney: I'm good. I'm good. I'm, I'm hanging in there. I'm weirdly losing weight, which is just totally out of character for me, so.

Cecile Richards: Okay, that's really annoying, Abby, but good for you. The rest of us are baking through this entire pandemic.

Abigail Disney: I've been baking too! That's the weird part. All right. Let's just sort of formally start now. Okay. My guest today is an old friend. Cecile Richards is a rather remarkable and never not awesome human being. Best known to the public as the ferocious leader and defender of women's rights at Planned Parenthood. Um, she's been a labor organizer, she's worked for politicians, she's been a coalition builder, and she's now leading Supermajority. Which she co founded with Alicia Garza and Ai-Jen Poo.

Um, so Cecile, welcome to the show.

Cecile Richards: Thanks, Abby.

Abigail Disney: So I realized when I was looking around poking around your biography last night, that you and I have two things in common. Um, one is that our mothers or fathers always get introduced before we do, um, which is nice, uh, but also kind of a pain.

Um, but the other is we both almost got thrown out of high school for protests.

Cecile Richards: I love that. I didn't realize that, Abby.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. Mine is a longboard story. Yours is much cooler. You were seventh grade?

Cecile Richards: Well, yes. Cause it was during the Vietnam war. Um. And I wore a black armband to school, which at my junior high was not common, or even probably understood, and I got called the principal's office, which was, I don't know, for me, pretty exciting. I had never even met the principal. I was, I was new to town. I thought, boy, if all it took was wearing a black armband to, to meet the principal, then I don't know. It kind of set me on my path I think.

Abigail Disney: Yeah, probably did. I got into a fair amount of trouble but that's a whole other story, we'll talk about another time. Okay. Cecile some of the young folks in my staff didn't really understand who your mother was exactly. And I wanted to cry, um, because not just because they didn't know who she was, but, but because like, knowing who she is and remembering her is a source of real strength just for me, I, and she wasn't my mom.

Can you tell us about your mom?

Cecile Richards: She was, um, she was an original. Uh, you know, it's funny, I grew up in Texas, right? And my mother was what we, in the days we called a housewife. She raised four kids. She put on the perfect dinner parties. And then the women's movement came through and Ann Richards just became, this woman on a mission and you know, she eventually ran for office. She became governor of Texas. Uh, the first woman elected in her own right to be governor. She was a progressive. She appointed more women, people of color, LGBT folks to office than all the governors combined in the entire history of Texas.

And then of course, she was a one-term governor because, um, as folks say, you know. They liked, they liked her, but she was too liberal. And of course, George Bush became the governor, and the rest is, the rest is history. But she was a straight talking, unapologetic progressive woman.

And I think that's, you know, obviously she had a huge influence on me, but also on tons of other women who ended up running for office because of her, getting sober because of her, taking risks, leaving bad marriages, you know, a whole host of things. Women stop me all the time to tell me what changed in their life because of Ann Richards. And, um, so that was her.

Abigail Disney: She was, she was really the best.

So when you moved from Planned Parenthood to Supermajority, a lot of people were sort of hoping you were going to, you know, drop your name into, uh, into the, into a race and say you were running for something. I certainly had hoped that you would do that. Is there a reason you didn't run for office or have you ever considered it?

Cecile Richards: Well, I mean, I've thought about it before. And the truth is, I mean, I think some people are just driven to run for office and to be in office. I've had the great, I guess, luxury and real privilege of being able to make trouble outside of being in elective office.

And I've always believed that the people who are in office are only as good as those of us around the world who are organizing to support them to do the right thing, or force them to do the right thing. So I feel like as an organizer, that's just been more my path. Uh, and, and

of course to me right now, I guess at this point in my life, there's nothing that brings me more joy than to see all these incredible women, many young women, diverse women getting elected to office. In fact, about a year and a half ago was the first time we actually elected two Latinas to Congress from Texas.

And to me that, that really is, um, that's exciting. And that's really what is driving me too at Supermajority, is just, is bringing in a whole new generation of women to lead.

Abigail Disney: I'm sort of beginning to think it's our generation's job to -- we spent a lot of time facilitating the older generation and learning from them. And, uh, and I think maybe our job is like, as a sandwich generation, we then turn around and facilitate the younger generation to pass us by. They seem to know a lot of important stuff.

Cecile Richards: Absolutely. And look, I mean, I love, you know, the young women I'm working with a Supermajority -- they're 20 years ahead of where I was at their age. And to me, if we can sort of, I guess, flatten the curve or whatever we can do to fast forward them and catapult them into leadership, provide them the support, um, and shine a light on them, that is great because then they won't, you know, spend, I think the many, many years, a lot of us did just trying to get into a position where we could actually make social change.

So I'm hoping that not only that we're the sandwich between these generations, but that we can really, I think just spread energy and light among these women who are ready to go, at a very young age.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. And maybe we're the people at the rental car agency and the old generation returns the car and then we clean it up and fix it and give it to the next one. Maybe that's who we are. Sandwich doesn't really work.

Cecile Richards: We're gonna find a good metaphor.

Abigail Disney: I know. We need to. So Supermajority. What is it and what does it do?

Cecile Richards: So a couple of years ago when I was, had decided to leave Planned Parenthood, I'd been there I think more than 12 years, and it seemed like it was time to make space for somebody new. I kept running into women everywhere. And this is of course, post 2016 election who were saying, what am I supposed to do?

They, you know, they said, I, you know, I marched, I've gone to town hall meetings, but we've got to make change. And a lot of women who really had never been what we think of as organizers or activists, and Ai-Jen, my good friend who was run the Domestic Workers Alliance for many, many years, Alicia Garza, who of course co-founded the Black Lives Matter global movement and now does amazing work through Black Futures Lab, they were having similar experiences. And so our idea was, well, what if we actually began to provide kind of a political home for women, uh, to say if you need, if you need just community to be with other women, because a lot of these women live out in areas of the country where it's very lonesome to be an agent of social change if you need training.

And if you want to make sure that you could be involved in the 2020 election in an effective way, we're your folk. And so we launched a year ago, uh, we now have more than 850,000 people in our community. We've trained thousands of women, and actually in a couple of weeks, we're going to launch Supermajority home, which is a place where any woman in the country can find out if she's registered to vote, if she's, you know, still on the rolls, what are the options for her in terms of voting, because our goal this fall is to run the largest woman to woman voter outreach program possible. Because women will decide the next election.

Abigail Disney: You know, looking back through the strand that starts after college, you worked as a union organizer with, um, with who exactly? I mean, with what kind of worker?

Cecile Richards: Well, when I first started, it's actually, it was, um, there weren't a lot of unions recruiting on my college campus, so it was actually, it was hard to find a union organizing job. I finally got one with the garment workers in Texas. I could speak Spanish. So we spent-- I was organizing women who worked on the border in garment factories.

Then eventually I went to move to New Orleans and organized hotel workers. And I, anyway, I had a long, long career organizing, essentially women who are working at low wages, nursing home workers, uh, janitors. And that was really where I spent the bulk of my early years and where I, I think I learned pretty much everything I know about organizing today. Um, it was an incredible experience.

Abigail Disney: Yeah, and formative, I'm sure. But if you, if you look at the line that runs from labor organizing, Planned Parenthood, and now Supermajority. I wonder if you could just, I feel like I see a through line. I wonder if you could describe to me what you think the through line is of all of that?

Cecile Richards: Well, I suppose, and some people ask me like, well, how did you plan your career? And of course I didn't. I think like a lot of other women. I just did whatever it seemed like the next thing was that needed doing. But I suppose that if there's a through line, Abby, it's been, I love, organizing. I love working with folks to find their power and support them to lead. And that was really the early days of the labor movement was, you know, working with nursing home workers in East Texas who were earning the minimum wage, had really -- they had no opportunities and it was a big risk for them, but they were willing to, they were willing to take such a big chance and organize.

And even if it didn't make life better for them, they thought it might make it better for the women that came after them. That to me, there's, there's no greater high than actually seeing people organize together and change the future. And so whether it's on political campaigns, whether it was at Planned Parenthood, having that incredible opportunity to work for an organization that literally changes the lives of millions of people every year by providing affordable healthcare, sometimes just providing a safe, safe place. That's what gets me going. And, uh, and it's, it is kind of funny to come full circle at Supermajority where seeing a whole new generation of young women lead. It's awesome. But what do you think the through line is?

Abigail Disney: Well, okay. The other throughline is women. It's working with low income people, and particularly strongly around women.

Cecile Richards: Oh, absolutely, Abby. You're right I was drawn always to people who were working for minimum wage, and those were largely women and women of color. So I guess if, if the through line is how do you, um, lift up the, the folks who are the furthest away from power, um, but who are incredibly powerful people, and that is women. And that's certainly true politically.

I think that's the interesting moment that we are in right now. And it, again, it's sort of, it leads back to why Ai-jen and Alicia and I created Supermajority is that if you look at women and particularly black women who have been the most reliable, progressive voters, even though it took them the longest to even get the right to vote, they are the change makers, but are never given the attention, the credit, their issues are never really dealt with.

And so, and I think it's an interesting moment now where women are beginning to come into their power. Some folks see it as, you know, finally being elected to office, beginning to have a Congress that looks more like the country rather than just a bunch of folk that are all the same.

But I also think women's power is that women are the ones who fuel the campaigns. They are the grassroots organizers. They are the phone bankers. They are the door knockers. They're the people who folks look to, um, when it comes to politics, about what can be different. And so I'm hoping that, um, I guess this is a long way of saying women no longer want to be just treated as "we're going to always be there for you."

I think women are on this cusp of saying, "we actually need serious change" because I think for a long time we thought, well, there's something wrong with me that I can't juggle childcare, my job, taking care of my parents, volunteering at the PTA, and in fact the systems, government were never built to, have us participate. And we're going to have to really bust down a lot of barriers for that to happen.

Abigail Disney: You know, you talked about abortion obviously for many years at Planned Parenthood, and I'm sure you're really tired of talking about it. But I'm interested in the role that it played in animating the christian right. It really feels like the secret sauce that the right wing has used to motivate and glue their whole movement together.

And it's, you know, you kind of came out of college right around when I did in the early eighties when that, that seal was really being formed between evangelical Christians and the far right wing of the party. I'm interested in the way it set us up for the political dynamics we're facing now. I think that a lot of the polarization we're dealing with now is, is very much on the way abortion was used on the right wing--you're meeting Forky my dog right now.

Cecile Richards: Well, I mean, abortion is part of that, but I, you know, I, in fact, I lived in Texas during the rise of the, um, the christian right. The creation of the Christian Coalition. And in fact, it was directly related to my mother's defeat, when she ran for reelection as governor. It was abortion rights, but it was also gay rights. It was a whole bunch of sort of what, what I think some very smart tactical political people, including Ralph Reed figured

out. If they could agitate around these issues and add a new coalition into the Republican party, they could, you know, they could get a governing majority and they were really, really effective.

I mean, on the topic of abortion, it wasn't that long ago when there were moderate Republicans in congress. There were moderate Republicans in the United States Senate who were, what I think of as, more traditional Republicans who believed in small government, including government, staying out of people's personal lives. They had pro choice voting records. They are nonexistent now. All the polarization that we've seen in the country, you're right on, abortion is one thing that has now become a completely partisan issue.

If you take the take, get rid of the parties and actually think about abortion, making decisions about pregnancy, even very conservative people in this country-- many of them believe that decisions about pregnancy should be made by the pregnant person, not by government. And we saw this repeatedly at Planned Parenthood when politicians try to ban abortion, whether it was in Mississippi or in South Dakota, and then these, these issues went to the ballot and, and where the voters could actually decide, and they overwhelmingly defeated abortion bans in their state.

Again, I think that because--people understand for the most part, it's a deeply personal issue. It's not an issue for the government to decide. But again, the Republican party has decided it's worth attracting the far right into the party and has taken a position that I think is really antithetical to where most people in America are.

Abigail Disney: I think something you've probably encountered a fair amount, are people are strident about their anti-abortion views who won't hesitate to get an abortion for someone that they love and care about that and are protecting on even while they're on the picket lines or making whatever choices they make.

Cecile Richards: Yes. I mean, there are countless examples of yes, folks who were picketing, a Planned Parenthood health center, and then suddenly one day they're there with her daughter. And again, I look, that's, that's why planned Parenthood exists is that, every, every everyone's situation is theirs. It's their personal decision they need to make, be able to make those decisions.

And again, I think it gets to so many other issues as well, but I feel for some of these women, I think they are so conflicted and they go to church and they, they're hurt. They hear that they're sinners and that they're damned, and that they'll never go to heaven.

And, uh, it must be a really hard place to live.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. Yeah. I can imagine. Although compartmentalization seems to work for lots of people very well, um.

So, so, so here we are in the midst of, of the COVID 19 pandemic. And, a lot of the people you were speaking about earlier that you worked with as, as an organizer, are now deemed essential workers. And you know, is there some way to build coalitions out of this moment?

Cecile Richards: It's, I mean, I, you know, we are moving from what is a healthcare disaster quickly into a long term economic crisis. And of course it is being born by women and by women with low incomes, women of color.

You know, 86% of nurses in the US are women. Three quarters of all the healthcare workers are women. And now a lot of men who are having to work from home are beginning to understand why public school teachers matter. Why, why caregivers matter. I think there's this awakening, I hope happening about the vital nature of frontline providers and going back to the way it was, you know, getting back to normal isn't adequate. And I do think it is incumbent, particularly on people running for office, including people running for president to talk about what are we going to do to actually look at this moment, look at the enormous economic struggle and what are we going to do about it?

I think we need a women's stimulus package, you know, in the US. It's like, invest in the people who were going to rebuild this country and who are on the front lines right now. You know, childcare, which is essential for women to be in the workforce, for people to be in the workforce has been completely ignored and this rush to somehow get everyone back to work, quote unquote. There's been no, no discussion about how are we investing in the care that our kids need, that our families need. I know Elizabeth Warren and I think Tina Smith a Senator from Minnesota have introduced a bill that would actually invest the kind of money that we use to bail out the airline industry and use that kind of money to actually bail out the childcare provision in America, because you could actually do that. It just is a question of where your priorities are. And of course, this federal government could give two wits about what happens to children and to families. They just want to see what happens to the stock market.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. Yeah. Which is not the economy. I don't know how many times we have to say that. When, when people talk about rebuilding, I think we're going to have to figure out how to, how to monetize the caring economy, because those are the pieces of our system that have fallen away.

Cecile Richards: I mean, there are so many obvious things, which is we need to establish a \$15 an hour minimum wage. But we also need all the other structural investments that would allow women to stay in the workforce and to support their family. So again, I mentioned childcare. It is a no-brainer. We have, we need to treat childcare like a public good and a public necessity. Uh, we obviously need a paid sick leave policy in this country. We need folks to be able to get healthcare coverage. And this is something I'm hearing Abby now from women around the country who are being forced to go back to work, even in unsafe conditions, because if they don't go back to work, they lose their health insurance coverage.

I mean, this is how completely messed up our system is. We know how to fix these things. This is, this is not like we have to invent a new cure for anything. It means we have to build the political will to say this matters.

And again, that is the, that is the opportunity, but also the risk in this pandemic that we go back to where we were and it doesn't work. It's time that the issues that women care about,

basic economic issues, basic healthcare issues, are put at the front of the line, not the back of the line.

And that has never happened before. We have never had the political will and the demand to make it happen. And that's what I hope we can do this election. It's time for that to change.

Abigail Disney: What do you think is available to us at home who are watching outrage after outrage on television and frustrated and really trying to manage our mental health around all that feels wrong right now? What is available to us as an outlet? How do you organize from your couch?

Cecile Richards: Okay. First of all, Abby, turn off the television. There is no good thing that's going to come from watching the TV all day.

But the second thing is, and actually this is, I guess I'll put a plug in, this is what we're doing at Supermajority is we are now text banking women in fact, in Pennsylvania who will be voting next week. We ask them, you know, today, do you want a distraction or do you want an action? Cause some days you're right. Some of our, the Supermajority community wants to look at, you know, cats playing pianos and some days they actually want to start texting voters in Pennsylvania.

And it's okay. And I do believe that the satisfaction that women are finding from home reaching out to other women is pretty amazing. It's, to me, it's very exciting. And I think it's important that in this time of COVID, we find community with each other. Uh, that's what women have always done. The resilience of women is profound and it's happening right now.

Abigail Disney: Okay. So two short questions. Uh, what do you miss the most right now?

Cecile Richards: My kids.

Abigail Disney: Your kids? Yeah. Yeah.

Cecile Richards: My kids. I mean, I don't know how you're doing. I know our kids know each other. And I mean, uh, one of my, my daughter Hannah lives in Rwanda where they have done an amazing job of handling the COVID crisis. Total transparency. They report every infection so I'm not worried about her, but I miss her and my other two kids, we see each other on Skype and Zoom and, um, you know, but it's not the same. So I miss them. Yeah.

Abigail Disney: Yeah, half of my kids are very far away and it's killing me. So, so what's the first thing you're going to do once we, if we ever get set free from all, what's the first thing you're going to do?

Cecile Richards: Well, I mean, it's actually kind of the same answer, which is I'm going to get on a plane to Rwanda.

Abigail Disney: That's going to be one hell of a hug. You know, they're going to want to stop hugging before we do. That always happens.

Cecile Richards: Well, whatever. They can, they can endure it.

Abigail Disney: Cecile, you are the best and the greatest always. I just love you to death.

Cecile Richards: Thanks, Abby. Take care of yourself.

Abigail Disney: I will. And you do too.

Abigail Disney: If you want to learn more about Supermajority, go to supermajority.com and on that site there are training and resources. Cecile has also written a New York Times bestseller called Make Trouble about her life and her mom. So go pick a copy of that up.

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