

**YEAR OF THE WOMAN**  
VoteRunLead and its CEO Erin Vilardi believe women already have the talent, skills, and experiences they need to run for office.

# See Jane Run ... for Office

With unprecedented numbers of women on the ballot, Erin Vilardi's nonprofit is helping them find ways to victory in November.

By NICOLE WALLACE

**F**ROM AN EARLY AGE, Erin Vilardi heard the message that girls are just as important as boys. Vilardi explains that now that she's an adult, her mother often says, "I felt like the world takes care of boys, so I definitely put extra energy into making sure you and your sister really knew that you could be anything you wanted to be."

The message took. The fourth of five children, Vilardi was reading *Ms.* magazine in the seventh grade, thanks to her older sister's feminist awakening in college. Not surprisingly, when the signboard outside her public middle school offered the holiday greeting "Goodwill Toward Men," she was appalled. To Vilardi, the sign was sexist and exclusionary — and she was having none of it. She wrote a petition on lined, loose-leaf paper demanding the sign be changed and collected signatures.

The day after turning in the petition, she was called to the principal's office, along with the first three students who had signed it.

"He had the dictionary opened up to the word 'man,'" Vilardi says. "I remember his finger tapping and pointing at the word 'man' and saying, 'See, it means human.'"

Before she could respond, the other kids jumped in, arguing that it didn't matter what the dictionary said. The sign was wrong and it needed to be changed.

The young activists prevailed and got to write

their own message. Vilardi laughs remembering what they came up with: "Happy Holidays to each and every one of us." She jokes that they used all the plastic, slide-in letters to change the sign. That campaign was a turning point for Vilardi. She began to see herself as a leader. "I look back on that and think that was probably one of the first times that I recognized what it felt like to give others power and that I myself had a voice."

Today, as the 37-year-old CEO of VoteRunLead, Vilardi helps women find their voices on a much bigger stage. The nonpartisan nonprofit trains women to run for elected office at a time when unprecedented numbers have entered politics in the wake of the divisive 2016 presidential election. It has won high-profile support from philanthropist Abigail Disney and the Omidyar Network.

## LEADING

### National Stage

And while VoteRunLead's focus is preparing women to run for local and state office, its alumni are starting to emerge in the national spotlight. Last month, Ilhan Omar and Patricia Torres Ray — two women who took advantage of the group's training when they ran for the state legislature — faced off for the Democratic nod in Minnesota's fifth congressional race. Omar prevailed. If she wins the deep-blue district in November, the Somali-American refugee will become one of the

first Muslim women to serve in Congress.

"That's the long-term vision," Vilardi says. "We have remarkable women running against remarkable women, and it's completely normal."

The group has had to expand its training schedule quickly, bolster online resources — and adjust to an exciting new reality. In the past, the group spent up to half its time encouraging women to run. No more.

"They were raising their hands to say, 'OK, I'll run. Tell me what office to run for.' That's never happened," Vilardi says. "All of a sudden, government was this place where they needed to be."

VoteRunLead continues to recruit and train new trainers to meet the surge in demand. Last year, it trained nearly 10,000 women — 3,200 in person and 6,500 online — roughly a third of the more than 33,000 women the program has prepared to run for office since the early 2000s.

Equally impressive are the women Vilardi's group is training. Sixty percent of participants are women of color. One third earn less than \$30,000, and the group has a special program for women in rural areas.

All those workshops and webinars are translating into candidates. During this year's primaries, 131 VoteRunLead alumni ran for office. More than 70 percent won their races and will stand for election in November.

VoteRunLead teaches candidates the nuts and bolts of running a campaign, says Alicka

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### POLITICAL TRAILBLAZER

If VoteRunLead alum Ilhan Omar wins in November, she could become one of the first Muslim women to serve in Congress.

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Ampry-Samuel, a New York City councilwoman elected in 2017. At the training workshops, she learned how to pull together a campaign team, craft slogans and a stump speech, raise money, and organize a get-out-the-vote effort — “every single piece of the election cycle from the beginning to the end.”

While it was critical to learn those skills, Ampry-Samuel says she also benefited from VoteRunLead’s ability to bring women together. At training classes, she found a campaign manager as well as a network of women who grappled with many of the same challenges she did.

“You have this sense that you’re not alone,” she says. “It’s always scary running for office, but when you sit at a table with other women who are taking that leap of faith, too, you form a bond.”

### Being Authentic

The political world holds up the model of the ideal candidate. The expectation, whether it’s spoken or not, is that the candidate is a man. The advice for women running for office has long been to do everything they can to fit the mold. Think navy-blue power suits and the admonition against showing emotion on the campaign trail.

Vilardi and VoteRunLead are helping women like Eve Hurwitz fight the conventional wisdom.

Running for a seat in the Maryland Senate, Hurwitz combines traditional campaign bona fides with a maverick spirit. She flew planes in the Navy, has five kids, and runs a small business. And since leaving the service, Hurwitz has had purple hair. She says it was a way to embrace her individuality after eight tough years of active duty. But she got a lot of static about her hair when she entered the race. The former aviator resisted calls to cover the purple until a group of people close to her sat her down and said they were worried she would lose because of her hair.

Hurwitz dyed her hair black — and was miserable. Four weeks later, feeling like she had betrayed herself, she called Vilardi to talk it out.

“She helped me realize that it is part of who I am, and that’s OK,” Hurwitz says, “because I had been going, ‘It’s just hair. It’s just hair.’”

Two days later the candidate went back to purple. Since then, she’s leaned into the decision. Her yard signs and campaign tchotchkes are dark



VOTERUNLEAD

purple, and she sometimes sports the color on the campaign trail.

“More and more people are hungry for authenticity,” Hurwitz says. “That whole slick politician thing is less and less acceptable.”

### No Dragon Slaying Necessary

VoteRunLead couldn’t agree more. The group’s Run as You Are curriculum starts with the premise that women already have the talent, skills, and experiences they need to run for office.

“We teach women to be a little more vulnerable, that their life experiences should not be hidden,” Vilardi says. Say, a candidate dealt with bankruptcy 10 years ago or grew up in the foster-care system. Overcoming those challenges, she says, is exactly what candidates should be talking about rather than trying to hide or minimize what happened. “The experiences that you have lived through are your expertise.”

The nonprofit’s seminars encourage women to dig into their motivation for running because when that’s crystal clear, everything else falls into place, Vilardi says. That catalyst becomes the foundation for speeches, fundraising, and other campaign messages. Vilardi says being clear on why they’re running also helps women become more comfortable on the campaign trail. She can see it in women’s body language: Their voices become sturdier, their shoulders relax, and they start to move away from the podium.

Motivation leads to stories, which is what voters remember, Vilardi says. She gives the example of a candidate she worked with, a businesswoman who talked about her experiences as a special-ed education teacher as a way to present herself as an innovator. During the woman’s time in the public schools, she pushed to get a washer and dryer installed so she could teach students life skills.

“Women feel like those stories are not enough, that they need to have something where they raised \$100,000 or they slayed some really big dragon in a corporate setting,” Vilardi says. “But when we tell those nuggets, we’re telling people the way we will lead.”

### Direct Approach

The group’s approach to training candidates mirrors Vilardi’s own straightforward leadership

style, says Shifra Bronznick, a social-change strategist who worked with Vilardi at the White House Project, the women’s leadership nonprofit that launched VoteRunLead.

“You don’t feel like you’re talking to someone who took 29 branding workshops,” Bronznick says.

Too many folks in the nonprofit world are people pleasers, Bronznick says. They spend a lot of time strategizing exactly what to say and how to say it, depending on their audience. Vilardi stands out for her directness. When they worked together on a social-entrepreneurship project at the White House Project, Vilardi was the liaison to the corporate sponsor. Bronznick recalls times when the organization’s vision for the project wasn’t in line with the sponsor’s.

“It would be Erin who would get this fellow on the phone and basically say, ‘Listen, you picked us because we know what we’re doing. So let us do what we’re doing,’” she says. “That’s a rarity.”

### New Leadership Skills

For someone who’s relatively early in her career, Vilardi has been at this work a long time.

She started as an intern at the White House Project in 2003, when she was still a student at New York University finishing up a double major in politics and gender and sexuality studies. She took a full-time job with the group after graduation and quickly moved up the ranks to head VoteRunLead.

During the financial crisis, the White House Project ran into money troubles. It shuttered VoteRunLead and then closed altogether in 2013. Vilardi began working as a leadership consultant, but she stayed in touch with the network of program alumni, local politicians, program officers at women’s funds, and community organizers who were the backbone of VoteRunLead.

Over time, more and more of Vilardi’s contacts reported that the number of women running for office was on the upswing. She decided they had to do something. “So we all went to Duluth, Minn., and sat on the lake and plotted to open up VoteRunLead again.”

The new stand-alone nonprofit, which opened in 2014, won critical start-up support from Abigail Disney and Barbara Dobkin, longtime donors to women’s issues. Grants from the Omidyar Net-



work and Rockefeller Brothers Fund followed, but fundraising remains a challenge.

“There are remarkably few foundations in the country, less than I can count on one hand, that have women’s political participation as their first, second, or third giving area,” Vilardi says. “So we constantly have to fit and squeeze into voting rights or women’s economic empowerment — and make the connection for folks that more women in government has a positive impact on the community.”

Relaunching VoteRunLead also meant that Vilardi had to change the way she leads. She admits that early in her career, she had her hand in every aspect of the program. But as the new organization quickly grew, she had to learn how to delegate.

Jehmu Greene, a political strategist who’s been involved since the early days and currently chairs the board, has watched Vilardi’s evolution.

“When you’re young, it’s very easy to take everything on yourself,” Greene says. “She’s been very intentional looking at the transition from start-up to scaling the organization.”

Hiring a chief operating officer to take charge of day-to-day operations has changed everything, Greene says. “That allows Erin to go out and be a spokesperson, be the primary fundraiser, and bring more resources into the organization.”

For the past 18 months, Vilardi has worked with an executive coach, whom she and the COO see individually and together. It’s an investment Vilardi recommends to anyone who is trying to change leadership styles.

“I felt stuck in some old ways,” she says. “It’s great to realize it. It’s another thing to have the

### CAMPAIGNS 101

Since the divisive 2016 election, Erin Vilardi’s nonprofit has trained 13,000 women.

tools to get out of some of those habits and patterns.”

### A Run for Office?

When people who have worked with Vilardi take out their crystal balls, the future they see for her is formidable. Greene, VoteRunLead’s board chair, predicts that 20 years from now they’ll celebrate the milestone of women holding 50 percent of all elected offices. Several associates expect Vilardi will take the cause of women’s political leadership global. Marie Wilson, founder of the White House Project, thinks she could be a governor, cabinet member, or maybe even the first woman elected president.

Vilardi is more cautious. She doesn’t answer directly when asked if she would consider running for public office. Vilardi says she loves what she’s doing and feels like she’s making a big impact.

But she also tells the story of a visit to the Department of Motor Vehicles last year. It was the first of the month, and the line snaked out the door. The office had 16 windows, but only four were open. “It was so understaffed and ill-equipped,” she says. The people around her didn’t understand the confusing forms they were completing. Vilardi found herself passing out pens and explaining to people taking advantage of New Jersey’s “Motor Voter” law that if you want to vote in the primaries, you have to designate a political party when you register to vote.

“It was really one of those moments when I thought government should be working a lot better,” Vilardi says. “That was one of the times when I was like, ‘OK, maybe it’s time to run for office.’”