# “Gabby Sheets Interviews the Executive Director of Michigan Women’s Commission, Cheryl Bergman”

Dialogue has been edited for clarity.

Gabby Sheets (GS): Hello every, my name is Gabby Sheets and I’m a third-year student at Michigan State University. I’m double majoring in Social Relations and Policy through James Madison College and Women’s and Gender Studies. I’m also minoring in LGBTQ+ Studies. I’m passionate about advocating for equality for groups that are oppressed by the societal patriarchy. Today, I’m joined by Cheryl Bergman. Thank you so much for joining me Cheryl!

*Intro music*

GS: Would you like to explain more about yourself and your background?

Cheryl Bergman (CB): Sure, thank you for having me Gabby! I am currently the Executive Director of the Michigan Women’s Commission for the state of Michigan. To give you a little of my background, I graduated from Michigan State University with a degree in Journalism, have not really used that degree so much except that I do do a lot of writing. I was volunteering, and this will date me, on Governor Blanchard’s gubernatorial reelection campaign in 1990 and that volunteer act led to a paid internship in his administration in one of his departments while I was finishing up my last year of school, I was to graduate that summer. I really thought I had it made, I was like I’m gonna graduate, I’m gonna be able to get a job in the Blanchard administration, this is wonder. Well, he lost to John Engler in that race. So, I was sent back to waiting tables, what I was doing before, because I was hired, because of my work on the Blanchard gubernatorial campaign, to run a state house legislative race, which I did. This started my path into the political campaign work that has defined my career up to this point. I also had my daughter when I was a junior in college and being a single mother and a college student and also working, in the Blanchard administration and on his campaign, really shaped my view of the world and made me understand the importance of who we elect because they create the policies that we live by. From there, I went on to work on several campaigns from state legislative races to statewide campaigns including Senator Stabenow when she became the first woman senator for the state of Michigan. Governor Granholm, I worked on both her when she was elected to Governor the first time becoming the first female governor in Michigan and her re-election campaign. Most recently, I worked on the campaign of our current Governor, Gretchen Whitmer. So, you can see there’s a theme of me working with women candidates. Throughout my career, I’ve also done a lot of non-profit work including the Michigan Political Leadership Program at Michigan State University, I was the administrator for that program for about 5 years I believe in its early start, I was on the ground when that program moved to Michigan State University and was there from the beginning of that program. Like I said, did some other non-profit work too. And now, I’m at the Women’s Commission!

GS: Thank you so much for sharing that with us Cheryl! I was able to connect with Cheryl through my internship with the Michigan Women’s Commission. Would you like to describe for us what the Michigan Women’s Commission is?

CB: Sure, the Women’s Commission was established by statute in 1968 and the mission, as outlined in the statute, is to survey the women of Michigan, identify the problems that they face, make recommendations to address those problems, and to recognize the achievements of women in the state of Michigan, and that remains the same today.

GS: Through the GenCen, during the summer, my academic advisor Patrick Arnold, sent students a list of available remote internships and I was able to apply for an internship at the Michigan Women’s Commission and it was there that I was contacted by Cheryl and the Chief Strategy Officer, Shannon Garrett, after I was brought on as an intern I was selected as the Social Media Manager where I co-run the Facebook and Twitter page with Shannon, as well as being a member of the Financial Freedom Committee. Would you like to explain how you’re connected to the Michigan Women’s Commission and how you gained your role as Executive Director of the Commission?

CB: Sure, like I mentioned, the bulk of my career has been political campaigns and helping, mainly women, become out elected officials and like I mentioned, most recently worked on Gov. Whitmer’s campaign for governor. Once the campaign wrapped up I just did some reflecting and one of the things I am passionate about and continue and have done throughout my career is to mentor and/or sponsor other young women who I work with or who I bring on board to work with me. So, there were some young women, I mainly do political fundraising, and there were some amazing young women on this campaign that I was able to lift up and mentor and coach and they are now leading the Governor’s fundraising efforts and I am very proud of that. And I decided I wanted to do something that would affect change through policy and that’s how I became the Executive Director of the Women’s Commission, when the Governor suggested this opportunity, I jumped at it, and she appointed me last October, so October of 2019.

GS: Currently the commission is going through a sort of re-branding and formation of new committees so it’s a really good time to be an intern at the commission because you get to see the commission sort of rise from the bottom to the top with all these new committees and this new work and these new events that are currently going on that I’ll let Cheryl talk more about in detail now.

CB: Yes, so, when I came on last October the Governor said I wanna talk to the women of Michigan, see what their priorities are, see what their needs are, exactly as our mission suggests. So, we started to do what we call gender equity conversations around the state, with women, before COVID hit and we were shut down in March, we were able between October of last year and March of this year to hold 6 gender equity conversations around the state. The Governor participated in all of these conversations. And what we learned is that the women of the state, wherever we were in the state, agreed that economic security issues were the main issues that were important to address in order to achieve equity. So, that led our commission to form our new priorities and to form working groups and committees around these priorities and they are: Unlocking Opportunities which addresses the barriers that women face blocking their participation in the workforce including affordable and accessible childcare which has come to an even bigger forefront during the pandemic with people having to make some serious decisions and now everybody in flux with our kids going back to school or are they staying home again and what does that look like just a lot of decisions and childcare is a hot topic right now and something the Commission is addressing through our Unlocking Opportunities committee. Financial Freedom, which is the committee that Gabrielle works with most closely, addresses issues like pay equity and access to capital for women entrepreneurs and skills training and opportunities for higher paying jobs. In Michigan, 45% of single female head-of-households are living in poverty, according to the Alice Report, so obviously we have a lot of work to do there. Our third committee is Visible Authentic Leadership which is promoting women into leadership positions at all levels across the state including business, non-profit, more women running for office, academia. So we are focusing there on what we can do to encourage and promote more women in leadership positions. Our fourth committee is our committee on implicit bias which was formed to educate our commissioners and we’ve also done some public learning like we launched a 21-day racial equity challenge and we had learning cohorts around this 21-day challenge that we just wrapped up and we plan to do some more in the fall. But, when we did these gender equity conversations across the state, another theme that wove throughout our conversations were to make sure that we are checking ourselves on our own implicit bias and making sure that we’re conscious of it and conscious of it during the work and policy work that we do. And those are our committees! We are also, in order to recognize achievements of women of Michigan, one thing we’re doing on August 26th is celebrating the centennial of the Women’s Suffrage and Women’s Equality Day, we’re hosting a live, virtual event with Michigan Women Forward: Her Voice, Her Vote, celebrating 100 years of the woman vote. Governor Whitmer is speaking, Secretary Benson will be speaking, and Professor Rashida Harrison who is with James Madison College at Michigan State, so we’re excited about that.

GS: This internship at the commission has provided me with so many opportunities, I get the chance to write and op-ed and work closely with Cheryl creating the suffrage event and working with Professor Harrison ensuring she’s ready for the suffrage event. It’s also great to be a part of the Financial Freedom committee from the beginning until the end. As an intern, I’m able to schedule the meetings of the committee and to attend and listen in on or add input in. I take notes on what we’re talking about or provide research for a topic when needed. But I also love the fact that I get to work closely with strong and empowering women leaders from all over the state. As an advocate for women, and a strong leader in the state yourself, what pieces of advice would you suggest for young women leaders or students interested in becoming involved in local politics or advocacy work like that of the MWC?

CB: I cannot stress enough the importance of, if you can, as young women, to volunteer on political campaigns, especially if there’s a woman who’s running whether it’s a local office or a statewide office, someone you admire and would like to get involved with, campaigns are a great way to gain a lot of experience in a short amount of time. You’ll find if you intern or volunteer on a campaign that you’ll be given as much responsibility as you can handle and have time for. I cannot stress how wonderful of an opportunity political campaigns can be for people. And, seeking out internships like the one with the Michigan Women’s Commission, the Governor’s executive office has an internship program, and my guess is that a lot of the other state departments have internship programs as well, and a lot of non-profits if there’s an issue area you’re particularly interested in do some research and find out what non-profits are doing work on those issues in the state and from my experience in non-profits they’re always looking for volunteers and additional assistance.

GS: It’s important to go for every opportunity that’s available to you and take it!

*Outro music*

GS: I’ve really enjoyed this conversation about the work in the Michigan Women’s Commission and I’m really grateful I got the opportunity to highlight the amazing work that the commission is doing for women all over the state. When you put women in positions of power, they have the opportunity to create real and powerful change within a system. Thank you so much Cheryl, for not only joining me on this podcast but also for allowing me to continue to intern with the MWC. I hope that you were all able to learn about the importance of women leadership and that you all have a wonderful day. Thank you for listening!

*Outro music*