

5 Minutes with: Jennifer O'Connell

Jordana Divon

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The Pickering regional councillor takes on the old boys' club as the youngest elected politician in her municipal ward.

You were first elected at age 23. How did you pull that off?

A lot of hard work and door knocking. I knew I was very young to be in politics and very unknown so I had to prove myself one door at a time. So it's kind of simple if you think about it, but most people underestimate the power of getting out there and talking to people. It's easy to complain about the government, but most people step aside when they see what it requires to follow through with a campaign.

What kept you going?

I'm a pretty determined person, once I set my mind on something there's normally no changing it. So the more people told me I couldn't do something, the more I wanted to prove them wrong (laughs) and I just felt I had a lot to offer Pickering. I'd lived there my whole life and there are some things that really frustrated me. Also, I think being so young it made me think about the future and what I wanted to do about it.

Did you receive any backlash from the older, more established politicians when you first stepped into council?

It definitely wasn't fun. I experienced the hurt and the anger of people not taking me seriously and I used that to motivate me even more. It didn't happen overnight, but I stopped listening to the negativity of certain colleagues or skeptics, focused on what I wanted to accomplish and I found that really spoke for itself.

And now that you've been elected again, have those critics changed their tune?

Yes and no. Some people that were skeptics at the beginning I work well with now, and others are a little bit nervous and are correct. (Laughs)

We've seen a spate of ambitious young politicians crash and burn recently. Where do you think they went wrong?

I always feel staying focused on the community and what you need to do is the safest way to have a career. Because if you go for other things, or building a platform for a future career, that's where I think people run the biggest mistake.

