

## LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

### BARBARA LEE & LATEEFAH SIMON: THE TRAILBLAZING CONGRESSWOMEN OF CA'S 12TH DISTRICT

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LAURA FLANDERS: What will it be like to be a Democrat in Congress next year? Democrats won 215 seats to the Republicans' 220 in the last election. Republicans also control the Senate, 53 to 47. Democrats are looking to spend the next two years, at least in the minority in the legislature. Couple that with the partisan picture shaping up in the executive branch and already in place at the Supreme Court, and entering government right now could feel like a very daunting prospect, especially for a freshman Democrat seeking to represent one of the most progressive constituencies in the nation. Our guest today, however, is the opposite of daunted. She is Lateefah Simon, and she's newly elected to represent California's 12th, the Oakland, Berkeley, Bay Area District. From everything I've heard and read, Simon is not daunted, she is fired up and that is no surprise. She has a great role model. Simon is stepping into the district formerly represented by her friend and mentor, Barbara Lee, the highest ranking African American woman in the U.S. Congress, the former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, and former co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. In her 26 years in Congress, Lee has often been in the minority, even in a minority of one, when she stood alone to oppose authorizing the president to use military force after the 9/11 attacks. Lee always inspires me and she clearly inspired Simon, who began her career in advocacy at age 16, becoming at 26, the youngest woman to receive the prestigious MacArthur Genius Fellowship for her work with young women. Under then DA Kamala Harris, Simon led Back on Track, a first of its kind anti-recidivism program. We last interviewed her here during COVID when she was advocating for access and affordability as a member of the board of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, having been born legally blind and being transit dependent herself. Tough times call for tough women, and we have two with us today. The women of California's 12th, Barbara Lee and Lateefah Simon. It is my great honor to have you join me.

BARBARA LEE: Nice being with you, Laura. Nice seeing you, Lateefah. Go girl.

LATEEFAH SIMON: Nice seeing you. Nice seeing you. You're in the Capitol right now. Ms. Lee is fighting the fight right now, and she is, I want to say before we even begin, our forever congresswoman for California's 12 District.

LAURA FLANDERS: You betcha. Well, how shall I refer to you all? Congresswoman-elect Simon, shall I turn to you first? Are you in fact undaunted, fearless, heading into this new session unafraid? How is it to be in Washington today?

LATEEFAH SIMON: Well, look at my mentor. She's sitting right there. You think I'm going to say I'm daunted? She has served under several presidencies, under several terms where the Republicans had the house and the Senate. We have been here before. Now the nation is extremely troubled. Many of us are troubled by what may come, what will come. But I do oftentimes think about my life and for an upwards of 30 years have been following the career of the amazing Barbara Lee, as a Black woman who was a single mother, who was my college professor, but also went to my alma mater as a young mother who decided that she wanted to dedicate her life to public service. Listen, in a Bush presidency, Ms. Barbara Lee fought to expand research for HIV and AIDS resulting in literally saving 25 million lives. We know what racism looks like. We know what the threats of deportation looks like. We have been here before, but I am so honored to be able to take on, again, the ongoing journey that was led by Shirley Chisholm, Kamala D. Harris, and my of course mentor, professor and friend Barbara Lee.

LAURA FLANDERS: Congresswoman Lee, you remember perhaps your entering Congress, do you? Back in, what was it, 1998? What was that like for you?

BARBARA LEE: Oh, yes. Entering Congress in 1998 was very exciting for me. It was a moment that I never anticipated, I never even thought about being a member of Congress, quite frankly. I worked for the greatest member ever, Ron Dellums. I was his intern, I was his chief of staff. So how good can it get? And then I land with him sitting right there in front of me in a special election. But let me tell you, being a Black woman in America really gives us the experience and the lens to not be daunted with being a minority. We've been a minority in this country forever. And so the challenges of being a minority are challenges that Lateefah knows so well. But Dr. Maya Angelou said, "And still I rise." And that's what Lateefah has done, and still she rises. And so I don't buy this fear. I don't buy into the fact that a lot of people talk about they're exhausted, Black women, we always keep going and Lateefah keeps going. And so I'm confident that she's going to be able to be part of the resistance and stand the gap for people, for marginalized people, for people who this administration is going to really oppress in many ways. And in fact, she's going to work with those that she could work with to make life better for everybody. And so I'm excited.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's talk about the situation there in the House. I mean, it looks on the face of it, 215 to 220, but there are going to be, I think, three GOP seats vacant because of Trump nominations. This isn't a landslide, this isn't the kind of huge majority that some might think. What are you facing as you go in, Lateefah? What are you being briefed on?

LATEEFAH SIMON: Well, again, coming into just a seat with amazing living legacy, there's work that we have to continue to do. California's 12th district and its leadership has been pushing to end Hyde Amendment, women all over the country need access to full reproductive health. We

are super clear that housing is unaffordable in this country. We collectively in this district with our leader, Barbara Lee, have been fighting for more low-income and middle-income housing. We have been fighting for public safety, comprehensive public safety. But you know, one of the things that I'm really excited about is telling the story because while many Americans we know voted Republican, we have to tell the story as Democrats, as the party of values, that when you try to take down the Department of Education, what you do is you cut billions of dollars of funding for low-income children with disabilities and breakfast programs. What you do when you decide to dismantle the FBI, you take out resources for missing and murdered women. You take out resources for finding young people who have been trafficked. I mean this foolery, we will have the opportunity and committee on the floor, both in the Congress and the Senate to tell a story about what the American people deserve. So again, it is daunting, but the role of a legislator, and Ms. Barbara Lee has taught me this, you don't win by only talking to the people that you like. If you are in a room full of cubicles and you're only talking to four people, there's no production that's going to happen. I have a great leader that I have learned from. My role will be to work across the aisle, telling the story, never giving up the fight.

BARBARA LEE: Laura, can I just say thing, Lateefah, I have got to say this and Lateefah, you need to know this, but today you talk about sitting, working with people who we don't often work for, or who we may or may not like. Well, this has been a heavy lift for me, but today we will pass the Congressional Gold Medal to honor Shirley Chisholm. And I had to get —

LATEEFAH SIMON: You did it?

BARBARA LEE: — Over 70 Republicans and Senator Butler passed it in the Senate last night. So yes. And we did it.

LATEEFAH SIMON: You did it.

BARBARA LEE: We did it. And it's going to happen today, this afternoon. So I just wanted to let you know that, because this is an example of what Lateefah was talking about. I mean, I had to go to Scalise, I had to go to Mike Speaker Johnson. I had to go to, oh God, Matt Gaetz. I had to go to so many people who I consider adversaries, not enemies, but adversaries, who we don't agree with. But we got it done. And so Shirley Chisholm, for her 100th birthday is smiling down and we can say happy heavenly birthday to you, Shirley Chisholm. First Black woman elected to Congress.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's remind people who Shirley Chisholm was, one of your mentors, Barbara Lee, I think you met her when you were at Mills College. The same place you met Lateefah. First African American woman, as you mentioned in Congress, first African American

woman to run for president. How did she affect you? What was it that turned you to be the politician that you are, Barbara?

BARBARA LEE: Well, first the context of my life. Then I was a single, young Black woman raising two small children, young mother, single mother. And I was on public assistance. I was a community worker with the Black Panther Party, not a member, a community worker. But I was intentional about politics. I was not going to get involved in politics because I did not believe that either party would speak to the issues and were addressing the issues that myself and my people were dealing with, such as myself. So here comes Shirley Chisholm. I invited her as a Black student union president to come speak as the first Black woman running from Congress. I had no idea that she was running for the presidency. She was an immigrant. Her family were immigrants from the Caribbean. So she was always talking about immigrant rights. Then that was before Roe, but she was pro-reproductive freedom for women. She was a coalition builder. She was against the Vietnam War. She talked about poverty. She was an educator, everything. She was a progressive Black woman. So I went up to her and I talked to her, told her about my dilemma. Well, not really a dilemma, but that I had never flunked a class, but I was about to flunk this one. But now since I heard her speak, maybe I would get involved in her campaign. And so bottom line is I talked to her and she took me to task because she asked me if I was registered to vote. "No, no, no, no, Ms. Chisholm. "No way. "That's bourgeois politics. "I don't do that. "I just want to get to know you "and you know, pass this class." Now bottom line is I registered to vote after she took me to task, I went back, got an A in the class, helped organize the Northern California campaign out of my class at Mills College, got an A, went to Miami as a Shirley Chisholm delegate, and the rest is history. We became very close friends.

LAURA FLANDERS: And that story sounds strangely familiar, Lateefah. You have your own version.

LATEEFAH SIMON: Absolutely. I went to Mills as a single mother as well, in fact, with a little girl who's now 28. And there was an email that came in that Ms. Barbara Lee was going to be teaching an eight-hour class every Saturday and in two days you had to get ready to register. And all the young women in the public policy program, you know, we were talking and saying, you know, I'm going to get in, I'm going to get in. There were only like 35 seats. I stayed up all night, literally with my index finger on the return button. So as soon as 9:00 AM hit, that next day, I pressed register and I got in and my life has been changed. This woman taught a class. The syllabus really was her legislative priorities on the floor from Somalia and Darfur, and HIV and AIDS and Middle East and war and peace. And every Saturday, now I know, I'm like, "Could I do that?" She would fly on Fridays, red-eye, go home, I guess change, and then lecture all day to these young women and told me time after time, "Don't miss another class. "Bring your daughter to class." This is the kind of leader that I want to be.

LAURA FLANDERS: But wasn't it Kamala Harris who got you to actually get up off the street and into an administration?

LATEEFAH SIMON: She got me, literally, she had me work at the DA's office again for the man. And what she told me, Barbara had said some things to young women, we're not the man, right? We're leaders. And again, we can effectuate change inside the system and outside, but we need to be inside. I never thought about running for office, really. You know, Ms. Lee called me one day and she said, "I think you should think "about running for office." And again, I think young women have to be challenged by our leaders to step up into a very, very scary space.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Ms. Lee, the Senate for the first time has two African-American women in the incoming class. That's history. Do you want to talk a bit about the significance of that to you?

BARBARA LEE: That's truly history. Now let me just tell you, since 1789 when the first Congress went into session, there have been two elected Black women elected and one appointed Black women since 1789. And of course I said when I was running for the Senate from California, I helped Lisa as well as Angela —

LAURA FLANDERS: Lisa Blunt Rochester. Angela Alsobrooks being the other.

BARBARA LEE: Because you know what I said, "one is not enough." I mean, can you imagine? Now we have two serving at the same time. And this is so important because the lens, the perspective, the experience, the strength, the clarity of purpose of Black women is who we are. And that's what they're bringing. And like they're setting their own table. Shirley Chisholm said, "If you don't have a seat at the table, "bring a folding chair." Well, they're building the table now out. And that's going to be an historic Senate now.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let's talk about keeping at it. The two of you are excited to be on together and you're being very nice to me. And as a white woman, I feel deeply and keenly the role that white women played in producing the electoral result we saw this November. You have every reason to be excited and fired up. You also have, it seems to me, some reason to be fairly pissed off. Are you? Are you taking a moment to being angry, Lateefah?

LATEEFAH SIMON: There's not a moment to waste. Listen, the election is behind us. What we know and what I'm actually proud of, we are talking about race unapologetically here. This beautiful nation and this district that has been led by Ms. Lee for almost 30 years. There's over 150 languages spoken. There are different faiths and communities who come together. The multiracial movement, the multigender movement is the movement that's going to lead us to real victory into the beloved community that we need. Yes, we got a lot of work to do. Black women,

overwhelmingly, over 90% of us voted for Kamala D. Harris. And while we didn't win the election, you know, we roll up our sleeves, we lift our chin and we get out there.

BARBARA LEE: Now you see how Lateefah, Congresswoman-elect looks at the glass half full and kind of lays it out in a very clear way where we understand what we have to do. But let me tell you, me, my background, clinical social work, five stages of grief, okay? One is depression for one day, period, dot dot, okay? Second stage is anger, okay? I got to say I'm pissed off, okay?

LATEEFAH SIMON: I'm too, Ms. Lee.

BARBARA LEE: But like Lateefah said, the next stage, you know, you have to get into the negotiating phase where you figure this out, you can't get stuck in the depression and in the anger. What the fifth stage though is acceptance. And I ain't going to never get there on the acceptance piece. And that's what Lateefah's talking about. We have got to keep at it because if anyone in this country knows the struggles and the challenges and the historic moments, had Fannie Lou Hamer and Harriet Tubman, had W.E.B. Du Bois, had Shirley Chisholm got depressed or angry, or just gave up and accepted this, we wouldn't be where we are today. And so, yeah, it was very disappointing and I was very angry, you know, and still, what can I say? Except encourage everybody to get out of that and to keep moving because if not, guess who's going to take over and guess what's going to happen to our democracy, and guess what's going to happen to the next generation and future generations of our young people? They won't even have a chance. So we've got an obligation to them

LAURA FLANDERS: That Authorization for the use of Military Force Act that I refer to at the top, Barbara, which you voted against granting to the president after 9/11. Is this like a defunct letter of the law? Is this still an active piece of legislation?

BARBARA LEE: I've been trying to repeal the 2001 authorization for the last 20 years. It was a 60-word authorization and all it said was the president, any president has the authority to go to war forever, in perpetuity. And I have Republican support to repeal that. Also, the Iraq authorization, I've gotten that off of the floor. There are two authorizations. And so until those are repealed, any president can justify the use of force anywhere in the world without coming back to Congress, even for domestic spying. And so that's why it's so important, and Lateefah will talk about our strategy because the public is with us to appeal this. If any president wants to use force, the constitution requires that president to come to Congress and to get it. And the reason I voted against that was it gave the executive branch congressional responsibility and authority by the constitution to use force forever. And that is wrong. It's unconstitutional and it's dangerous. So we're going to keep at it. I'm going to keep at it from the outside. Lateefah is going to keep at it from the inside until we repeal those two pieces of unconstitutional dangerous laws. They're on the books.

LAURA FLANDERS: I hear one thing on the books for you to deal with, Lateefah, what's your next, what are your other primary objectives? And if you could get one thing done, what would it be?

LATEEFAH SIMON: Listen, the people of the district have been really surrounding Ms. Lee and I and saying, "In this next Congress "we have to fight for what we fought for." Again, it's consistent. Women need bodily autonomy. Folks need to be able to afford a home, afford an apartment, afford education. Really, when we're thinking about international and national security, these are number one priorities. We have an administration who is saying that they will continue this idea of sending our men and women overseas, but also have a conflicting understanding of who's going to take care of them when they get home. You want to de-unionize federal workers? Listen, there is a lot that we're going to have to hold dear and fight for. And part of being the new kid on the block is you get to learn from the folks who are in democratic leadership. And you know, again, I have special forces of Barbara Lee to support me. You know, when I say that while she's transitioning out of congress, Ms. Lee has so beautifully offered me her desk to be in my office, and what that does to me, she also gave me a physical baton. We have work to do. There's no I in the United States Congress, we are a team, we are a team of those who've come before us and those who will come after us. So the work of Barbara Lee has changed literally the world. And there's more work within that legislative docket that we will have to push forward. Public transportation, disability, access, HIV and AIDS, eradicating HIV and AIDS in our lifetime. Again, making sure that folks can have the promise of the American dream. Immigrant justice is a huge issue in this community. We're going to fight. We can literally walk and chew gum at the same time. These are not just progressive values that I'm talking about. These are American values, these are values that are engraved on the Statue of Liberty, its base. So I feel like we have a job to do, that is the American job to hold up a democracy in a time of potential tyranny.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, well, I know that we have to let Representative Lee leave, but I want to give you a chance, Barbara, to give Lateefah any final word of advice, caution, strategic insight. I don't know, do you have any secret cubby holes in that desk?

BARBARA LEE: Listen, Lateefah is hitting the ground running. Lateefah has her agenda. She knows exactly what she's doing and she's taking this baton and moving us forward. And I think what I'd like to say is, this is, especially after this election, you know, people have been very upset, quite frankly. And so self-care and understanding the pain that people are suffering through is really important to do regardless of where, you know, we are in this whole process. And so I think being able to see people and feel the pain and understand where people are, yet helping people move forward. Again, my background is psychiatric social work. And so the individual kind of caring is extremely important. And sometimes these legislative bodies can be

dehumanizing because, you know, they're very transactional. And so you have to have your circle of trusted friends and colleagues. So I have my little barriers. I mean, I know who I can trust, who I don't trust, because everything's public and everything's hardcore. Everything's transactional and everything, you know, could come back to haunt you in a way where there's so many people who innocently may talk about something that you may think is very private, just innocently. And so I would just say we have to be, Lateefah, you know, be very judicious and be very discerning with how you engage with your friends.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm hearing that friends close and enemies closer.

LATEEFAH SIMON: That is good.

LAURA FLANDERS: Final words from you, Lateefah, to Barbara before she has to head off?

LATEEFAH SIMON: Well, honestly, I just love you so much. I just love you so much.

BARBARA LEE: I love you back and you know that.

LATEEFAH SIMON: You are such a model, but I hope that people can see why so many of us on the ground, so many young moms who went to school, took us a ton of time to graduate. But you know, there's so many of us. There's an organization called Emerge and it's training democratic women to run for office. And Barbara Lee is our collective hero. And we talk about you all the time, not just for your fierceness, but because of your grace. And when you talked about making sure that you hear people, you see them, you love them. When Ms. Lee comes to town every weekend to be in community, I mean, she's hugging mothers and children. And in most cities, folks know they're mayor and they know their governor. Well, in the East Bay, everyone knows our Congresswoman Barbara Lee. And you've done the work. You've done exponentially, just an incredible job. And we love you so much. I'm going to make you proud, ma'am.

BARBARA LEE: You already have.

LATEEFAH SIMON: I know you are. And I think-

BARBARA LEE: Congresswoman-elect.

LAURA FLANDERS: Shirley Chisholm —

LATEEFAH SIMON: Crazy.



LAURA FLANDERS: — is beaming down at both of you. And thank you so much for this conversation today.

LATEEFAH SIMON: Thank you.

BARBARA LEE: Thanks, Laura. Nice seeing you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that's the cheeriest conversation we're going to hear between Democrats for a little while, I reckon. I enjoyed it. I hope you did too. If you are curious, I was able to speak a little longer with Congresswoman-elect Lateefah Simon. And in our extended conversation she talks about how the Congress and its good old buildings are adhering to the requirements of the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act. She also tells a pretty interesting story about Speaker Mike Johnson. If you are curious about all of that, you can subscribe to our free podcast at our website. The links are all right there. And join our social media feeds. We just joined Blue Sky, as well as find out about our online streaming programs, which you can share the links to with your friends. Another takeaway from today's show is that friends and family and connection are what keep us from getting tired. Maybe we get tired, but community, connection is what stops us from staying that way. So thank you for being part of our community here at "Laura Flanders and Friends." Till the next time, I hope that you will stay kind and stay curious and stay connected. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura, thanks for joining me.

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