Bad Midwest Feminist Podcast - Episode 1

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HOST: Hey, Bad Midwest Feminist listeners.

In these introductions, I'm very tempted to do my best Gossip Girl voice impression and start off with a, “Hey, Upper East Siders” but I won't because I'm a serious person and I'm based in the Midwest, not Manhattan.

Any who, Welcome to our first episode. I'm sure you're very excited. I am too.

Here at Bad Midwest Feminist, we're exploring what it means to be a feminist in the central Midwest, the direction of feminism, and whether or not it's on the right track.

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HOST: Today, I'm joined by the wonderful Iowa State Representative Jennifer Konfrst, who represents House District 32 and just so happens to be running for Congress for Iowa's third congressional district held by Republican Zach Nunn.

She also works at Drake University as an associate professor in public relations because she clearly hates free time.

In this episode, we cover Jennifer's first experiences with feminism, how it's shaped her life in politics, both of our grandmothers, and whether or not she thinks the Democratic Party is currently the party of feminism.

So, let's get into it, shall we?

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HOST: Hello, everybody, and welcome to our first episode of Bad Midwest Feminist.

I'm here with Iowa Representative Jennifer Konfrst. She has been in the Iowa House since 2019, I believe.

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KONFRST: Yeah.

HOST: Yes.

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HOST: And she is an expert in all things politics, especially since she is from Iowa. You're a Midwest girly.

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KONFRST: I am.

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HOST: You are a Midwest princess. You are from this area. Just to start off our conversation, do you identify yourself as a feminist?

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KONFRST: Yes, of course.

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HOST: Maybe speak as to why?

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KONFRST: Absolutely. So, I'm a what I like to call a Gen X feminist, which is someone who came up in a time when feminism meant something different. And I've done a lot of thinking about what that means as a feminist.

But basically, Gen X feminists were sort of told we can do everything. We just have to do it a little better in order to get attention. I've tried to both do that and model not having to do that for the next generation.

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HOST: Do you have a specific memory cemented in your mind of when you first encountered feminism?

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KONFRST: You know, I think that when I was in 8th grade, I went to my first ever Reproductive Freedom Rally. I didn't know before that my decisions were not completely up to me about my own body, and so that was sort of a stunning moment.

But in high school, I volunteered for a group called the Young Women's Resource Center. And in that moment, the executive director at the time sent me a note, and at the end, she just wrote, “Remember that sisterhood is powerful.” And that's a phrase I still have the note card all these years later, and it's a phrase that's really stuck with me.

It's just this idea of sisterhood and how that does or doesn't fit into feminism, depending on the circumstance.

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HOST: If I remember correctly, your father was a reporter for the Des Moines Register.

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KONFRST: For the Associated Press.

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HOST: For the Associated Press, all right. And he covered the Iowa Capitol.

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KONFRST: Yep.

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HOST: Yeah, that was his beat.

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KONFRST: And presidential campaigns.

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HOST: Okay, and so you followed him around quite a bit. So, you were at the Capitol from a very early age.

How do you think Iowa politics has shifted from those perceptions you made as a kid to you yourself now running for Congress?

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KONFRST: Yeah, when I was there, obviously, it was a very different time. I didn't go there until I moved in with my dad when I was 10. So I had just started living with him and my stepmom, and then started traveling and going to the statehouse with him every spring break.

I would just walk around, and he would just let me go run free in the Capitol. And I remember there was a time when I was sitting in the Speaker of the House's office, as a 10-year-old does, and heard him fighting with a Republican. He was a Democrat.

Heard them screaming at each other. And I remember being very afraid. And when I got in the car, I said to my dad, “I don't get it.” They were mad at each other, and then they were laughing and friends after the fight. How does it work? And he said, “It doesn't work any other way.”

I think we've seen now what happens when people aren't talking to each other, when people are villainizing each other, when people spend all their time on social media. It just feels like we've lost a touch of that shared experience. I think more than anything.

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HOST: Do you think that is that specific to Iowa politics?

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KONFRST: Oh, I don't think so. I think social media sort of ruined politics in many ways. You know, in the sense of, it's made things so black and white when really nothing in politics is really black and white, especially in governing. It's almost all, you know, Governor Cuomo, not this one, old one, used to say that “you campaign in poetry and govern in prose.” And that's very much what it's like.

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KONFRST: You know, campaigning is being able to say we're going to do X, Y, Z. Governing is being able to say, well, how can we get X, Y, Z done? And it might take longer than you think. So, for me, that kind of collaboration is really important and sometimes is missing.

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HOST: So, you have a personal life and in addition to your or a legislative career. How has your personal life, your legislative career, your career in journalism and your work at Drake University shaped the way that you view feminism just in this place?

You're a product of central Iowa.

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KONFRST: Yeah, I think that for me, it's really about making sure that I'm comfortable with my own definition, because others will try to put a definition on you and put you in a box.

It's been about defining what my priorities are, how I can look at the world, not denying the fact that I look at the world through a certain lens, through the lens of a woman coming up in a business.

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KONFRST: You know, I've worked in broadcasting, I've worked in academia, I've worked in corporate America, and I've worked in politics, none of which are bastions of feminism ever. So, I've seen a lot of different iterations of what it's like to be a woman in some spaces that end up being traditionally male or used to be traditionally male.

It's been about making sure that what I do is comfortable with my own idea of who I am and what my goals are and finding ways to make that fit within whatever workspace or personal space I'm in.

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HOST: What is your personal definition of feminism?

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KONFRST: Yes, I mean, for me, it's just about ensuring equal opportunity, ensuring I have an opportunity to, that a woman in a room would have the same opportunity to get something done, to be heard, to have her voice heard, to be recognized, to be represented as a man in the same room. And that's a pretty simple definition of feminism, but for me, it's been the low bar that is the one that's sometimes hard to cross.

I've tried to just really limit it to, it's just making sure women are in the room when we're at the table, women are part of the conversation, and considered in the conversation, and that's harder than it might seem.

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[STORY ADVERTISEMENT]

EMMETT: Have you ever wanted to go to church in the middle of a conservation area in Iowa? Well, guess what? Holy Cross is the place for you.

It's a small, rural church that seats only 88 people, and it has a rich Irish history that keeps the church strong in the 21st century, amid rural church closures. The author of this story is me, Emmett McMenemy, the multimedia director for Urban Plains.

You can read it right now on the Urban Plains website.
Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

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HOST: Do you think that the Democratic Party would you consider it to be the party of feminism in the United States?

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KONFRST: I mean, of course I do, right, because of how I define feminism. But I think the important thing is that by limiting feminism to one party, we're implying then that you only have to have one set of beliefs or ideals. I think that, better than saying one party is the feminist party, I would say that right now, Democrats are the ones pushing forward policies that are better for women in many, many ways.

And so certainly policy-wise, that's where it is. But feminists can look like a lot of different things, and I think it's important that we recognize that. I think if we get back to my definition, which is having a voice at the table, being considered in conversations, and being heard, I think that can

happen anywhere, and we don't want to limit it to just one party. It would be great if both parties were the party of feminism.

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HOST: In what ways do you think feminism is different in Iowa, central Iowa, the central Midwest, compared to on the national scale?

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KONFRST: It does feel, it feels more generational than regional, I guess, in many ways. But for me, here in Iowa, it's been more of an expectation of there's a role that you're supposed to play as a woman in whatever business I was in, and when you don't fit that mold or fill that role, people aren't comfortable with what to do.

And so, they don't quite know how to respond to you. They don't know how to react to you. And I've seen that discomfort with people because I don't necessarily come across the way that they would expect someone. You know, I was the first woman to be minority leader in the Iowa House. And so, I got to see, and my team got to see, how a woman in that office is treated differently than all the men who had been in the office before.

As a Gen-Xer, I never wanted to talk about being a woman. I just wanted to talk about doing my job. I was told, "Put your head down and do the work."

Someone literally told me in an internship, as a woman in this business, you have to work twice as hard, and you can never complain about it. So, I took that as gospel when I was 20. It's just been about trying to pave that way for myself and then make it a lot easier for people behind me.

That's been a really important part of my journey.

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HOST: Do you think that your experience of kind of shutting yourself off to your femininity, your womanhood, do you think has been a hindrance to your political career?

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KONFRST: I think that it's just not shutting myself off necessarily to my femininity, but the femininity that people might expect from me, if that makes sense. Sometimes being a little bolder, saying things that are pretty straightforward, things like that.

It's the same old trope, right? I'm aggressive; someone else, a man, is assertive. I'm bossy, a man is a leader, you know, things like that you don't want to be true, but they are. And that's what people think of you. And so, it's first you have to name it before you can try to fix it, I think.

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HOST: So now you're running for Congress against Representative Zach Nunn as a Democrat.

He is a Republican, and Iowa hasn't swung in the direction of a presidential Democratic candidate since 2008. Why do you think that is?

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KONFRST: Yeah, I think that Iowa statewide has sort of, if you look at the statewide makeup of the voters, has become a little more concentrated and a little more. 53% of Iowans now live in 10 counties, according to the 2020 census. So, the consolidation of population has really affected where votes are concentrated.

I think for statewide races like a presidential caucus or presidential general election or a governor's race or a Senate race, it's a little tougher to get over, get things swung back to where they were.

Last time we elected a Democrat to Congress was in 2020. So, it's not like we've, you know, we're in the wilderness forever in this phase. It's just a matter of statewide versus congressional districts.

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HOST: Yeah. Do you think we'll ever swing back?

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KONFRST: Yeah, I do. I do. I think that because it's not really about politics, it's about power. When people have, when one side has too much power, we've seen this in blue states and red states now that our country is all run by one side. I think people tend to gravitate toward bringing a little balance back.

Iowans have always traditionally liked balance. They like, I mean, this is the state that elected Chuck Grassley and Tom Harkin, right? So, Iowans tend to be a little more pragmatic than just party line voters. We know Iowans split their tickets a lot too.

So, there's a lot of movement that can take place on any given cycle.

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HOST: Now I'm positive that you're familiar with the term “the blue wall.” The blue wall consists of the states Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. It has been a tried and true strategic tactic by the Democratic Party to win presidential elections by getting those Midwest states in a blue cluster.

Now, in the last presidential election, we know that Minnesota went blue, Wisconsin was red, Michigan also went red. But can the Democratic Party still rely on the blue wall as a strategy in, can they still rely on the Midwest?

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KONFRST: You know, I have a, I think that if we want to survive, we have to. We have to learn how to talk to the Midwest. We have to learn how to talk to Midwestern voters. You know, I'm not a huge fan of the Electoral College. So, you know, this folks. focus on an entire state, do or die, is a little frustrating for me anyway. But look, we need to learn how to talk to Midwestern voters.

We need to learn how to listen to Midwestern voters and talk about the things that are affecting us here. You know, the more we ignore communities and states like those in the Midwest, the more we become the party of the coast, and that is not sustainable. If we want to truly want to truly have a voice that represents the nation, that's why we have to have people in the Midwest who are also bringing both sides of an argument to the table.

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[STORY ADVERTISEMENT]

KYLIE: Hi everyone, I'm Kylie Petty. I'm writing a piece on Jasper Winery, a winery right in the heart of Des Moines. They attract young adults to their winery with music deals and very exciting events. I stopped by to get a sense of the atmosphere and a taste of their excellent Iowa wine.

Go read my piece on Jasper Winery and visit the winery for a taste of deliciousness.
EMMETT: Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

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HOST: If you end up winning your election to Congress against Zach Nunn, then you'll obviously, you won't be able to represent the people of Windsor Heights anymore. Does that, does it make you sad?

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KONFRST: Yeah, I mean, I love state legislative work. I absolutely love it. You know, one of the considerations I had when making this decision was, will my seat stay in Democratic hands.

That was important to me because I worked really hard to flip the seat back in 2018. I want to make sure it's going to stay blue. The district has trended more blue over the years. I feel pretty confident that a Democrat can win reelection in this district. I'm really proud of the fact that we've worked hard to build this district back up.

I think it's time for me to move on.

I also think I will have been there eight years. It's time for someone else to get a chance to lead. I think that sitting too long in one seat isn't good for the party or the constituents.

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HOST: So, you have absolutely showcased that it is possible to flip a seat, to flip a seat blue. Are you very confident that you're going to be able to flip this congressional seat?

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KONFRST: Yeah, I'm confident in the sense that I fully believe this seat can be flipped. It often flips after the presidential election. And so, it's, you know, it's on track to do the same.

I also am hearing from a lot of folks who are concerned, upset, not happy with the way things are going right now. So, I do feel that there's some discontent out there. I think that the important thing is going to be to, they don't trust politics and they don't trust politicians and I don't blame them.

It's a matter of out there and showing that I'm somebody they can trust to carry their values to D.C.

Those values we like to put in the social bucket, but really those values often are, just remember that we exist, remember that we like our small towns, remember that we want our kids to move back home, remember that we want affordable housing, and they just feel very unseen and unheard.

If I can continue to show them that they're seen and heard, I think that that's what they're looking for.

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HOST: I remember way back when, this was like in October of 2024. I was on a road trip with my friend. We were going to see the Villisca Axe Murder House.

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KONFRST: That's in this district.

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HOST: I can remember like as we were just like, you know, driving around these very, very rural roads, all these very small towns. I saw, I expected there to only be Zach Nunn, Trump Vance signs, but there was an actually like a 50-50 ratio.

There were some Lanon Baccam signs, who was the congressional candidate this time last year against Zach Nunn. Do you think that like these rural, like these rural areas, you like, what do you think are the stereotypes that like really hold rural areas back, are there stereotypes?

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KONFRST: Yeah, I mean, I think that we make assumptions about people in these rural communities based on what we see, and we forget that they're living full, whole, complete lives, that they want the same things that folks in the city want, right?

They want a good school for their kids. They want to not have to think about politics every day. They want to know that they'll have a job. They want to know that if they get sick, there's a hospital nearby they can go to. They're worried about the same things we are.

I think the stereotypes we make are that there are times that I think folks think of people in rural Iowa as just patently different than everybody else, and they're not. They're just like everybody else, and their concerns are the same. They've just been not heard as much as folks in suburbs and cities have been lately.

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HOST: So, do you think that feminism, just as an ideological theory, has it been reaching rural areas as of late, or have the rural areas not been grasping enough towards feminism?

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KONFRST: Well, I think if you, I've met a lot of women mayors, women city councilors, women school board members, women who are running the fundraising drive for the community pool. So, I think if we go through my definition of just having a seat at the table, I do believe that feminism has reached these areas.

I think that if you call it that, in some of these areas, it won't go well.

But if you're looking at, are women represented at the table, do they have a voice? Yeah, in a lot of these communities, they really do. Sometimes a disproportionate voice compared to some of the urban communities, right?

I mean, we're seeing there are certainly more women on city councils in some of these small communities than there are on the Des Moines City Council.

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HOST: You touched on this, but why do you think there is kind of this like, oh, this like this jump back approach when potentially someone is referred to as a feminist or the topic of feminism is brought up?

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KONFRST: The word, I mean, they just, the word's been weaponized, right? Like so many other words that over, I mean, that's just political communication, right?

It's what we've seen happen. It's been weaponized to mean a lot of different things. I like to say I'm a lowercase feminist, you know, not the kind of feminist that's been caricatured or anything like that, but a feminist who believes that women should have a seat at the table, that's not controversial, I don't think.

I think it's been weaponized and politicized in ways, frankly, often to keep women down and to keep women from having exactly what I think you need. I think it's just been, just like many things, it's just been weaponized in our political sphere and people don't really even think anymore about what it means. They just know they don't like it for some reason.

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HOST: Yeah, no, my grandmother, who's in her late 80s now, she definitely wouldn't, she would not, I mean, I have to ask her, but I can say wholeheartedly I do believe that she would not personally identify as a feminist, but she worked as a nurse for 40 years and she never was interested in like being completely at home all the time with her six kids, one of whom was my mom, she was very interested in doing something like doing something for herself, and she was very passionate about her nursing and about like that and about her medical career.

Do you think that just that mentality, is that just a feminist mentality?

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KONFRST: That's how I would define it, right? So, my grandma was a garment worker. She organized a union on a factory floor and was a badass right, in every way. I'm sure that if she was still with us and I asked her if she was a feminist, she would say no.

But did she, was she a female leader who made sure that women's voices were at the table and were heard in the workplace? Yes.

Did your grandma make sure that she was modeling what it is for a woman to lead and being at the table to make hard decisions? Yeah.

Again, I think it's about the work and your place in the world, much less than sort of a political label.

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[STORY ADVERTISEMENT]

LILY: Filk is what happens in a filk circle. Consequently, what happens in a filk circle for that moment is filk. Want to learn more?

I'm Lily Wasserman, Accessibility Editor for Urban Plains, and I'm bringing you an audio story on filk music featuring information about an upcoming relaxicon coming to Des Moines and interviews, and music from the organizers and prominent Filk musicians in the Des Moines area.

Learn all about Filk, its history, relaxicon, and more.
EMMETT: Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

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HOST: What are some things you've witnessed in Iowa, in the central Midwest, and on the national scale that have indicated to you whether feminism is on the right track or is it on the wrong track?

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KONFRST: I hate to do this, but I think, again, we get to a definition. You know, I think that women's rights in this country are not on the right track. When it comes to sort of some thematic elements that are coming out of Washington right now about women staying home, women being traditional, you know, their role being as a mother only, things like that get a little concerning.

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KONFRST: But certainly, some policies that affect women are not going in the right direction. I think in terms of women's voices, women's voices are still being heard. It's just a matter of making sure that sometimes that translates into policy decisions.

I think in many ways, that's why it's important to elect people who listen to and speak for women to these offices.

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HOST: You think that that's possible here in Iowa?

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KONFRST: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes, absolutely. I mean, I grew up here. I've seen it. This is, you know, we always say it, but this state has been through this before.

I remember very well, winning the, when the state has been blue, terrible nights in 2010, amazing nights in 2008, right? Like, I mean, this is just politics. I don't think this state is lost forever to one side.

I think this state is more pragmatic than it looks and I think that we're due for a little bit of a resettlement when it comes to power balance in the state.

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HOST: What do you think that resettlement looks like exactly?

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KONFRST: I think it looks like flipping a couple of congressional seats, maybe flipping the governor's mansion and holding on to, flipping some state legislative seats in a way that brings some of that balance back. It's just tilted a little too much.

Iowans, you'll notice that I'm not calling for the entire state to be Democratic either. Iowans, I just think we need to be more purple than we are, and I think that's where Iowans are more.

Because when I'm out there, I'm in a library and I'm hearing from people talk about, you know, sort of some very, what would be considered conservative things at Banned Books Week and at the week where they're talking about public education. So, they don't look at themselves as Democrats or Republicans.

They look at themselves as residents of Red Oak, and they want things to be this way, and they share Republican and Democratic ideas. So how can we find that balance?

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HOST: And that concludes the first episode of Bad Midwest Feminist.

Special thanks to Representative Konfrst for taking some time out of her busy schedule to chat with me.

I have to say, the biggest thing I picked up on our conversation about Midwest feminism in politics is that feminism exists everywhere in the central Midwest. From even its most rural areas to its biggest cities, it just might not be called that.

If we take notice of the underlying feminist-like actions in our communities and not whether people decide to label themselves as a feminist, Midwesterners can see that there is feminist-inspired, women-focused progress and women-led initiatives all across the region.

But before you return to your normal scheduled programming, at the conclusion of each episode of Bad Midwest Feminist, I'd like to leave you with one last sentiment and piece of wisdom from our guest.

If we get away from the label of feminist that has been weaponized and start thinking of feminism through the lens of equal voices, I think we can make a lot of progress.

Do with that what you will, and until then, I'm Carolyn Siebels-Lindquist with Urban Plains Magazine asking you to just keep talking.