

Amazon Studios
Late Night - Breaking Through Series

Minyon Moore is the founder of Women Building for the Future, and heads Dewey Square Group's state and local practice. She was the CEO and COO of the Democratic National Committee, Assistant to the President of the United States, Director of the White House Office of Public Liaison, and Director of White House Political Affairs for President Bill Clinton.

In the summer of 2004 instead of working in the Presidential Campaign, I decided to step out of my comfort zone and work for an organization that was little known at the time called Citizens Change. It was a non-partisan voter education and voter mobilization campaign headed up by business mogul Sean "P Diddy" Combs. It was specifically designed to engage young people and marginalized voters. I received a call from his manager at the time Phil Robinson asking to meet with me to discuss the campaign. Apparently, the campaign had hit some road bumps in the organizing efforts. They had gone through a couple of managers.

Ok, think about this for one minute. Minyon, working with, a hip hop artist. One of the most strait-laced human beings on the planet. Something was wrong with that picture. Phil and I met. I listened and told Phil to feel free to call if I could offer any advice on your plans and strategy. I told him I wasn't able to come to NY. Now Phil was the mastermind behind the earlier version of Sean Combs. Everyone wanted to get to him. I should have been honored to meet with Phil. But I didn't know them. I only knew what I had seen on TV and read in the newspaper. I can't say that I was raring to go and be with a group of people that I didn't understand and would probably not understand me.

Well that was short lived. I was sitting in my office one day and my phone rings. It was Sean Combs. Although he introduced himself as Puff. He launched into plans about the campaign and why it was important to come work with on this. He was passionate about his vision. He knew we needed to energize and excite young people. He was convinced he was the person who could do that. He was right, we did need to wake up young people and African American voters, but was he the right person to do it? He ended the call by saying "mommy" I need your help. I thought to myself, does he think I'm that old? Only to learn later that it was a term of endearment and if you were lucky to be called you "mommy", it was a sign of respect.

To be honest, I still wasn't sold on the whole concept. It had risk for sure. The stereotypes of the industry were playing in my head like a scratched CD. And, this election Bush vs. Kerry was too important to have some outside organization screw it up with a bunch of ideas that could backfire. Even further, his efforts were nonpartisan so we would be effectively being walled off from any campaigns. We would be on our own to sink or swim. That was a little scary.

After multiple conversations, I decided to take on the challenge. I would team up with a brilliant sister, Alexis McGill who was heading up the overall efforts. She knew the hip-hop language and culture and I knew the language of campaigns, tactics and strategy. It soon became apparent Alexis could use an extra set of hands. I think the campaign had become larger than anyone had anticipated. Maybe everyone, but Sean. He always knew it was going to be big. Alexis and I became the perfect match for each other and the best of friends. Sometimes, we even found ourselves teaming up against the very person we were working for – Sean Combs, especially when we couldn't keep up with his ideas.

The day I arrived Sean was doing his first national interview on the campaign. I get a call from him, "where are you?" I'm at the office. Why aren't you here with me? Of course, I look at the phone and think to myself – where is the communications person? shouldn't he or she be with him? Well that was lesson #1. Let's put the right team and infrastructure together so that we will all have defined roles.

The first couple of days was a little rocky. Not without hiccups for sure. I first had to come to terms with the slogan "vote or die." From a civil rights perspective, people had died for the right to vote. Would people think we were making light of the struggle? As days went on, I began to understand the method to his madness and in this case his genius. Sean knew he needed to get the attention of young people and the media. The message had to grab the hearts and mind. He also knew he needed to enlist his other high-profile friends and celebrities to go on this journey with him. His marketing materials for the campaign were first rate. Even the t-shirts were high end. The events were designed to go to places that weren't frequented by candidates. Sean would often say, "we have to talk to the forgotten ones." It soon became the hottest campaign of 2004.

The last part of the campaign was a fly around. I enlisted many of my former white house colleagues and campaign friends to serve as advance and state leads in the places we were targeting. We decided to treat this tour like a Presidential fly around. We had advance leads and organizers in every state. Departure day arrives. We get on the plane. Everything organized and we are ready to rock and roll. First stop MI, the late Kevin Jefferson was the lead organizer. We land, one slight problem the cars are at the wrong airport. Well of course I wondered is this an omen of things to come – Kevin scrambled to get the vehicles to the right airport. Surprisingly, everyone remained calm.

Our last stop was Miami, FL. Tanya Lombard a former top aide to President Bill Clinton was our lead. She had organized this leg of the trip. She was as good as you get, and she had handled the state for former President Bill Clinton. By the time we hit Florida, we are all beat. Tanya met us at the foot of the plane. I told her; you can take it from here. Alexis and I headed straight for the van; we were wiped. She briefed Sean on the events that would be taking place the following day. It is safe to say; she took us across the finish line and the trip was deemed a success.

I count this as one of the best learning experiences of my life. It opened my eyes to an entirely new generation of young people. I met some of my dearest friends today, working on the Vote or Die campaign. It also gave me a sincere appreciation and insight into a man who can sometimes be misunderstood. He was brilliant, compassionate, and had a work ethic like nothing I had seen. He loved his community and kept reminding us we must talk to the people. I also learned I didn't take the risk

working for Sean. Sean Combs took a bigger risk jumping into politics. He was a businessman. He had built an entire empire. This could have certainly hurt his brand if things had gone wrong. But he decided to put himself out there. So, he put his faith in us.

By the way, to this day, I have never called him P Diddy, Puff, Puff Daddy or any of the other names he has given himself. As a “term of endearment,” I called him Sean. To me that represented what I saw in him. A business mogul. A young man who made it out of Harlem, but he has never forgot where he came from. And while Sean has become one of the most successful entrepreneurs of a generation, he still goes back home and shines a light in dark places. It truly taught me to never judge a book by its cover.

Follow @LateNightMovie and @AmazonStudios for more to be released stories from women and people of color breaking through. Amazon Studios’ is highlighting such stories as part of Emma Thompson & Mindy Kaling’s new comedy Late Night, which was inspired by Mindy’s own, similar experience breaking through the TV writer’s room.

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