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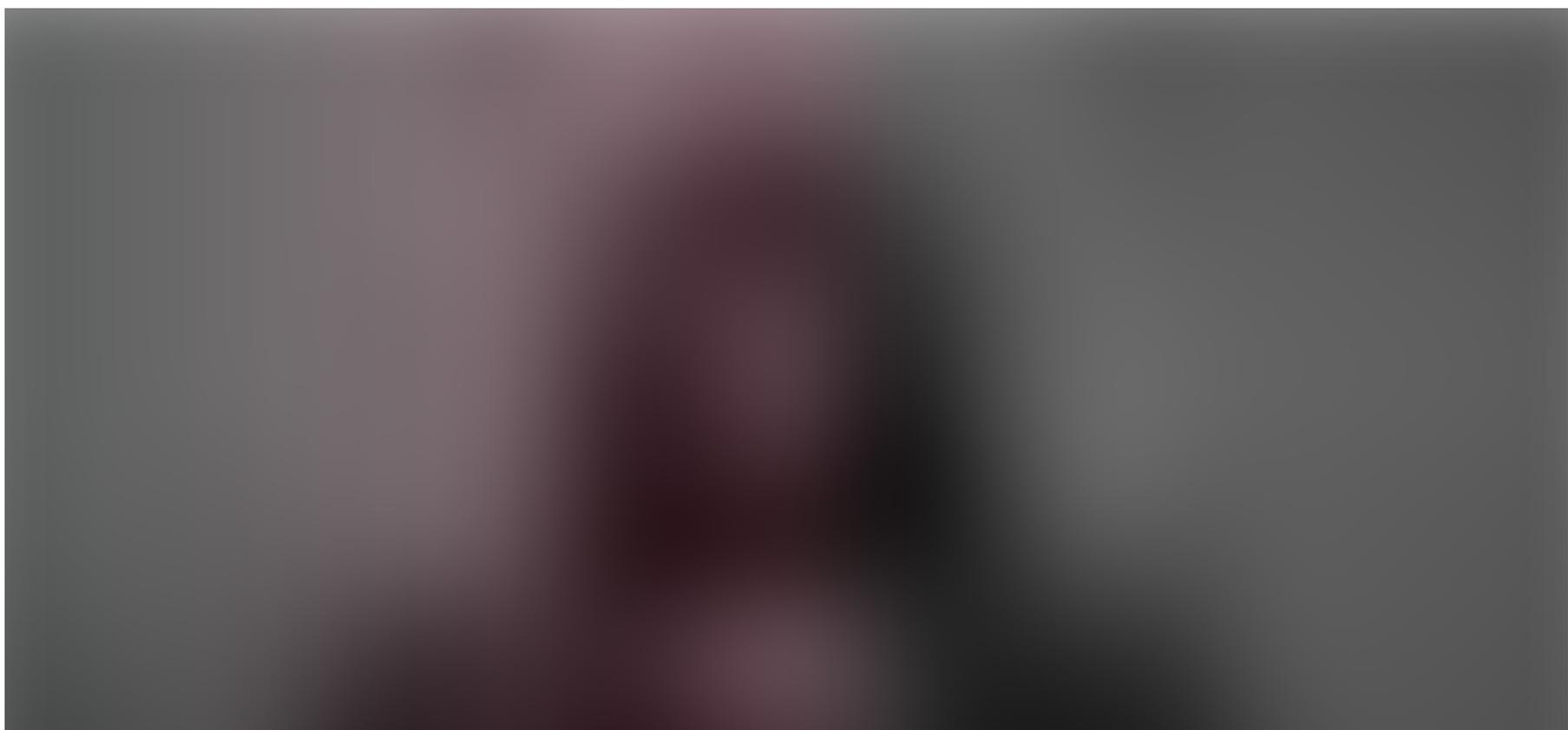
# Maya Rupert Wants to Nurture the Potential of Aspiring Politicians of Color

2020 Presidential Candidate Julian Castro's campaign manager speaks of the glass ceiling for people of color, her own backlash, and community-building



Taylor Crumpton

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Courtesy of Maya Rupert

**M**aya Rupert is making history. As the third Black woman to manage a presidential campaign — working for Julian Castro, the first Latinx presidential candidate — she’s laying the foundation for a new generation of Black women and girls to authentically be themselves in electoral politics. Rupert’s presence in our nation’s politics is a powerful space that reclaims space — historically maintained by white Ivy League alumni — for Black women. The importance of our expertise is in both developing and implementing an intersectional policy agenda that honors the lived experiences of marginalized communities. This must be combined with actionable steps on how to resolve the harm done by generations of White supremacist policies.

In the Office of General Counsel, as part of Secretary Julian Castro’s administration at the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, Rupert advocated for transgender people to access government-funded shelters based on their gender identity instead of their sex assigned at birth. As the former policy director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), she understood the importance of this federal decision, and its negative impact on the lives of trans women of color, who experience institutional barriers due to the intersections of their race and gender.

Her advocacy was influential in the implementation of this policy in September 2016, and resulted in a promotion to being one of Castro’s senior aides throughout the Obama White House. Rupert’s intersectional policy-making decisions was founded on a communal principle centering diverse and historically silenced voices.

Before her entrance into electoral politics, Rupert’s experience at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law and a brief tenure at a law firm ignited her desire to pursue social justice through the fields of nonprofit advocacy and politics. At the Center for Reproductive Rights and NCLR, she coordinated a comprehensive policy agenda that intergrated LGBTQ rights, racial justice, economic justice, and youth justice during

the Obama administration. Honored by *The Root* and *Ebony*, Rupert's foundational principles of diversity and inclusion is amplified in her management of Castro's presidential campaign.

*This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

**ZORA: In a field of democratic candidates that's made history as the largest and most diverse, compared to Castro's counterparts, can you tell me how this campaign is a true reflection of diversity and inclusion in politics?**

**Rupert:** One of the things that has always struck me is the age where I would have said, "Oh well, this is interesting. Let me join a campaign and see about it." I couldn't afford to work for free. I think there are a lot of folks, especially people of color, who could not afford to take an unpaid internship to get enough experience to be considered for a lower paid job. That's how you come up through politics, which is in and of itself very limited. That was something that we committed early on to not doing. We were going to build a pipeline of people who were passionate and wanted to do this and we weren't going to limit it to the people that could afford to work for free.

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Our senior team is majority women, folks of color with a lot of diverse perspectives. We're bringing in folks who don't have traditional campaign experience, and we're doing things differently because we're not bogged down by the sense of, "This is the way it has to be, because this is the way it's always been, right?"

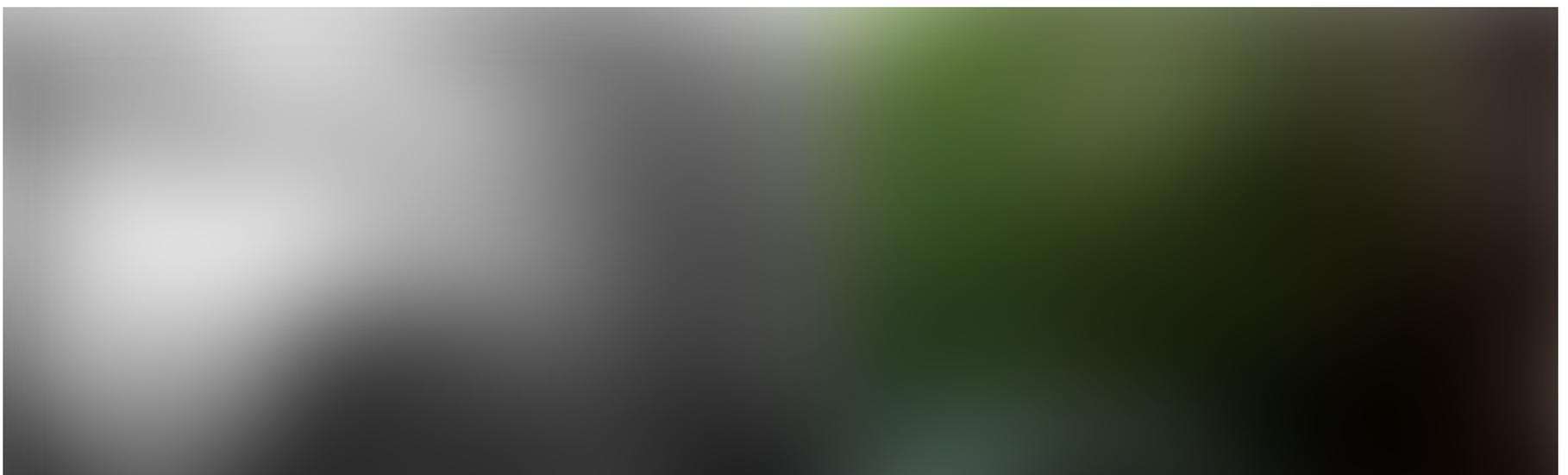
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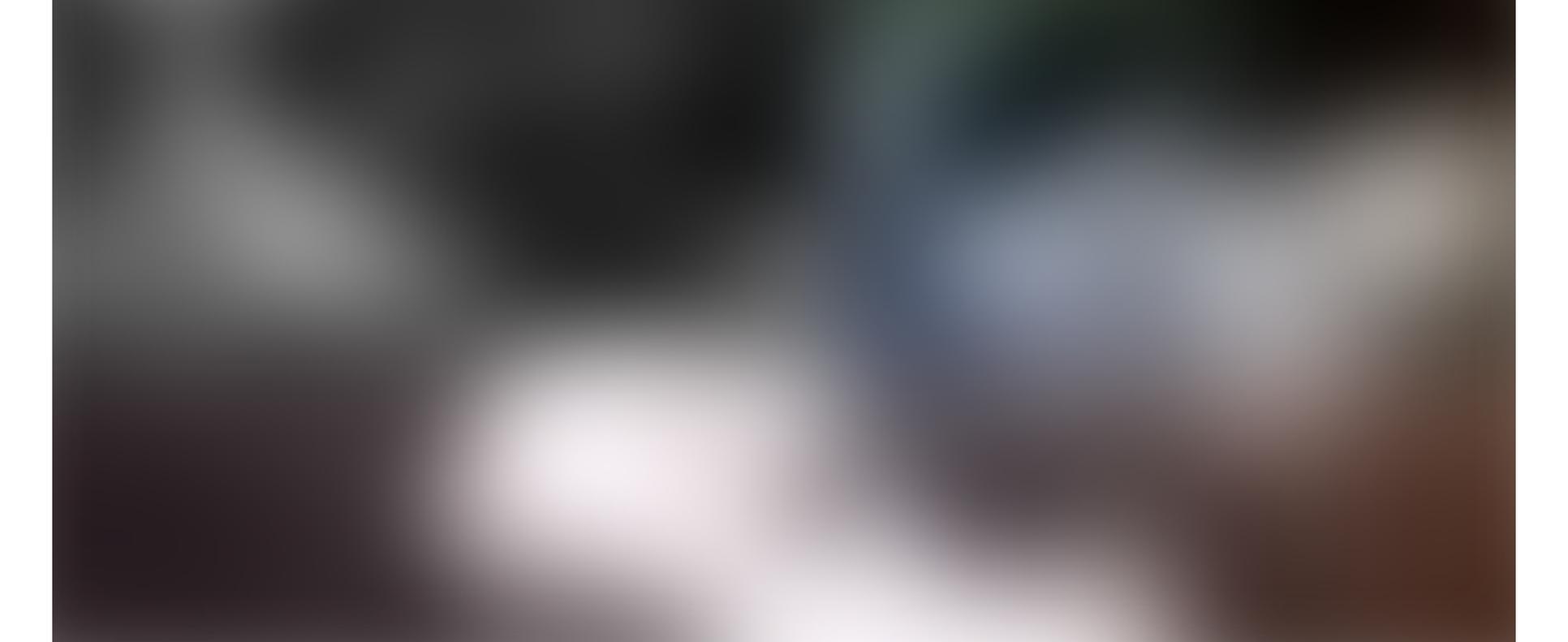
**In an interview with the Texas Tribune, you said, "People of color don't get an opportunity to fail. We don't get to screw up a little bit and then still end up where we are." Can you explain how as a campaign manager, you're creating a better system in which young black women interested in politics are allowed to fail?**

I think this comes from a sense of if someone doesn't allow you to fail on some level, they're saying "I'm taking a chance on you. And so, that chance needs to pay off." That doesn't happen when you're not tokenizing someone. If they're being treated in a sense of, "I see potential in you," you receive the grace to figure out how to do the job, to fail, and figure out how to do it right.

The biggest thing when we're creating these spaces is not to look at hiring a person of color as taking a risk or a magnanimous thing. You're hiring someone because you see potential in them and you're allowing them to fulfill that potential. It's a very simple thing, but it's one of those very big things.

I've been very lucky. Secretary Castro does not see me as an opportunity to elevate a Black woman, and so I therefore need to prove him right. He sees me as a person he trusts and whose advice he trusts and takes, who knows him, knows his heart, knows his vision, and can translate it. I'm given the freedom to be a full person in this job. That's what I want to do for our team.





Courtesy of Joaquin Castro campaign

**On Twitter, you wrote a thread after your confidential information was released, which resulted in unsolicited attacks from Trump supporters. Within the thread, you beautifully stated an inspirational message to the next generation of Black girls interested in politics. You encouraged them to fight against the voices of divisive people adamant to maintain the structures of power and privilege in the world.**

**Existing as a Black women with all of our intersections is a difficult burden to bear, especially being in a highly public position; individuals can weaponize your intersections to carry out attacks against your character. Yet, you transformed their attacks into words of inspiration for young Black women and girls. What lead you to utilize this moment as a call of motivation to those afraid to engage in a political system that is dominated by White supremacist voices?**

It hit me harder than I expected it to.

One of the questions I often get when I meet young women of color and especially young Black women is, how do you deal with it? Because of Trump's rhetoric, people target you. They're only coming after us because they see exactly what's going to happen: they're going to lose. They're acting desperate, because this incredible

generation of young women are running for office, and taking jobs to shape politics in our image. I'm grateful to see that happen, and helping people feel like they can do that gives me gratitude and strength in those moments.

It was one of those moments that I was like, "No, this is exactly what you do. You take a shower, you laugh it off, or you cry it off, or you get mad, or you vent to your friends, but you just keep going."

### **As the third Black woman to manage a presidential campaign, a highly public position with extraordinary pressures of stress. How do you center yourself and create space for self care?**

I'm really lucky to have a really terrific support system. I have amazing friends. I have my sister and my sister-in-law, my sister's wife. They really are my people, and it's funny because they don't work in politics. There's something great about that. Having other strong women who work on different things is better in some ways because they're not anywhere in the same field, yet the themes remain the same. The underlying issue is that we face a lot of similar challenges.

It's great to talk to people about technical skills, and how to navigate feelings and pressures as a young professional. Your mentors don't have to share a profession with you, and in a lot of ways you gain a greater perspective when they're not.

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### **What would you say to the next Black woman who wants to run a presidential campaign?**

I think the biggest thing is trust your instinct. Your judgment is a skill set. When you walk into a room and you're not immediately given credibility, you tend to go toward, "Okay, well then I can become the person who knows most about X. And when we're talking about X, I know I'm the expert in the room."

The thing about politics is that very often you're not going to be the most well-versed person in the room. You're actually going to have a bunch of subject matter experts. Your job is to be the one who has seen the whole board. We are not socialized to assume that that is a skill set that we can bring. I think that the quicker you learn, that if you come into a room, and you're trying to come up with a policy on economics, if there is a tax expert at the table, and they know more than you, you are not failing; you are not supposed to be the tax expert. Your job is to connect with the tax expert at saying the thing that the people talking about paid family leave are saying. Your job is to be the connector and to be the one to see the whole board.

I think that way too often we think of, "I have to come in and I have to do everything otherwise people aren't going to take me seriously as the leader." In a lot of ways, politics is constructed to be the exact opposite of that. That's what I think was one of the most valuable things for me to learn. You need to feel comfortable with the fact that you are coming in with a skill set of judgments. Trust those judgments. Be the person to sort of see gaps in the whole thing and pull the entire thing together. That's your job.

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