

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
U.S. Representative of Florida (1989–2019)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“You Could Actually Run for Office”

Representative Ros-Lehtinen explains why she decided to run for public office.
Interview recorded April 16, 2018

What happened is, I realized my dream of becoming a teacher, and with my parents, we founded a little elementary school in Hialeah, a working-class area of Miami Dade County, where everyone there was, was an immigrant child, a refugee child, where the parents spoke very little English. And so they would come with papers that they got from government agencies and ask me to translate, which I did gladly, and I would navigate them through the bureaucracy of our government. And finally, somebody one day said, “Rather than just helping Maria, and José, and Pedro, you could actually run for office, set the policies that are frustrating these parents, and you could have a greater impact.” And I said, “How, how do you do that?” And they said, “You run for office.” And that was the first inclination that I had that I could do something to help a lot of people, and that was my motivation. I would run for office and I’m able to help a whole lot of people. And I hope that in my almost 40 years of elective office, 29 here in the, in the House, that I’ve been able to help a whole lot of people because that’s been my motivation—that and continuing the fight for freedom and human rights, not just in my native homeland of Cuba, but throughout the world.