

Oral History Transcription

Interviewee: JoAnne Page, Former CEO, The Fortune Society

Interviewer: Megan Knighton Scofield

Location: Zoom

Date: April 17, 2024

Megan ([00:00:03](#)):

Okay, we are now recording and we have done the consent form, so we are okay to record. And as I've mentioned before, I'm going to mute myself so that my responses don't interfere with the audio and I know you can't see me, so if you just hear silence, wait a second because it just means I'm unmuting to respond.

JoAnne ([00:00:26](#)):

Okay.

Megan ([00:00:26](#)):

Okay, <laugh>. Alright, I'm muting now and so you're good to go.

JoAnne ([00:00:33](#)):

So this week was an eventful week. Stanley (Stanley Richards) and I were jointly honored by CHPC (New York Citizens Housing and Planning Council) for our (The Fortune Society) work in housing. And it was a huge event held at the Marriott. And we were being honored with people who've done really big projects. And the mayoral office was represented at a senior level and so forth. And I'm documenting how, with the purpose building, we were novices in creating housing. We basically didn't know what we were doing, and we just had this urgency of need that was in our face because people were really going under who were trying, and especially long-termers - people who'd done massive time for usually for homicides who were among our most stable and most motivated clients - were just not able to get access to the limited, decent housing that there was because of the nature of their convictions. And others didn't have track records.

JoAnne ([00:02:13](#)):

And we were seeing flagrant discrimination against people with records among the decent housing options. So we knew that we just needed to provide housing, and that when we were engaged in a learning curve, it still would be better for our clients than the total absence of decent alternatives that they received. So basically on a wing and a prayer, Jean Jeremy who was then our CFO (Chief Financial Officer) and I sat at the computer and we looked at our fund balance and we looked at how much of a mortgage we could afford if everything went wrong. And then that was where we calculated what we could pay and we went shopping. There was a building that was magnificent and a shell, and that was the Castle at 140th and Riverside. And we knew that one could never build that kind of a building in modern times.

JoAnne ([00:03:36](#)):

It had been a Catholic girls' school. The city had taken it by eminent domain for the tuberculosis epidemic. And when they took it, the epidemic was waning and they left it vacant for, I believe, 20 years. And meanwhile it got vandalized. Homeless people were living in it. There were crack vials cracking under our feet when we walked in to see the property. The backyard empty lot, which is now Castle

Gardens, had an illegal parking lot where there was heavy drug dealing going on. The building overlooking us said that you could see in the night by the car door lights of the drivers who came in from New Jersey to cop drugs. So it was a menace to the community. It was within our budget because fortunately, the real estate gods were smiling on us because we bought in a really low time in the market.

JoAnne ([00:04:49](#)):

A speculator had purchased the property and wanted to do luxury condos in it. And that probably would have been a good idea, a brilliant idea in the current real estate market, but it didn't fly in that real estate market. So basically, we had a consultant, Birchman Terrio, who told us that if we could get site control, we could get funding to build or to renovate. And so what Jean and I figured out was what could we afford for a mortgage if we hit headwinds and couldn't get the funding. We went to LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation), and because we had so little of a track record, their terms were rather egregious. And so we had a volunteer named Steve Aronson, who was in the garment center business, and his son played soccer with a person from Fleet Bank.

JoAnne ([00:06:29](#)):

And Fleet Bank was redlining and needed to do some social justice investing in order to make up for its bad behavior. And so we got a conventional mortgage from Fleet Bank because they needed to make amends for redlining in Harlem. And, you know, the rest is history. We renovated the building with HHAP (Homeless Housing Assistance and Prevention Grant), with an HFA (Housing Finance Agency), and HHAP has stood by us incredibly even contracting with the Grayston Agency to give us instruction in how to handle tax credits. We invented a term that led us to housing that was not going to be permanent, that was called phased permanent housing. So we straddled transitional housing and permanent housing, and were able to get the permanent housing tax credits and the money from HHAP that was combined for transitional and permanent housing, all to house homeless people. And I think we opened the Castle in 2002.

JoAnne ([00:08:08](#)):

But though it was an enormous leap of faith, I'm always grateful to the board (The Fortune Society Board of Directors) because it was a courageous move to go along with this plan to do something that we had never done. We built-in numerous go, no-go places, but we opened the doors and we started housing homeless, formerly incarcerated people, regardless of the severity of their convictions. And the caveat is that we had to be especially careful if we took in people with lifetime registry for sex offenses, not because they were higher risk than other clients in terms of their behavior, but because they posed such an enormous risk to us in terms of community opposition. That if one of them went wrong, it would've been much more damaging to the agency than if one of our other other clients went wrong. So what we did was we built on that beginning and on that learning curve, and we became a model for the country.

JoAnne ([00:09:40](#)):

And when we were ready to build on the empty lot we built mixed affordable and supportive housing. So we have a complex in West Harlem that goes from emergency to transitional in the Castle to permanent mixed, affordable and supportive housing. And so we have a continuum on that lot that takes people from homelessness, gives them an opportunity to stabilize. I think it works like a train switching station because we can assess people's needs and get them qualified and get them jobs or get

them on public assistance or get them on disability. And for the select few that need to get in permanent supportive housing, we either can qualify them for others, but we also have Castle Gardens next door. For many of the people that we house in the Castle they just need to get a decent source of income and can move into market level housing, or they can reunite with family, or they have many other options.

JoAnne ([00:11:09](#)):

What the barrier for us though is that public assistance pays \$215 a month for rent for a single, and many people stay in the Castle for far longer than they need to or want to because \$215 is just not enough for apartments in New York City or for a furnished room or to rent a closet in New York City. So they're kept in homelessness if they're incapable of earning a market rate job. So anyway, we built on that Castle and Castle Gardens. And New York State, we were asked by New York State to replicate the model in upstate New York where they were having people released on parole from state prison and did not have anything other than the shelters. And there is no right to shelter other than in New York City. So the shelters had limited capacity and they were utterly unsuited for people who were coming out of institutions that needed transitional services attuned to their needs.

JoAnne ([00:12:47](#)):

So Liz Glaser was then Deputy Secretary for Public Safety and what she did was ask us to choose an upstate New York city that was seeing homeless people released from prison without the needed resources. We did a search, we wanted an organization that really knew how to deliver sensitive, culturally appropriate, competent services to formerly incarcerated people. We went with CCA (Community Center for Correctional), and they brought the land in through a partnership with the public housing authorities in Syracuse.

JoAnne ([00:14:13](#)):

And this is a unique way to replicate because public housing authorities are not the most progressive in their willingness to accept people with records. But this housing authority was different. And so they came in in partnership and we delivered technical assistance to what then became Freedom Commons. Soup to nuts technical assistance from doing the funding proposals with them, designing the program, working with the contractor, doing community relations guidance, fundraising, fundraising, fundraising. And when they opened, assisting them in startup, and they opened just before the pandemic started, so assisting them in keeping the program open, operating and stable during the pandemic. And we continued doing technical assistance until I think the funding lapsed in 2023. So we were continually getting appropriations for that technical assistance. But the Castle and Castle Gardens model has been replicated in its totality in Syracuse, but we have had numerous people come and learn from our experiences from across the country and internationally.

JoAnne ([00:16:06](#)):

So Stan and I just got honored, but it's just remarkable because we were in the company of people who do housing as what they are. And the fact that we could create a model that is, you know, recognized as guidance for housing homeless people with criminal legal history from nothing and emerge as a leader in the field is something we are really proud of. At this point we probably have 800 people a night and what they are, they're in our scattered sites, in our Castle, in the MOC-J (New York City Mayor's Office of

Criminal Justice) contracts that we have for emergency and transitional housing, in a senior building that is a joint venture with Bronx Pro. And we have two buildings on the way that are going to be in construction or are in construction this year.

JoAnne ([00:17:29](#)):

And Just Home, which is a desperately needed model for people who have complex medical needs and are released from Rikers or are in Rikers and could be released from Rikers to homelessness when the shelters are not providing anything near the level of care and case management and medical intervention that they need. We are dealing with enormous community opposition, but we are very hopeful that City Council will depart from its tradition of member deference because the community is deeply against it and so is the City Council person, will depart from what they call member deference, which is to defer to the member on any housing.

JoAnne ([00:18:40](#)):

And I think the stars are on our side because with the Mayor talking about a city of yes, and that each neighborhood needs to have its fair share, this neighborhood that Just Home will be in is a leading malingeringer in providing homeless housing and providing supportive housing. It is in the bottom of affordable housing. It is in, I think, the bottom five of all the City Council districts in the City - five worst. So I'm very hopeful. It will take much work and we've been doing the legwork with the City Council members with community meetings and I think we're going to succeed. So two buildings are certainly on the way and should open in 18 months. And I consider the Just Home to be in gestation. I think it's going to come through.

JoAnne ([00:20:10](#)):

So that is, I think, that's the nutshell about how we did housing, how we broke into housing out of necessity and have become a leader in housing nationally that helps people come home out of homelessness and out of incarceration. So that is one thing I wanted to talk about. I'm writing up the genesis of the Castle for Fortune, and we've already written a toolkit about Castle Gardens that is important historically because it documents what it took to build 114 units of apartments and a 20,000 square foot service center on that empty lot using a multiplicity of funding sources and the NIMBY handbook or toolkit where we talk about how we turned neighborhood fear and objection to our presence into profound neighborhood support in Community Board Nine for West Harlem. Okay. So I'm changing the subject.

Megan ([00:21:58](#)):

Can we ask a few questions quickly about the housing, if that's okay?

JoAnne ([00:22:02](#)):

Yes, absolutely. Yeah.

Megan ([00:22:05](#)):

Well, no, it was perfect. It's perfect especially for the audio <laugh> that you talked, but we do have some questions. I think Kendall wants to jump in.

JoAnne ([00:22:17](#)):

Hi, Kendall.

Megan ([00:22:21](#)):

She may too be having technical difficulties.

JoAnne ([00:22:25](#)):

Well, that's the story of the morning

Kendall ([00:22:27](#)):

<Laugh>. Hi JoAnne, can you hear me?

JoAnne ([00:22:30](#)):

I can. Hi, Kendall.

Kendall ([00:22:32](#)):

Great. Good morning. You kind of touched on this a little bit just now, but I kind of wanted to ask more about the details upon seeing the Castle for the first time. You kind of mentioned, you know, the state that it was in, but I also wanted to see if you had any insight on how it felt emotionally, did it sort of, you know, feel like the right fit upon first seeing it? Was it more of a process?

JoAnne ([00:22:59](#)):

A little. Yeah, just finish the question because I spoke as far as you did.

Kendall ([00:23:06](#)):

Oh, I'm sorry. And then what sort of made the Castle the right fit? Like why was this building, why was the location even in West Harlem going to work for the people that we serve?

JoAnne ([00:23:22](#)):

So the first thought we had was to get a property within walking distance of our Manhattan 19th Street site so that we could have the housing and the services close together. We looked at various properties with that in mind, but even at that low point in the real estate market Chelsea was too expensive for us. The realtor we had, Arlene, twisted our arm to take the trip to Harlem to see the property. We could not have walked from West 19th Street to West Harlem. So she said, you gotta see this building. And so we went and we fell in love. The properties we were looking at were humdrum boring properties. This was, we could envision what it would be like for somebody who had spent time in homelessness and time in the streets and time in grim prison walls to have something beautiful.

JoAnne ([00:25:06](#)):

And we knew that there was not a modern building that could have this feel. So it was fitting with our vision to have something beautiful to welcome people home. And it also was with our price, and it had the empty lot behind it. So we were getting a lot for the money that we could afford. But when I say we were getting a lot, we were getting a building that was going to be magnificent and welcoming and beautiful and exceptional when we were done with it. So yeah, we fell in love at the first moment. Roland (Roland Nicholson), who was then our Board Chair, had said that his father had said somebody is

going to do something with that building someday. And so Roland was motivated because it was his father's wish that somebody do it. And he was Board Chair of an organization that was about to do it.

JoAnne ([00:26:21](#)):

Also there was an alternate vision, which was to have a footprint in the community that we were serving. And our clients didn't come from Chelsea, where our 19th Street office was located, but many of our clients came from West Harlem. So we saw it, we fell in love, it was love at first sight. And then there was a homeless guy living on the third floor. We had to get him alternate accommodations. We needed to secure the building. We needed to get rid of the drug dealing in the empty lot. We needed to shovel the sidewalks, which hadn't been done for 20 years. And there's a real slope. And if you were a senior, you didn't want to walk on that sidewalk when it was icy. We proceeded to be good neighbors from the time that we bought the building until the time that we opened it and then thereafter.

JoAnne ([00:27:37](#)):

And so we had a strategy of going to six meetings a month. So we went to four community board meetings, the friends of Riverbank State Park and the police precinct council meetings, and we have continued. We bought the property in '98. We are continuing to go to those community board meetings to this day. And we built trust. In one of the meetings, one of the early meetings, a woman who lived in an adjoining building said that she had to shut her windows during summer, even though she didn't have air conditioning because of the stench of the garbage that had built up between the buildings. And so we cleaned the garbage, we shoveled the sidewalk, we put security in, we fenced everything off. We made the building, which had been a hazard, we secured it to make it safe, and we basically turned community opposition into community support. So that's a long-winded answer to a short question.

Kendall ([00:29:11](#)):

No, thank you for it. And I also wanted to see about the early plans for the Castle, I bet at some point they might have been greatly ambitious, and if there wasn't anything that maybe was realistic for the building at the time that maybe wasn't realized or, you know, brought out later in Castle Gardens or in some of our other buildings.

JoAnne ([00:29:35](#)):

You know, you hit the nail on the head about ambition because what we originally planned and what we proposed to HHAP was that we would make the Castle into the service center and we would build the residence on the empty lot. So we were talking about a much bigger complex, all of which was going to be housing for formerly incarcerated homeless people, but it was going to be two phases done at once, and we were not able to raise the money for a separate service center. So we changed our plans radically and made the Castle the residence and saved the empty lot for many years. And then eventually built Castle Gardens in it. So the first big plan needed to be shaved down dramatically because it was easier to raise money for housing, still is, than for services and for capital money for a service center.

JoAnne ([00:30:51](#)):

We also did not have enough money to adequately point the building because it was over a hundred years old. And we've struggled with water coming in. We had to waterproof the building in phases rather than do it all upfront just because of the massive cost. I think that the Castle is the point at which Fortune emerged from being a small service organization among many others, to being standing out

from our peers. And the Castle was symbolic. It was a visual that we've used as our symbol, I think, as marketing and just as a way of distinguishing ourselves from other providers.

Megan ([00:32:16](#)):

JoAnne, can you talk a little bit about that? So just kind of linking the first moment that you guys walked through what would later become the Castle to a context? Right. So I'm thinking, why was this so rare at that moment? You know, why was Fortune in a position to have this vision? What was the problem like at a community and maybe city and state level that was leading to the need for this type of solution? You know, like just talking about that historic moment and contextualizing it and talking about why, you know, where did you get the foresight to see housing as a solution when clearly this was not something that was very common at that time?

JoAnne ([00:33:11](#)):

It was a common need at that time. But, you know, Roland interviewed me when I first interviewed for the Fortune job, and that was in 1989. And what he remembers is that I said that housing was an imperative. We did a strategic planning a few years before we bought the Castle and we committed ourselves to do housing. And we engaged a consultant who basically said what I said to you before, which is if you can acquire a property, you can build it, you can raise the funds to build it. We would meet in the Hollywood Diner, I think it's on 16th Street and 6th Avenue. And Steve and I would talk about what it took with a consultant.

JoAnne ([00:34:37](#)):

They helped us write the proposal. But, you know, I think I'm a risk taker and you know, I'm telling this story, what I've told many times. I picked up a magnet in a dime store and it says: sometimes you need to take the leap and build your wings on the way down. And I'd been CEO long enough to build the Board's confidence that I was willing to take risk, but not risk that would jeopardize the agency. So everybody thought this was impossible, including the leadership at Fortune. But we built in go, no-go points that let the Board feel and me feel safe that if the failure happened, we would be bruised, but not killed. But I think that the willingness to take risk is not a characteristic of government and it's a potential for nonprofits, but I don't think it is, I don't think any other nonprofit leader that I knew would've taken that risk of basically draining our fund balance and buying a property without the money to renovate on the faith that we could or that we could survive holding that mortgage. But it was about taking risk that was mitigated by go, no-go steps. And by the knowledge that if everything went wrong, we would have a piece of property that we could sell. So it was a cushioned risk, but it was a profound risk.

JoAnne ([00:36:55](#)):

And the other risk was that we were willing to take people with violent convictions. And that went across all the guidance that we got because what people were saying is, you're dealing with a high risk population, don't take people with violent convictions. And what we knew from our experience was that if you had a choice between a guy who had committed a homicide at 18 and had done 30 years, and a guy who was young and had a couple of drug deal convictions, the former was much, much safer than the latter because the risk of recidivism and the risk of creation of violence was dramatically low if you could provide a safe setting. And so what we did, and this was contrary to how other programs were running, we defined the Castle as a program that included housing, and we asked our potential residents to commit to services as a condition for being allowed to live in the Castle

JoAnne ([00:38:24](#)):

The truism in supportive housing is that services are provided, but they are voluntary. And for us, this was supposed to be a place where people developed the tools necessary to move out successfully in the community, and so it was. I called it a hot house for human growth. It was a program that included housing and with an absolute rule of no violence or threat of violence, and with a commitment that if people fell out or if we threw them out for violence or no violence, we made a lifetime commitment to take them back if they were ready. And those characteristics were, are, not anything I know from any other program going. So we invented our own stuff and we've taken considerable risk to protect that model, which isn't the traditional model.

JoAnne ([00:39:53](#)):

So I think nonprofits have the room to be creative and take risk in a way that government can't. And I think that I had developed enough confidence in the Board and made a proposal that had sufficient protections if everything went wrong, that the Board was willing to go with me in a high risk proposition. That if, you know, the term B-HAG: big hairy, audacious goal? That was a big hairy, audacious goal. But I think that willingness to take the risk, take the leap of faith, be innovative, be committed to meet an overwhelming need without a clear path blazed by others, really defined Fortune thereafter, and has built a pattern, because we do take risks that other organizations would not take, but they're calculated risk. And also we are in a position where we can negotiate as peers in a David/Goliath situation with government funders because we offer a unique mix and we're willing to walk away. So we do brass knuckle negotiation about running the program we want to bring into the world and cross-funding it so nobody owns it completely. And being willing to walk away if our government funders are an obstacle to what we want.

JoAnne ([00:42:12](#)):

And I don't think, I don't think other nonprofits negotiate that hard. If we did the usual, we would get the usual. And I think that we've blazed the way by not being willing to compromise what we think works, or to invent what we think will work and test drive it and modify it as we did with the Castle, because we're not doing the Castle traditionally. It sure isn't being run like a DHS (NYC Department of Homeless Services) shelter, even though we have DHS funding. We went with DHS for funding, I believe for 35 of the 90 or so beds that we currently have. And when they wanted metal detectors, we said no. When they wanted restrictions on visitors, we said no, we negotiated with them because that rule of no violence, no threat of violence is essential for us. And their policy was that if somebody committed violence or threatened violence, really committed violence, they would remove the person they committed violence against. And we got a turnaround of that policy for our program. Because if you're dealing with people who have lived with violence all their lives, you need to have them be safe in order for them to experiment with different behaviors. And so that is, that was an essential negotiating point. And we wouldn't have accepted DHS funding without that. Does that answer your question?

Megan ([00:44:31](#)):

Yeah, I think it's, I think, yeah, you've been really informative and we're getting a lot of layers of information, right, just like a general overview of the history, but then also to your point, like organizational decision making, which I think is gonna be really interesting to certain audiences. And I like this theme of risk and how it extends to some other programs. I know we wanted to talk about HIV and AIDS and I feel like that risk theme is going to come up there, but I know Kendall had a few more

questions about the Castle, so I'll let her jump in, but I'd love to like keep building on that theme of risk and decision making in some of these other program areas that I know we wanted to talk about.

JoAnne ([00:45:19](#)):

Yeah. And I also want to talk about Green Haven (Green Haven Correctional Facility), because I think the theme is a parallel theme to the Castle.

Megan ([00:45:35](#)):

Yes.

JoAnne ([00:45:37](#)):

Yeah. So do you want to ask more questions about this? I can go till 10:30 or till 11:30.

Megan ([00:45:44](#)):

Okay. Me too. Kendall, why don't you ask the final questions about the Castle and then we'll switch to Green Haven and the HIV work.

Kendall ([00:45:54](#)):

Yeah, perfect. Sort of the last thing I wanted to ask kind of along the ideas of like learning and risk is when it came to the Castle, I wanted to know like where there situations or plans that didn't go as they were foreseen, and what did the organization do to either find an alternative to remedy these problems, and then how did that kind of translate to when we are talking about it on a national scale when we're supporting housing in Syracuse, that we were able to add guidance and aid them in that process?

JoAnne ([00:46:35](#)):

Okay, so two answers to that question. One is that I mentioned that we were straddling the definition of transitional and permanent housing to get tax credits for the building. And HRSA (Health Resources and Services Administration), we get federal funding for shelter plus care. No, we get, yeah. Well, again, I'm muddy about the funding. But we get HUD (US Department of Housing and Urban Development) funding. And HUD originally, when we applied for HUD funding for beds in the Castle, what they had was a box for innovative programs. And so we were able to straddle transitional and permanent, but a number of years moving in, they eliminated the innovative category and they classified the Castle as permanent housing. And that would've required people to get a lease and to be able to live there all their lives. And we would not have had the turnover in beds that would let us take in new people every year. You know, the Castle pretty much turns over every year. And so what I did was I went to the HUD representative and I said - I think there were 64 beds at that point - I said, we want to keep the innovative category because right now we've got 64 people. Next year we would be housing what, maybe two or three new people and the year after that, two or three new people if we were permanent housing.

JoAnne ([00:49:04](#)):

And if we are keeping our current model where people can stay as long as they need to, but the average length of stay is about a year although some people stay longer and some people stay shorter, you probably are going to have 60 something new people housed and pulled out of homelessness each year. And we're succeeding in out placing them. Do you want more homeless people housed through this?

And he said, you're permanent housing, and I've been reasoning with government folk for innovative models, and they usually are willing to have their mission better met by innovation than to be rigid and say: this is the way we do it. And so what we did was have an internal discussion because the continuum of care was privileging funding for permanent housing and was eliminating transitional housing. And the HUD funding was pivotal funding for the Castle, but they were going to change the model so that we would lose the ability to house more homeless people.

JoAnne ([00:50:30](#)):

And so what we ended up doing was going to Washington. The head of HUD was Sean Donovan, and we got a dispensation where we changed from permanent housing where they were now designating us to transitional housing, even though it meant we needed to fight for the funding every year instead of having it be secured, but we were not willing to lose the model that let us house so many more people. So that's an example. The other example is that we have taken in some very high profile people, and even though there's a risk of negative publicity, and the big one was we took in Joel Steinberg.

JoAnne ([00:51:45](#)):

Joel Steinberg was basically the perpetrator of a really brutal murder of a child that he and his wife had adopted, and he brutalized the wife too, and the child died and he was sent to prison. And when he was paroled, nobody wanted to take him, including programs under contract with the Division of Parole. So the Parole Commissioner called me, and essentially it was our mission to house people who other people wouldn't house. And to think that the person is not the worst thing he ever did. And I went to the board and said, this is going to be a high risk proposition because we're going to get flack.

JoAnne ([00:53:03](#)):

But he doesn't pose a current risk of violence. He has done mega time. He is in urgent need of housing. And if he's willing to consent to the conditions of service participation, no risk of violence, etc., etc. If he were not notorious, we would be taking him and the Board - I really am grateful to the Board because I did turn their hair white on numerous occasions - and actually we were going for refunding to Robin Hood (NYC based philanthropic organization), and we took Joel Steinberg. And the head of Robin Hood called me, he said, how do we explain this to the [Robin Hood] Board as you're being considered for funding? And I gave the same justification that I gave to the [Fortune] Board, which is he's in need of housing, he is homeless, he doesn't pose a current risk of violence, and we think a person is not the worst thing he has ever done. And so we took Joel Steinberg in, but boy was there drama.

JoAnne ([00:54:23](#)):

First, his lawyer picked him up in a white limousine. The helicopters were overhead from the news media, and we were watching the helicopters following this white limousine. And I called parole and I said, we're an anti-poverty agency. We are not willing to take him in a white limousine, ditch the white limousine, have them in an ordinary car, and we're willing to take it. And we were besieged by reporters. They were sleeping in the hedges. They tried to get in. There was a live newsfeed from the front porch. It was incredible publicity. And, you know, you can pull it from the archives, Joel Steinberg. And years later, Keith Wright told me that we shouldn't have taken Joel Steinberg, but we did. And we should have. That was the most notorious and the highest risk that I think we've taken. We also took a couple of people who were convicted of killing cops and had done massive time, and we coordinated with the Department of Corrections to get them on a holiday weekend because we were concerned

about police picketing us. And we ended up timing it so that on each of those instances, we didn't have publicity. But we're willing to take risks for the mission.

JoAnne ([00:56:09](#)):

So those are the two stories, one financial and the other media.

Megan ([00:56:20](#)):

Those are great, JoAnne. Okay. So now if you're comfortable transitioning, unless you have anything else you want to say about housing, then the stage is yours to talk about Green Haven, HIV, whatever we can fit into the next 20 minutes.

JoAnne ([00:56:36](#)):

Okay. So I want to do Green Haven because it's very fresh and very moving to me. So I went to law school, committed to doing work in the criminal justice system. It had a parallel to my history as a child of Holocaust survivors and my Dad's as a prisoner in Dachau. And I wanted to do social justice work. I needed to have credentials. I went to Yale Law School committed to do criminal poverty law in New York City for the rest of my life, I thought. And when I ended up in law school, I came in with a bunch of people who had similar motivation, wanting to do social impact work. And by the time October rolled around they had gotten jobs with white shoe law firms at a stunning salary for the summer. And I got a job at Legal Aid for a pittance and didn't know if it was going to come through until the beginning of the summer. And so I just started questioning what I was giving up and whether I was committed to it because the road that I was on was going to yield much less money, much less security. And this was a once in a lifetime chance, you know, for a working class kid who went to state school to be on a track for mega dollars and respect and security.

JoAnne ([00:58:38](#)):

And so what I ended up doing was taking the year off after my first year, and I volunteered at The Fortune Society and I worked at a spinoff of Fortune, Long Island Friends of Fortune. And I drove up to the prisons and ran groups while family members visited. I was driving the bus to bring family to prisons, and I developed some relationships with leaders, incarcerated leaders at Green Haven, which has always been a place where leaders emerged. Eddie Ellis was there. The Resurrection Study Group was there. The Seven Communities study was done there. So I had relationships with all the leaders in the incarcerated population. When I went back with the commitment that I was going to stay on the road that I had chosen, I went back to Yale with a commitment to that work. But when I looked around me, I realized that the people I was going to school with were going to be judges and lawyers and politicians and policy makers, and maybe Supreme Court justices and maybe the President.

JoAnne ([01:00:18](#)):

And they were going to be making policy for people incarcerated and to get people incarcerated without ever knowing who the people were. So I borrowed my dad's delivery van and took a bunch of Yale students to meet with the men I'd developed a relationship with. And because I'd had a relationship with the institution, I was able to get them cleared. And that developed into a program where I would get my dad's delivery van, I'd load it up with law students, people who had cars. We would make a convoy and go to Green Haven and meet with this group. And it was really impactful. It was a side of the

world, you know, Yale really was a bunch of people who had grown up in elite institutions. I was the exception coming from a state school. They'd gone to Ivy League undergrads. They'd gotten a privileged education that I hadn't gotten, but many of them moved in the same small social circle where they saw the same people all the time in all of the elements of their lives on vacation, et cetera.

JoAnne ([01:01:46](#)):

So it was eye-opening, and it was a profound learning experience for many of the law students that I took. So when I graduated, I handed it on to Chris Stone, who later became the head of Vera Institute of Justice, and he handed it on and I lost track. And what I found a number of years ago when they reached out to me is that it had continued, and it is one of the key experiences available to students from Yale Law School. And they did a documentary about it. But the parallel to the Castle is that I just saw a need and I just did something.

JoAnne ([01:02:48](#)):

And it had roots. You know, I had a van or access to a van. I had the contacts both at Yale and at Green Haven. I thought that it was really important for the Yale students to have a personal knowledge of incarcerated people and for incarcerated men to have access to Yale law students and to be able to shape them and to be able to learn from them. So I just put the pieces together and did it. And 46 years later, it is going so strong. So this was the graduation of the organization that had its genesis in these first Yale meetings and the law students who've taken it over. And, you know, law students are only good for three years because then they graduate and they've already got the successor leaders and they do a dinner to orient new students to the Yale program with Green Haven. But this was the graduation the group inside is called PACT (Program for a Calculated Transition) and they basically said I was the matriarch of their organization and of the collaboration with Yale.

JoAnne ([01:04:39](#)):

And it's like you throw a rock in the water and the ripples can just go unbelievably far. And the ripples of my just doing what I thought needed have impacted on several hundred law students, many men behind bars. Richard Buery, who's the head of Robin Hood, came through as a law student, James Forman, who now is a professor at Yale and a Pulitzer Prize winner for his writing came through the Green Haven project as a first year law student, and it politicized him about prisons. So, you know, the men are inspiring because they've created an organization that is deliberately diverse, Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian, in a place that is self-segregating, where they're encouraging people to go to college. They said something like 70% of their membership is in college or has degrees. They're tapping Bard (Bard Prison Initiative) and Hudson Link College programs.

JoAnne ([01:06:17](#)):

And they're, you know, Eddie Ellis said that when young men go to prisons, they meet the fathers they've never had. And these are not blood fathers, they're older people who nurture the young. And these are people who are doing that. And they got the start by this program because it gave them something to organize around. And now the Yale students go there every week. So the parallel is that if you just do what's needed with what you've got, you can build on that. And that was the Castle, and that was the 46-year-old going strong program that has impacted people both behind bars and generations of Yale law students who are in many places where they are making a difference. So, yeah, you know, it was so moving because these guys are long-termers. You know, one guy said what his response was as a

young man realizing he had a 99-year sentence, and how people build hope and leadership and themselves in that kind of a setting is just inspiring to me.

JoAnne ([01:08:01](#)):

So that is what I wanted to say. But I think I've done the leadership at Fortune that way. If there's a need and we've got resources, and if it's not illegal, immoral, and within the mission, there basically is the freedom in a nonprofit world to do whatever you think is needed if it's within mission, and you basically organize the means. And if you start small, you can build. But if you never start at all, it just doesn't happen. So I think that's my philosophy of how you do it, that you don't wait until all your ducks are lined up in a row, because otherwise you're never gonna start. You start with the pieces you've got, you are willing to take risks, but calculated risks. And if you build momentum, you can build on that. And I think that's what we did with our AIDS program. That's what we did with our housing. We started from zero. And we are a very desired partner for people who want to do real estate development. We've turned down some offers where we didn't want those partners and we basically have all the development we can handle right now, including with two City owned lots and a hotel that we purchased.

JoAnne ([01:10:04](#)):

So, yeah. You know, there's an old Billie Holiday song and the lines that I treasure are "the difficult I'll do right now, the impossible will take a little while." And I think that in nonprofits you're dealing with overwhelming problems and thoroughly inadequate resources. But I think if you just take the risk of doing what is needed with the resources in hand, as you pull the resources in because of the momentum you develop you can do stuff that looked impossible. And Green Haven was just an affirmation for me of how if you just do it, you can build on it. If you see something that needs to be done and you just do it, you can create something that has lasting impact and that builds on itself. So that's a monologue.

Megan ([01:11:31](#)):

I think it's really helpful just to have you monologuing. So definitely don't worry about that. We have 10 minutes, so I want to make sure we are respectful of everyone's time. Is there anything else you want to say? Maybe one or two questions and then we can wrap up at 11:30.

JoAnne ([01:11:56](#)):

Yeah, I think time for questions.

Megan ([01:11:59](#)):

Okay. So one thing I'm thinking hearing you talk about this is like this issue of time, you know, like you did something and it has this long lasting impact and it sort of grows and it was something you started when you were young and it's something you introduced, I mean, theoretically people who are in law school are not all the same age, but many of them are young. And so they are kind of set on this path that they have this transformative experience. And then contrasting that with like, how much time is taken away from people who are incarcerated? Because I think when you started Green Haven and when the Castle came out, like we, we just saw these increase in sentences, you know? People started getting 99-year sentences you mentioned.

JoAnne ([01:12:51](#)):

Yeah.

Megan ([01:12:52](#)):

You know, so there's this issue in my mind of like, you have been given this gift of time and effort and then other people's time is like being removed from them and how this feeds on itself, right? Or how even somebody who has a 99-year sentence can develop a mindset of trying to make change when they are sort of stuck in this place permanently. Does that make sense? I know it's a little bit philosophical, but I'm hearing this.

JoAnne ([01:13:24](#)):

Oh no, it's not, it's not. How in the face of that kind of sentence, do you build meaning into a life where you're not looking at the possibility or the likelihood of your getting out? There always is a possibility, like people are preparing clemency packages, but how do you have hope and meaning? And you know, what I've learned in this work is that we're all made of the same stuff and that people need meaning in their life and they need to have work that has meaning and that is part of their identity. And what prison does is strip people of so many possibilities.

JoAnne ([01:14:20](#)):

But, you know, one of the big influences in my life has been Viktor Frankl and his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. And what he was doing was writing about how people survived concentration camps. And the people who had a meaning, something to live for, were more likely to survive. And I'm paraphrasing badly, but what he said was people who have a strong enough 'why' can survive any 'how.' And there is a parallel to what a person with a 99-year sentence finally comes to in order to build a life with meaning. The person who was talking about the 99-year sentence said that effectively, he was poleaxed for a number of years and just was in the yard and fighting and playing cards and et cetera. And then, maybe largely from the influence of other people around him, the leaders around him, started to build a life of meaning in the prison, in community.

JoAnne ([01:15:57](#)):

And people build powerful communities in prison. And many of them look at themselves as models for younger people and try to keep them from the same self-destructive paths that they went through. And what this organization was celebrating was that they're an organization that effectively recruits people who are leaders and recruits young people to shape them into more constructive ways. And they have community projects where they pool their money and buy backpacks for school kids who are visitors to the prisons, you know, the children of incarcerated people. And so I think that you can have meaning even in the desert of the prison. And it was just really inspiring to see these folks. But also, you know, I'm thinking of two people who came through this organization [The Fortune Society] and through the Yale program and have been doing advocacy and service work since they were released and passed through Fortune. Ronald Day was a member of PACT when he was incarcerated, and Khalil Cumberbatch, who was in our David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy and is now doing advocacy elsewhere. When I went to Yale, I saw a plaque with the PACT members and I recognized Khalil's name. So what Fortune has is many people who were shaped by incarceration and wanted to make a difference when they got released.

JoAnne ([01:18:22](#)):

The people who have infinite sentences, and there are so many of them, so many of them, need to find their meaning inside because that is the world that they're living in. And these guys are just an example of that. And I deeply respect them.

Megan ([01:18:53](#)):

Yeah. We talked to Stanley Bellamy who was at Green Haven in '89.

JoAnne ([01:19:03](#)):

Oh yeah.

Megan ([01:19:04](#)):

Yeah. He just got released on clemency. So we interviewed him as well. And he talked about this too.

JoAnne ([01:19:10](#)):

Well he was one of the guys who they mentioned as one of their folks.

JoAnne ([01:19:17](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. He was impacted as part of the Yale program.

Megan ([01:19:20](#)):

Yeah, I know. It's weird because I am hearing his conversation and then hearing yours and I'm like, wow, if the three of us, or if you two could hear each other <laugh>.

JoAnne ([01:19:31](#)):

Uh-huh.

Megan ([01:19:32](#)):

Yeah. So it's, the reverberations really kind of go in all directions.

JoAnne ([01:19:39](#)):

But you know, the bigger social issue is that our prisons are becoming old age homes.

Megan ([01:19:47](#)):

I know. Well that's what these sentencing things have done, right? They've put people away.

JoAnne ([01:19:51](#)):

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

JoAnne ([01:19:54](#)):

These are horrific sentences where the only way out is clemency. And that is a handful of people a year.

Megan ([01:20:00](#)):

Exactly. Exactly.

JoAnne ([01:20:05](#)):

And the legislation of RAPP (Releasing Aging People in Prisons Campaign), you know, that if people do 15 years, they're reviewed. That legislation can change things.

Megan ([01:20:17](#)):

I hope so. Because I mean this is going to be an issue. And to your point, I know you talked about this last time, but like as people age, they become less and less violent just in general. And this applies to people who are in and outside of the prison system. I don't mean to imply that like violence is just the people who have been incarcerated because that's not true. But you know, like yeah, at that age, to your point, they could be out in the community like helping other people. There's like so much more they could be doing with their time that's actually useful than just languishing in prison.

JoAnne ([01:20:59](#)):

And also when people are sick and old, prison is no place for them.

Megan ([01:21:08](#)):

Right.

JoAnne ([01:21:11](#)):

Yeah. And there is so much talent and so much life energy that is caged. So many people who could be doing things. And you know, one of the things they said, they asked people to raise their hands if they were fathers and maybe 80% are fathers, you know? And the percentage of women who are mothers is higher, but people struggle to be fathers even though incarcerated. But what a loss. What a loss.

Megan ([01:22:01](#)):

Yeah. I know. It's so nice to hear you and other people talk about all the things that they've been able to do. And that's an important thing to keep in mind. But yeah, it is hard not to just look and see the kind of real loss that comes from this system too.

JoAnne ([01:22:26](#)):

Yeah. And just a waste of human life and potential and you know, there are many people who could have been the doctors, who could have been the leaders, and they're just locked in cages.

Megan ([01:22:49](#)):

Yep. I know like Ronald Day is really interesting because he was able to benefit from the funding for higher education in the prison system, which I know they took away and now has come back, which I think is super helpful, you know.

JoAnne ([01:23:07](#)):

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. It's transformative.

Megan ([01:23:09](#)):

Yeah.

JoAnne ([01:23:10](#)):

It's so transformative in people's view of themselves and the world, but also it's transformative in terms of when people get out, in terms of their access to employment that is paid a living wage. A college degree makes a hell of a difference, especially when it's in the social services. And when people come out with a mission to make a difference, they can get jobs as counselors.

Megan ([01:23:43](#)):

Right. They have so many more opportunities.

JoAnne ([01:23:45](#)):

Services at all levels. Okay, I'm gonna need to stop here. Yes. But I think there's still more talking about it

Megan ([01:24:01](#)):

Yeah, I think so too. I think maybe we, I'm going stop interviewing for a few weeks just to do a final push. And then my professor has seen some early reactions that I've written down and some of the transcripts and she thinks that we should try to turn it into a paper and take it to the Oral History of America conference next February because she thinks people will really want to hear this stuff. So in my mind there's maybe a longer horizon for what we can do with both gathering information and then turning it into something more public.

JoAnne ([01:24:52](#)):

And, you know, for me it's helpful to have this all on paper because I'm going to be drawing from it also.

Megan ([01:25:00](#)):

Yes. And I am right now trying to get to the archive at John Jay, which it looks like I'm going to go either next Wednesday or May 1st, and I've asked her to pull any and all oral histories that they had done previously.

JoAnne ([01:25:17](#)):

Ah, yes.

Megan ([01:25:19](#)):

So I'll keep you posted on that. And then she does want to talk about gifting what we've done so far. So we'll just need to get the transcripts approved before we submit them.

JoAnne ([01:25:31](#)):

Good. You know, that interview that I did - I gave you the information of the professor's name - it was a draft of a first part of a two-part interview. And if you could capture that, that's contemporaneous for a time where Fortune, I think, only had the Castle and probably was half the size and was much closer to the AIDS work.

Megan ([01:26:05](#)):

Mm. Okay.

JoAnne ([01:26:07](#)):

So it's contemporaneous for at least a decade earlier.

Megan ([01:26:13](#)):

Okay. Yeah. I'm very curious to hear them and see what kind of parallels there are to the conversations we're having now. And to your point, like how the different scope of Fortune itself might have shaped the way you were thinking about some of these issues like housing.

JoAnne ([01:26:33](#)):

Yeah. And I would appreciate a copy of that. Most especially.

Megan ([01:26:40](#)):

Yeah. So that's the other piece that sometimes they don't allow you to take things out of the archive. I don't really know what the rules are for this one, so I'll just talk to her about how I can get you the information. Like can I take notes and you can have my notes, you know what I mean? Sometimes they have various levels of privacy concerns.

JoAnne ([01:27:04](#)):

I would guess they would not be averse to duplication.

Megan ([01:27:09](#)):

I agree.

Megan ([01:27:12](#)):

Right.

JoAnne ([01:27:14](#)):

As long as it's attribution.

Megan ([01:27:17](#)):

Yeah. But because it's unfinished, I don't know. And it sounds like no one has indexed the stuff that was given to them.

JoAnne ([01:27:28](#)):

Well, you know, I have a draft, but I'm hoping that it got finished.

Megan ([01:27:35](#)):

Yeah. So I'm gonna talk to her about it, but whatever format I can get it to you, I will. That's on my list of things to do when I go visit the archive.

JoAnne ([01:27:46](#)):

Okay. Well, I'm really glad that you are taking this project.

Megan ([01:27:52](#)):

Yeah, me too. It's exciting and I'm just so happy to be able to keep the relationship with Fortune and to hear all these stories and to give them to the world in whatever way we can. It's a nice feeling

JoAnne ([01:28:08](#)):

And I'm really glad to participate. Thank you.

Megan ([01:28:11](#)):

Thank you, <laugh>. Thank you. And Kendall. Thank you <laugh>.

JoAnne ([01:28:16](#)):

Thank you both. Okay.