Narrator: Julie Bowditch
Interviewers: Chris Lamb & Md Khalid Rahman
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Abstract: In this interview, Chris and Khalid spoke with Julie Bowditch, the Executive Director of CASA Project Worcester County, about her background, career, and commitment to community work. Julie, raised in Fitchburg as the only biological child in a family of seven, has been deeply influenced by her experiences in foster care and adoption, driving her passion for child welfare and advocacy for vulnerable youth. She moved to Worcester in 2010 and began working at UMass Chan Medical School in 2012. Throughout her career, she has been an active supporter of local businesses and nonprofits, working to foster connections within her network. Julie's dedication to social justice is evident in her belief that respecting others is crucial for an equitable society, particularly in Worcester. She also highlights the importance of diversification in driving future growth for the city. Julie's achievements include being named to the Worcester Business Journal's "Power 50" in 2023 and "Power 100" in 2024, being honored as one of their "40 Under Forty" recipients in 2019 and receiving two keys to the City of Worcester. Julie emphasized the role of independent women in shaping society. The interview was conducted on October 16th, 2024, by Md Khalid Rahman and Chris Lamb, both graduate students at Clark University.

CL: Okay, so I'm Chris Lamb, here with Khalid Rahman and Julie Bowdich. We are at 100 Grove Street, at the office of the CASA Project—Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children in Worcester County—and we're interviewing Julie today about her life in Worcester and her work as an advocate for the city, specifically for children, through the CASA Project. Thank you, Julie, for being willing to do this interview with us. We're really excited about this and excited to participate in this project and hear more about your work.

JB: Thank you for including me [laughs].

CL: [laughs] So maybe we'll start by just getting a sense of your background. I'm assuming you grew up in Worcester, but if you didn't grow up in Worcester, when did you come to Worcester, and what is your connection to the city?

JB: Yeah. So, I grew up Worcester-adjacent, if you will. I was born in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, which is just, you know, a short ride up 190 or 140, depending on which way you want to go. But it's north of the city. It's very close. So Worcester was always kind of, you know, the big city, if you will. That was kind of our neighbor. But I was born in Fitchburg, and I spent most of my childhood there. Then I moved here to Worcester almost 20 years ago now. So, I have been here

for a substantial amount of time, but I've been in Central Mass for most of my memorable years [laughs].

CL: Wow. And so, did your family grow up in Central Mass?

JB: Yeah. No, actually, my mom's family did grow up in Massachusetts, out in the Bridgewater area, as I understand. But my dad is from the Midwest. He grew up in Michigan. They met in college, and then she lured him, if you will, to the East Coast. And so, they've been here ever since. So, I have family sort of all over the country, mostly on my dad's side, because he was one of five siblings who kind of moved around. So, we have, you know, some family on the West Coast and then a smattering around.

CL: How was that for your dad, adjusting to life in Massachusetts?

JB: You know, I've been to Michigan many times to visit family, and I'll have to tell you that, like, a lot of it—weather-wise—it's so similar that there probably wasn't a big adjustment. I think culturally it's somewhat similar, specifically in the more rural areas. My dad's family lives in a more rural area of Michigan. So, I don't know that there was a huge culture shift either. He's never shared much of that. And he's remained really close to his siblings and both his parents until they passed away—my grandparents. So, you know, I'm sure there were changes, right, but I think, you know, having transitioned first to college and then moving was... yeah. But Michigan, if you've never visited, is a beautiful state, so I recommend a visit [laughs]. But I am selfishly happy they landed here because, you know—we'll get into that, I'm sure—but I'm very fond of the region [laughs].

CL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I mean, you can talk about that, absolutely. I guess I want to say this is going to be edited, but, if you feel like going in any particular direction or elaborating, feel free to do that.

JB: Okay.

CL: And if we want to bring it back, we can signal that we'll do that.

JB: Okay, great.

CL: So don't feel like—you know, we don't want you to feel limited by the script.

JB: Yes. Okay. That's helpful.

CL: Yeah. So, I guess maybe if you could talk a little bit about what life was like growing up in Fitchburg, being close to Worcester, and what it was that, as you just mentioned, made you really become attached to this area?

JB: Yeah. And make, make it my home. So, I will say, growing up in Fitchburg, Fitchburg is relatively urban diverse, which is something that I consider while I think. I don't know, I know you said you're from New Hampshire. I'm not sure if you're from Massachusetts [looks to Khalid], but I know that folks still sort of feel like Fitchburg gets a lot of shade. It's a little bit of a rougher area that has had a little bit of trouble getting out of its own way in terms of just redeveloping industry-wise and so forth. So, it has been under-resourced, and I think it gets kind of a bad rap, partially for valid reasons.

So, growing up there, although I lived in sort of a suburban neighborhood, it was definitely an area where I've considered an advantage to my upbringing that I was exposed to lots of different cultures and a lot of diversity. And so, I was able to make friends that some of them, of course, have moved on, and others have been lifelong friends who, you know, maybe their life looked nothing like mine. And I honestly consider that an advantage in my personal life and my professional life because I think it gave me early exposure to, you know, just different cultures and different backgrounds and so forth.

So, I'm happy that I grew up in a region like that. Worcester wasn't so far away, but back in, you know, what I can remember, which would probably be more like the later '90s, early, early 2000s, Worcester was considered not only sort of the big city in a sense, but also kind of dangerous, was the perception, I would say, at the time. And of course, every city has—there could be an element of that that's true. But I think Worcester—I think it's a testament to how far Worcester has come. Then, Worcester is a destination versus seen as a place where, oh gosh, you know, lock your doors, be careful.

Now listen, I'm certainly not advocating to not lock your doors, right? Like, it's a city. And frankly, anywhere I would go, I would probably lock my doors. But I would say Worcester has become a place where people are drawn to because there's a lot more arts and culture now. There's a lot more jobs now, and it's a vibrant community. So, I think—and of course, education has always been a crowning jewel of Worcester and maybe what brought you to the region as well. But I think that's something that has maintained and, if anything, sort of become even maybe more visible and more of a draw, I would say.

From my personal perspective and opinion, what Worcester could do better—and perhaps the same could be said of Fitchburg, because there's a great university, Fitchburg State University, there as well—for attention, and you might hear this theme through conversations you have in

this experience, but I would say what Worcester has yet to fully maybe wrap their arms around is the ability to retain students who maybe weren't brought up here or didn't grow up here. But then, you know, they come here, they go to school, they get a wonderful education, but maybe then they either go back to where their roots are, or maybe they go elsewhere to find a career. Of course, there's always going to be some of that that happens. That's just the transient nature of education and cities and all of that.

But I think Worcester could—I think Worcester would do well to prioritize retaining students because we have a lot of talent that's coming through the universities and colleges. And to be able to make sure we're matching up jobs with those sort of career tracks and educational experiences, I think, would only help to sustain the forward momentum that Worcester has now. So, again, that's just my perspective. But I'm obviously very biased [laughs]. I know this about this region, but I would love to see people say, "I had, you know, such a great experience. I had so many great job opportunities when I left school that I could see myself setting down roots here." And whatever that might look like, you know, whether that's a family, whether that's, you know, starting a business, or a million things in between or crossing over [laughs].
So, that is something that I think there's been a lot of progress, but I think there's still room for growth.

CL: What do you think, from your perspective, has been the biggest contributing factor to the lack of retention in Worcester?

JB: I mean, you, I think jobs like... so, you know, I'm not calling out any specific industry, but I think that Worcester has done a great job thanks to Mass Biotech and some other folks that are in the field of—and UMass Medical School, UMass Chan Medical School, excuse me—in the medical education and biotech fields. But I'm not sure that the jobs match, sort of, the graduation rates, you know, at least in my understanding. And that is certainly not my area of most information. But I do have some, you know, friends who have mentioned that it would be great to bring some more jobs to this region of that nature.

Obviously, I think we're a relative leader in health care with UMass and Vincent's too, so that's nice. But, you know, we don't have any law schools here, so it's hard to... I know I've talked to some of my attorney friends, and they said it's harder to retain attorneys or talented attorneys. We have some really great firms too, so by no means... but I don't think that it matches. You know what—of course, we're not Boston. We're not trying to be Boston—but it'd be nice to be able to retain some of that talent. It's hard to see sometimes folks in these specialty areas getting recruited out to Boston or somewhere totally different in the country, right?

So, you know, I think... I guess I don't know what that would look like for Worcester, but... and I don't even know how you do an audit of that. Like, what are the programs in the universities versus the job opportunities? I'm not sure how you do that. But, you know, that would be something interesting, I think, to see in terms of a way to just, sort of, capture students and say,

"Here's... this is your home now, and you can see yourself making a great living and, you know, having a vibrant personal life too."

So, it's all those, like... it's so multifaceted, I think, because there's such a... like, the culture of a city has so much to do with it. But also, what are you going to do when you're not at work? It's great if you got a great job, but a lot of people, you know... it's what you do outside of work that matters [laughs]. So anyway, that's just my observation [laughs].

CL: Yeah, yeah. No, that's a really, really good point. So, what do you love to do outside of work in Worcester?

JB: Yeah. Well, I should back up for one second because I really didn't tell you... I know we have the form that will help supplement, but I didn't really tell you a lot about, sort of, my earlier start, and I didn't know if... would it be helpful if I share a little bit of my family? It was unique.

CL: Yeah. So that would be really great.

JB: Okay. All right. Yeah. And then I would love to also jump back into that because it's one of my favorite things to talk about. So, I was one of seven—although often you'll hear me say eight—siblings. The reason I say eight siblings is because one… a…a family friend became sort of a brother to us. So he's... legally he isn't my brother, but he... our relationship is the same as if we were family. And he spent a lot of time with my family growing up. So often you'll hear me say I'm one of eight siblings, and all of my siblings except for me are adopted.

So, I had a really sort of unique upbringing. My parents—and, of course, this will tie back to my work shortly enough—my parents fostered; they were foster parents in Fitchburg for over 30 years, and they adopted. So I am the second to oldest, but the only sort of biological child in my family. So, I had a big family growing up. My oldest sister is only ten and a half months older than me. She was adopted from South Korea when she was an infant. My youngest sibling is over 20 years younger than me.

So, there's a wide range of ages and certainly experiences too. And obviously, so two of my siblings were international adoptions. One was a private adoption—so through an agency—and all the rest... [pauses to reflect] I'm just triple-checking my math... came through the state, so DCF adoptions. And, of course, that ties back to what I do now for work, incidentally. But... yeah. So... and now they're spread out around the country too, you know, the ones who are kind of moved on to their adult phase of their life.

But, so, that was sort of a fascinating way to grow up because I would say to you that there was never a time—even when I was a small child—that we didn't have foster siblings. My parents had hundreds of foster kids through the years, I would say. And so, you know, it's like anybody...

when you're a kid, you don't know that your family is different until, at some point, you start to realize, you know, that other families have different structures, right?

So, I think I was sensitive at a young age to the fact that our family was a little bit unique, but I was also very protective over that. You know, one thing that really bothered me was when people would say, "Oh, you don't have any real siblings." And that... that would really bug me because I was like, "What do you mean? These are my real siblings."

But, you know, obviously, they didn't adopt all the kids they fostered. A lot of them were reunited with their family, which is wonderful. Some were adopted by other families or by, you know, relatives, which is also wonderful. So, I got to kind of grow up alongside kids that are of all different circumstances and backgrounds. And that, I think, was super interesting.

CL: What was it like for you? Did that pose any challenges for your relationship with your siblings, or what was it like for you being the only non-foster child in that context?

JB: Yeah. So all my adopted siblings were adopted at a relatively young age, anywhere from infancy to a couple of years old. So they largely don't have memories of other families. I can't obviously speak for them, nor do I mean to suggest that you're asking me to, but I would venture to say that their experiences were definitely nuanced compared to mine. A couple of my siblings are Asian, so they, of course, had a different experience. They grew up in the same house with the same parents, and yet they didn't have the same experience because we all know that the way you look, and different cultural nuances, are going to impact the way the world interacts with you.

So, I think it took me a long time—like I would even say into adulthood—to fully start to appreciate that. When you're growing up—I shared a room with my sister, and I thought, "We're having an identical experience," but no kid has an identical experience. First of all, because your interactions with the world, your personalities, your relationships with your parents and siblings—all of those things impact your experience. But it just took me a really long time, I think, to fully appreciate that I had privileges that my siblings didn't. Even though they grew up in the same house—I shared, like I said, space, parents, siblings, dinner tables, and all sorts of things.

Two of my siblings, also worth noting, have some pretty impactful special needs. Over the years, we had kids with special needs who came through the house at various times. Some were easier to diagnose at an early age than others. My parents usually had babies or toddlers—small kids—but two of those children who came through the system into our home, I like to say we kept them. That was one of my brothers and one of my sisters. My sister, she was the youngest of the initial five of us. There are two that are much younger, so they're kind of the second wave. But my sister Bethany was the youngest of the first five of us, and she was our "forever baby" because she had a syndrome called Robin Syndrome, and it impacted her globally.

She never walked, never talked, and couldn't feed herself. She was globally impacted. Unfortunately, she passed away when she was 16, but she had profound medical challenges. So, of course, that impacted my family—not only growing up, but we were sort of secondary caregivers for her because she was so impacted. But that was just normal for us. That was just part of our life. And then, of course, losing a sibling, even though she was never what I would call healthy, had a huge impact on us all in different ways. My youngest brother and sister never met her. I think they maybe lived with her—I'm trying to remember the exact years. I'm sorry, I can't recall exactly. If they lived with her, they would never have remembered. I don't think they did, though. I believe she had passed before. No, that's not true. I'm not remembering their adoption date. They did meet her, but I don't know. I've never asked them if they have memories of her because they would have been very young. I'm not sure they recall what it was like living with her. But she passed away. Yeah. So, yeah, that was our family [laughs].

CL: Wow. I want to ask about education, but I'm also really curious—before we go there—to know what was the inspiration for your parents to take on that role, not only in your family but in the world?

JB: I honestly don't know. It's such a wonderful question, and it's something that I've been thinking a lot about to explore with my parents and sort of the origins of that. I do know that my dad—and again, I can't speak for him, of course—but I know my dad had a sixth sibling who was also much younger than his original five, which is sort of ironic, right? But he was born with Down Syndrome. Back at that time, kids with profound disabilities like Down Syndrome—those situations were handled very differently than they are now.

So I have talked to my dad and my aunts a bit about what that was like for them. My oldest aunt was in high school, I believe, when their youngest sibling was born. At that time, they institutionalized kids who had Down Syndrome. I'm not even sure they called it Down Syndrome then, but it was very different. My understanding is that my grandmother—of course, they were in Michigan, right?—my grandfather was a minister, a reverend. So they were living in this really rural space. My understanding is that they wanted my grandmother to surrender her little baby son to the institution—that's how it was handled.

My understanding is that she was very resistant to that. In a way I guess it was sort of progressive of her, but I think it was also just maternal. Then she had these teenage daughters, my aunts, who I think probably had strong memories and feelings about it too and didn't want to see their baby brother institutionalized. But he didn't live very long, unfortunately. Again, medical treatment wasn't what it is now, of course, and he had some comorbidities. Anyway, his name was Todd Bowdich, and one of my brothers was named after him. So I suspect—although he's never been quite as transparent about this, and maybe it's even more—who knows, maybe it's a little more…I don't know what word I'm looking for.

CL: Subconscious.

JB: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. But I wonder if that impacted, sort of, for my dad—my dad was the youngest of those first five siblings—so he was a little boy. But, of course, he remembers this was his little brother. And, obviously, they named my brother after him. But it does make me wonder if, you know, that has happened to impact, sort of, the way he was looking to interact with, you know, children with special needs or just children who maybe had circumstances that were out of their control or what have you. So, my mom is just very maternal, obviously, because she has all these kids. But I think that that was just maybe a way that she found she could, sort of, have a place in, sort of, giving back, I think. And she kind of made it her life's work. So, for all the time that I think I have been around, and certainly all the time I can remember, my mom didn't work. She stayed home with all these, sort of, gobs of children. And my dad was a very blue-collar worker, but they made it work, and the family was, and still is, sort of, everything to them. And they—so my mom—they both were educators originally. And then she retired, or, you know, resigned, I guess [laughs], to sort of spend time with, you know, all these kids that we had traipsing around with [laughs].

CL: This is just a side question, but are you somebody who, because of that experience, finds herself liking to be around people?

JB: Interesting question. I'm extremely extroverted. I love being around people, but I have no desire to start a family of my own [laughs]. So you can interpret that as, you know [laughs]. But, you know, I have a lot of respect for what my parents did, but I don't have any kids of my own, and I don't have that inclination. So, who knows, right? Like, I'm sure that my upbringing shaped that in some ways, but I'm not sure. And, of course, all my siblings have their own personalities and sort of family ambitions and so forth. And then I have one other brother who, as I mentioned, had some disabilities as well, but his disabilities were mental health and learning abilities. So he is, luckily, physically healthy. And he still lives with my parents at home, even though he's in his 30s. But he's pretty impacted, so he doesn't have a ton of independence, although he has some great skills, and he's very articulate and, you know, has been able to integrate in a lot of ways. But he is still, you know, very, I would say, childlike, very vulnerable. And so, my parents made the choice to sort of protect him into adulthood. And so, that's my fam [laughs].

CL: You don't have any desire to have a family of your own, but you are a caregiver in a much bigger, different sense.

JB: Yes. It all sort of comes full circle. Yes [laughs].

CL: So back to the other question about—so, where did you…you went to school in Fitchburg? Fitchburg public school?

JB: So this is another sort of fascinating—you didn't know what you were getting into here—another fascinating layer is that my parents homeschooled all of us children. So, all except for, obviously, Bethany—she wasn't, obviously, able to participate in traditional education. And then my other brother that I mentioned, he had some modified, you know, schooling but still participated in, you know, a regular, sort of, traditional education tracks. But yeah, so, all of my siblings besides Bethany graduated from homeschool, if you will, except for me, again, the outlier, who went to Fitchburg High Public School for my senior year. So I graduated from there, and that was something that I wanted to do. And so, yeah, I had one year of traditional, if you will, education.

CL: How was it integrating into public school?

JB: Oh, it was rough [laughs]. It was culture shock, totally. I luckily had, like, some friends—you know, a good number of friends—although some went to private school or were in different grades or whatever. But I wasn't totally going in blind since that was kind of my community. But it was like—I didn't know how to open a locker, you guys. Like, it was wild. So that was a really interesting experience. And, like, I always joked even, like, later in life—which we can touch on if you want to—but I was in education for a while as an educator, and I always said, like, "Oh, this is my first field trip," you know [laughs], because I missed all these, sort of, like early education experiences that a lot of other people experience. But, you know, again, it makes you who you are, and it's interesting.

CL: Yeah, you had a very unique, very unique experience.

JB: Yeah. I think what was hardest for me is that I love people, as we just talked about. I enjoy being around people. And so for me, it was very isolating. And I, I'm not sure what I imagined the school to be when I was quite young, but I imagined it to be a place where I could make friends and have experiences and learn about things that, like, I wasn't, you know, that you don't experience—maybe your family isn't into for whatever reason or whatever. So that, to me, is the thing that I at least perceived missing out on and that I felt like I was craving. And so—but you know, I think if you talk to my siblings, they might have different responses altogether based on their personalities—so it's just, you know, it was very—it's a nuanced thing. So anyway, that was, that's my sort of, like, early years.

CL: And from Fitchburg High you went… what was the next chapter for you?

JB: So yeah. So from Fitchburg High, I went, I went to work, really. So I was working, even when I was in school, I was working. And, to me, work, I equated work with independence. And independence is something that I was really craving and really eager for at a young age. And so for me, you know, I didn't really know many other ways that you sort of achieve sort of whatever independence means to someone. But, so I worked really, really hard at a young age, often was working two or three jobs at a time. And I continued that really into sort of, like, young adulthood because, hey, like, life is expensive, and I wanted to work really hard, but I also always had this philosophy of, like, "work hard, play hard" mentality. So I also wanted to enjoy life. So, you know, everything costs something [laughs]. And so, you know, of course, there's your primary, you know, you need to have a place to live, and you need to eat food and those kinds of things. But I also wanted to have, you know, the ability to enjoy my free time too, even though at, sometimes there wasn't a whole lot of it.

And in the meantime, I went to community college for a while, kind of off and on, because I was able to kind of work that into my schedule. And of course, in those days—not that I'm, like, sooo ancient—but even then, you didn't have online, like it wasn't like online classes or something. So you had to figure out, like, what is your schedule, and can you go to classes, and so forth. So I found that my education was a little splintered as I started getting into higher ed because, you know, certain things, I'm really strong in, sort of like, language, like language literacy, that kind of thing. But then you look at some things like sciences—it's pretty hard to teach those outside of certain settings. So even when I was testing into, like, public school settings, they were like, "Wow, you're, like, college level in this, and you're, like, you know, freshman level or something in, like, sciences"—those kinds of things.

So that was shocking to me too because, you know, you can read a whole lot, but sometimes it just, you need that application. And so there were definitely splinters in my education in that way. And I would even still say, you know, of course, everyone has areas that they're more interested in or more inclined to. But for me, I think there's just gaps, frankly. And so when I started to go into some college classes, I was like, "Oh, this is hard [laughs]." And I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my education and so forth. So there was a lot of fits and starts to it.

I ended up transferring—like, this spanned over several years—I ended up transferring to Worcester State, after a while. And I went to a state for a while, and, but I never did actually graduate with my bachelor's degree. So even though I have "some college," you have to check the questionnaire, and I just, you know, check "some college." But, you know, at some point, I got—and we'll talk probably a little bit more about my career path—but at some point—it's definitely still a goal of mine; it just feels like something that would be such an achievement—But I—oh, lots of my peers, of course, have a minimum of their bachelor's, if not even a master's or above—But for me, at some point, I just said, like, "Gosh, I'm already doing the work that I was sort of striving towards."

And so it's not to say that there's not plenty more to be learned, but at some point, I sort of redirected my investment into sort of my career. And I don't know if one sort of trumps the other, right? Like now, I think—depending on the industry, obviously—I think there's a lot of conversations happening around, you know, experience being equivalent to certain education.

Again, I'm not talking about, like, you know, you want to be a doctor or something. Obviously, there are career tracks where that can apply. But I think there's a lot of conversations, at least in the spaces that I work in, around, you know, how to be more inclusive, knowing that everyone doesn't have access to the same education. And how do we make sure that there are jobs there? And that we're also, like, respecting people's experience alongside, you know, more formal forms of education. So yeah, so that's my educational journey, to date—I don't think it's over, but [laughs].

CL: We're always learning.

JB: Mhm.

CL: And so your work in education then—can you talk a little bit about that?

JB: Yeah, it's a perfect segue. Yeah. Yeah. So, early on, I knew I wanted to work with youth. And so, you know, when you're young, you only know what you know, or you've only experienced sort of what's been in your world. And so I worked for, I started at a daycare center, and I did some nannying, but then I started to work for a residential school. So, it still exists; it's in Lancaster, Mass., again, just a little bit north of here. It's called Doctor Franklin Perkins School, more commonly known as Perkins. However, not to be confused with the Perkins School for the Blind, which is also a well-known Perkins school in the region—no association, but just similar founder names, I guess [laughs].

But, Frankl, Doctor Franklin Perkins School—Perkins—was where I think I got my, I would call it, my first real job, I guess. And it also was my first foray into actually—this will come full circle in a minute for you—but working with really vulnerable youth and vulnerable populations. And I…I really enjoyed the work there, but I was working with kids—I was practically a kid myself at the time—but I was working with kids who were largely wards of the state. They didn't have any parents or guardians, most of them, or had been deemed by the state to be sort of unmanageable, you know—excuse me—couldn't live at home or couldn't live in a foster home or with relatives.

So, that was a huge education for me, in that place. It still exists, although it's, I think they've sort of pivoted like many schools of its sort. But it was—you know, this isn't obviously a word we use these days—but for all intents and purposes, it was essentially, I would consider, like a modern-day equivalent to an orphanage, which lots of group homes and residential homes, you know, unfortunately, still are for all intents and purposes. So, you know, I worked with kids who had really severe trauma, and that manifested many times in some really tough behavioral stuff, some mental health things. I can't say—I don't have the expertise to say—whether or not they were trauma-triggered or whether they were things that, you know, these kiddos were going to

experience anyway. Probably somewhere in between or a little bit of both. But they were, you know, they were all experiencing some really tough stuff.

And so, I loved that work, but it was really really physical. It was really really emotional. And direct care is largely known as an industry that you don't stay in for a super long time because of those reasons. I think about those kids still. They would all be adults now. Hopefully, they're all still with us. Although they were all, you know, really super vulnerable, and I fear that some may not still be living, or may not still be—some, some may be incarcerated—or other sort of sad, experiencing homelessness or other sad outcomes. I don't know for sure, of course—they were kids, and I don't know—but I think about those kids a lot.

And that was a first eye-opening for me, to see what would happen to kids maybe in my care if there weren't people like my parents out there. Or even with the work my parents did, some of these kids just weren't able to integrate. And so, that was really tough. I did that for a few years and then I took a job in the public school system, working with kids—primarily kids with autism diagnoses, but really heavily impacted—and some kids who had, like, dual diagnoses. You know, a variety of things going on, but kids who had some pretty profound stuff going on, particularly educationally but also behavioral.

And I worked in two school districts doing that, and I loved that work. It was a parallel to the work I had been doing, but these kids, by and large, had really supportive families and, you know, good advocates at home, for the most part. And, but I loved…working with them. And it was…I worked with younger kids for the most part, and I just enjoyed it so much. I felt like I was making a huge impact there. But at some point, at the second school district that I was working at—and I met literally lifelong friends, like some of these kids, unlike, you know, when you're working in a residential placement, there's a lot of confidentiality around these cases and stuff. But these, a lot of these kids, their parents, of course, had the autonomy to say who could be in their life and, you know, who you could stay in touch with and stuff. So, a lot of my students I still sort of know where they are and how they're doing. And that's super fun. I run into some of them still. Some of their parents became lifelong friends of mine, and that part is really exciting.

One particular student of mine in the district—public school district I worked in—he, years later, his parents asked me if they could make me, if they could make me his guardian. You know, if something were to happen to them, could I sort of take over making sure that his trajectory stayed strong, and I agreed to do that. So, while he doesn't live with me or anything like that, they're perfectly healthy and well. But, God forbid, if something were to occur prematurely to them, that's still the arrangement. So, you know, he's been a huge, huge part of my life. After I stopped working at the school, he went to a, they call it still a more restrictive setting. But you know, he was able to live at home, but he was in some separate school specifically for kids with autism diagnoses and other profound learning disabilities. But he was able to live at home and stuff. So, he has really strong advocates in his parents. But that's one anecdotal story—it's relatively unique—but it's of a student who now is well into his 20s and is still a huge part of my life. And I still spend a good amount of time with him, and his family, too, and kind of give them

some respite if his parents are traveling or just to give him some experiences—community experiences and stuff like that.

So, anyway, I was at the second school district I worked at, and I kind of was starting to wonder, what's next for me? Unfortunately, in education, for many people, you kind of reach a plateau at some point where you're like, do you go back to school? And did I see myself in an administrative role? I wasn't sure. I was feeling like I had kind of—I don't want to say capped out because there's always more work to do—but I just felt like I was maybe no longer as challenged…I felt like there was something more out there for me. And, of course, there are people who do that forever, and they're doing amazing work, and I have nothing but the utmost respect. I don't mean to suggest that everyone should be looking for what's next.

Some people, that is the end for them, and they're making a huge impact. They're needed. They're wonderful. But for me, I was just feeling like I was ready for a challenge, and I wasn't sure how I fit into the bigger picture. I was feeling like I was making a big impact on the kids that were coming through the doors of our classroom, but I knew there was so much more need out there, and I really wasn't sure how to make that into something tangible for me. But also sustainable—like I needed to pay my bills, of course, and stuff like that, too. So, in the meantime, I was starting to get really involved with volunteerism. And it was sort of, again, having a sort of untraditional upbringing, I hadn't experienced some of the volunteer opportunities that you might throughout high school or college or whatever. So, I started to sort of dabble independently, and I was volunteering for some autism resource centers in the area and doing some fundraising. So, I was finding that I loved it. We were doing some major events, five Ks, and these kind of things that I was, at first, I was just sort of on these committees or part of these groups. And then, next thing you know, I was chairing these groups, and then, next thing you know, I'm like, "oh my gosh, I love this work." I started taking on some of my own fundraisers independently that would benefit existing organizations. And I was thriving. I was like, "this is, no one told me this was a choice. Like, this is cool." And I was just loving it. It's very, it sort of like lends itself to my personality because I love being with people, talking with people, learning about people, interacting. And then also, I felt like I was making this impact in a financial way that I had, as someone who came from relatively humble roots, I never experienced philanthropy in the sense… So I was like, wow, I don't have a lot of money to give, but I can, I can scrap together all these different people, right? And together we can raise money. And so, I was starting to get really excited about that and passionate about that. And I started to wonder, is there a way to make that a full-time gig? Can you get paid to do these things? Well, turns out you can! [laughs] but I just sort of didn't know what that looked like at the time.

So I started looking around, and I ended up taking a job at UMass—now UMass Chan Medical School—it was UMass Medical School then, because that gift hadn't been made at that time—from the Chan family—and my... I... so I took a job at UMass Medical School in their office of development, and I spent the next nine years. At first, it was like a temp job. It was just going to be like seasonal work. And they needed help with a big event. And then at the end of that seasonal work, they offered me a full-time job, and then I... that's when I resigned from the schools. This is doing a little bit of both at the same time for a while. And then, I felt like I was learning so much. I was loving it so much. And at UMass, of course, they have they're a

relatively large fundraising operation. So they, especially at the time—the office has evolved quite a bit since that time—but in 2012, when I joined their office, they had sort of like people or even groups that specialize in very specific areas of fundraising. So I was able to learn from people who are really true experts in a very small subset. So, for instance, in higher ed, you may know this, but there's annual giving, there's alumni relations, there's donor relations or stewardship, you know, there's major gifts, there's corporate and foundation grant writing. I could go on, but you get the idea. There's all these sort of tracks almost. And if you're in a big fundraising office for a really big nonprofit or higher ed, you might have a specialty. And of course, at smaller organizations, like the one I'm at now, you sort of are... you wear all those hats most often, right? So, anyway, it was an awesome experience for me, because I got to learn from these folks who are doing, you know, these operational things, these all these different things, and that was amazing. And I loved it, loved it, loved it. And I felt like I was learning something every day. And I was really excited about the work that's being done. At the time actually, I should add, UMass Chan Medical School and UMass Memorial Health shared a philanthropy office. So at the time, for the first, seven, maybe seven years, I want to say, of the nine I was there, I was able to fundraise for both the sort of hospital clinical system and the medical school. And that was a dream because there's all these exciting initiatives going on there, and when a donor would come to you and say, "I care about," let's just say, ALS, breast cancer," whatever it is, right? You had the autonomy to say to them: "Well, do you want to do like to support education, or do you like to support clinical care?" You know, because people feel very differently about those things. And that was exciting because you could really meet the donor there, and the donor had a ton of autonomy. Sometimes they said, "we want to split it up." And that was cool too.

But then, I call it "the divorce." But UMass Chan and UMass Memorial split their fundraising office specifically. They always had separate sort of initiatives, obviously. And, but they split up and our office evolved and changed, and I... my job, the role I was in stayed with UMass Chan. So for the last couple years, I was just working exclusively raising money for the medical school. But they remain separate. And I have colleagues still at both offices, that are both doing great work. But I loved... I was excited by what was going on there, because you probably know at least somewhat, it's an exciting place. There's a lot of cutting-edge science going on there, there's a lot of folks that are experts in their fields. A Nobel Prize, another Nobel Prize, was just won by somebody at UMass. And he's not the first. While I was there, there was a couple UMass, a couple UMass colleagues, professionals who were Nobel Prize winners. But of course, there's plenty of work that's been done outside of Nobel Prizes that's really exciting.

And one of the highlights for me of my time at UMass was, several years ago, one of my initiatives was managing, we had a Boston Marathon race team. So, you can get these charity bibs, you know, and people can run, to raise money for these charities. And you don't have to be the fastest, you just have to commit to raising the money. And the Boston Marathon specifically has a really, really sophisticated program. So we had a few bibs, and that was specifically for Dr. Bob Brown's ALS research that he has, he has clinical care, too—he sees patients—and he's one of the top experts, I believe, in the world on ALS. He treated Paul Cellucci, former governor, who passed away of ALS, and they formed the ALS -Cellucci Fund in Paul Cellucci's memory. And I had the privilege to not only work—you know with Dr. Roth's team, learning about his

work a little bit—but with Paul Cellucci's family, raising money in his memory. Specifically, the Boston Marathon bibs were one of those initiatives that raised money for the Cellucci Fund. And this becomes very personal. My dad. So, the weekend of the Boston Marathon is always in April, and this is pre-COVID, and I think it was 2018. April 2018, my dad called me and one of my uncles back in Michigan, he had been experiencing some health challenges and they didn't know what was going on. And he called me, and I was, it was in April, and I was literally leaving, I was in Boston leaving the restaurant in the North End, that Paul Cellucci loved and he would take tons of meetings at, I guess. And we hosted our Boston Marathon runners every year: big pasta dinner, marathon weekend, to sort of thank them for all their work, fundraising. And they could meet some of the scientists and so forth, and the Cellucci family. It was very, very, very cool and impactful—I loved it—and I was literally in Newburgh driving away, and my dad called, and he said, "Uncle Ron has received a diagnosis of ALS." And I was like, driving away from this ALS sort of themed, you know, project, getting ready for marathon weekend to support our runners that we had. And the timing, it was like the universe was like, "hello" [laughs]. And I made a decision that, I feel like that day I said, "I'm going to run the Boston Marathon for my uncle Ron." Well, unfortunately—I did, so the good news is I did—but unfortunately, my uncle Ron passed away between April of 2018 when he received that diagnosis and April 2019, when I ran the Boston Marathon for the Cellucci Fund at UMass. So I did run, and my aunt Joyce, his wife and my dad's sister, was here from Michigan. She met me at the finish line. And that was like one of the most impactful things I've ever done. Really personally, although it was, of course, it was a cool experience because it's convergence; I was still managing our team at the time, so I got to kind of run alongside our team members are raising money, but it was very personal for me. I raised a ton of money for my uncle in his memory. And all of a sudden, and these are the times, right? When you're raising money for these cool scientific and medical initiatives and it becomes, like, so personal and so close to home.

And all of a sudden, all the work I was doing, Dr. Brown's team, became super important to me personally. So that was really, really impactful. And a lot of my, a lot of my dad's family was also there to celebrate. So that was a really special time. And it was also, we didn't know at the time, but it was the last Boston Marathon before Covid as well. We didn't know that, but all those things could have looked very different for us if it had been just a year later. So unfortunately, you know, the ALS research isn't, hasn't come far enough that it was able to save my uncle or save others yet with the diagnosis. But it was, that was one of the ways I illustrate, you know, that working at UMass was impactful to me, because I got to see people's lives being changed. And even for families who did lose somebody like my aunt and my family did, it's, you're still so invested in wanting a different outcome for other people, or in some cases it's so cathartic to pour your energy and your grief into feeling like you can give back in something bigger than yourself. And I saw a lot of that at UMass, and that was impactful. On the flip side, when I was at UMass, I felt like the scope was almost too big for me. At some point, you know, I said, "I know where I go next, it's going to be smaller, a more focused mission, where I can really understand the absolute nuances. Because at UMass you're never going to— not on the fundraising side—you're never going to be an expert in [laughs] everything that's going on at UMass because it's massive. So yes, you had some priorities and some things you're working on, but in no way did I ever feel like I was an expert in any of those things. So I knew, where I went next, I wanted to challenge myself with a smaller nonprofit, and also something that really resonated with me and I felt

like—you know, smaller dollar, smaller donations—philanthropy at maybe a different scale could make, still make a really big impact. So now we enter our CASA chapter [laughs].

CL: Yeah. Wow. Thank you so much for all of that. That's an amazing story and...

JB: Yeah. And it kind of illustrates, right? Like how no one's path is linear, of course, right? But it's kind of interesting how I was in special education and working with kids who were impacted by the system—my family experience. But then, professionally, and then everyone said, "Oh, you went from school to UMass raising money," and, but now that makes sense. [laughs]

CL: Yeah. It all comes together in hindsight.

JB: Yeah. And of course, I didn't know what opportunities would be out there then, but just sort of following your path and [laughs].

CL: Yeah. Wow. Real quick, before we move on, do you plan to run the marathon again? Was that something that you saw, or was it like, "Oh, I did this thing. I feel good about doing it. I'm going to move on"?

JB: Probably that. Yeah. I've always been a noncompetitive runner, and I still run. There's a group in the city that I've started running with. It's a newer running group that's been really impactful, I think, community-wise. But I don't think I'll do another marathon. It would take another sort of, like, act of God if, you know. [laughs]

CL: It's a big commitment.

JB: Huge. Like, lots of training.

CL: Yeah.

JB: Yeah. I'm glad I did it, but I don't think I'll become a marathoner. [laughs]

CL: Very, very cool. Very cool story and chapter. Okay. So, CASA project. Can you introduce us to the CASA project and then kind of tell us about your role?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. So, CASA, as you mentioned, is Court Appointed Special Advocates. We…it was a national…it's a national organization that we are essentially sort of a chapter of, although we have our own independent 501(c)(3), our own nonprofit entity, which I know looks different for different national or global nonprofits. But CASA—I think this is impactful for the project you're working on. CASA project, Worcester County, where I work, was the first CASA project in Massachusetts. It was founded in '81. And my understanding is—I've been trying to do my own history work on this—but my understanding is it's one of the first of, I believe, nine pilot programs in the whole country. So, there was a judge, a juvenile judge out in Seattle, who sort of had this concept of, you know, I have attorneys on cases, and we have all these parties to the case who have these different clients or different priorities, but, I don't know that I am getting the whole story or that anyone in my court is totally unbiased or is getting, you know, sort of, the big picture.

So this judge had this concept of having this advocate who had no bias and just best interest focused only, and—different than attorney, different than, you know, anybody else in the case—and so he founded this concept and he brought together, in my understanding, some sort of, you know, other judge friends, I guess, and so forth, and said, "Would your region be open to sort of trying this out?" And he brought together a group of volunteers out in the Pacific Northwest. And Worcester got to be one of the first ever pilot programs. So starting out in the first, sort of handful of programs in the country, we're now one of about a thousand. So just to give you a scope of the last 40ish years. This was back in the early 80s. And I'm still trying to do my own history work around CASA Worcester's founding; I know that there was a group of women, incidentally, for this project, but also, you know, kind of special. And I believe that they were a group of Jewish women who were volunteers—they were part of a known sort of group. And they were—of course, this is, you know, maybe a time when not all, especially women of their age, maybe didn't have their own career track or some did. Some are retired, whatever it might have looked like for them—but they were a group of volunteers. And these Jewish women sort of latched on to this concept, and I'm trying to track it back to what judge or what, you know, how it kind of came here and how we were deemed to have a receptive area.

But my guess is there was a first justice or a juvenile judge in the region at the time who was receptive to, you know, the concept. And, so, we were founded in '81 and so we're 43 years old now. We will always be the oldest program in Mass, obviously, but we also are still the largest. But we're now one of seven in the state. There's a brand, brand-new one down in Bristol County, but we have several others. So, but we're all, we all have sort of our own programs, but we do of course collaborate and talk a lot. And so, yeah, it's…I love the size that we are. I think it's very digestible. I have I'm one of 15 on our team, so it's still a pretty small team. I came to the organization—I was, so, a friend of mine, she was on the board here at CASA. She still is. And she knew a little bit about my family history. And so she approached me and she said, I was working at UMass at the time, and she said, "Gee, I wonder…we're looking for some new board members. We're trying to diversify." In the interest of being totally candid, you know at the time—and this isn't so long ago, this is maybe six or so…something like that…years ago—it was a relatively white, relatively retiree board, and the board had identified that we're missing some very valuable perspectives from our board, you know, and so kudos to them—they were really

trying to diversify—and so I brought sort of a different lived experience. I don't mean to suggest that my experience is the same as having been in foster care at all or adopted. But she knew it was an area of interest for me. And so, I brought—in terms of diversity—I brought some youth to the group [laughs] that didn't exist much at the time other than my friend that I mentioned and, and one other person at that time. So, the three of us kind of started, I think, a new age of sorts—a very valuable board by the way, who had their heart completely in the right place and, great skill sets, great perspectives—but, you know, they just were lacking in sort of, I think some…a variety of perspectives. So it was an exciting time because I think some of the board members that are still part of sort of our family here at CASA will relate back to me all the time, very frequently, and say, "That's when our board shifted, and that's when the organization started to shift." And I don't think that had anything to do with me personally, but I think it had to do with the fact that the board prioritized—and leadership prioritized—wanting to be more representative of the community we're serving and bringing, you know, new, new ideas. And so I first brought a fundraising perspective because that's what I was doing full time, and that they were hoping to add to the board at the time. And I was excited about it. It was a pretty mom and pop shop, in terms of fundraising even then. And so I was excited because I felt like I could really bring something of value to the team then.

And then a few years later, I was on the board—I was loving it—and our former director had left the organization and the board. We sat down. I remember very vividly, it wasn't that long ago, but I remember we had this board retreat, and we were going to talk about, like, strategic planning and what our priorities were for the organization. I was excited. It was Halloween day—I remember, it was October 31st. I don't know why I remember that very specific detail, but it was, and it must have been 2020… and it was our first time getting together since Covid. We were in one of the board members' homes. And were still being very careful, of course. And they said, "We're going to…"—it must've been, I'm just trying to remember if I have the year right…it would have either been October of 2020 or 2021, but I would have to, to look… maybe it was 2021 now that I'm saying it—but at any rate, I said I kind of... So we got to talking: What is it, what does the organization need? What do we think for the future? And we were mapping it out and the consultant we had with us, she said, "Well, geez, it sounds like you guys need to define who your next executive director is going to be, because you're in between directors, and it's a great time for you to identify who you want to lead this organization and what that profile will look like." So I'm excited—I'm like, yes, so we want this. We got, the board was all into it—we had a really engaged board, we did then and we do now—And we talked about it, you know, and I said, "Gosh, we get, we got kind of like had drawn out this concept of who this person is and what we thought the organization needed, strengths and weaknesses of the organization at that time…"And I said, "I want to be on the search committee, because this is a person who, I think I am eager to help us find. And I just think it's exciting times for us." And after that, that meeting, that retreat, several board members spoke to me individually and separately and said, "We think you are…we think the person we defined closely aligns to the skill sets that you have. And we know your passion with the organization." So they said, "would you be, would you consider potentially applying for this job?" And I had wild imposter syndrome, and I said "hahaha, hey, you're funny. There's no way—I don't know the first thing about running an organization, and I don't think I could do it." I was honored and flattered, but I was like, "gosh." So they said, "well, just think about it."

And so I, I eventually decided, through some urging that I would apply. I was really, really ready to leave UMass for a variety of reasons. But I just thought this was a lofty sort of opportunity. I applied—in full disclosure—for several other things at the time, too, that were, you know development director and some other things that I thought were maybe closer to where my experience was, and, but I thought, "well, you know what? At a very least, it will be great experience, right?" Like, you go through the search—technically, it was a national search—although to my understanding, all the candidates were local. Although I don't, I never actually saw the full list because I was then became a candidate, so I obviously I stepped off the board, and I was fully expecting to rejoin the board. In fact, I had several conversations, people about how it was just a temporary leave. And, you know, I just never thought I would be considered in any serious way. I'm like, "oh, I'll, I'll, I'll rejoin the board and I'll be so excited to help this person on board and sort of get their footing and stuff and work closely with them and all this." So, you know, that was my plan. But I was all in—I was, I really, I worked really hard on trying to prepare. And I went through this, you know, executive search process, which they had a search committee and an external, a search firm that led it. And—I don't think my team, most of my team knows the story—but the gentleman who was on the board at the time, he since has retired, but, he's wonderful, and he was leading the search committee. And he called me and he said—and I knew it was close to the end of the search—and, you know, I'd gone through several rounds of interviews and yada, and I'd ask them, "please don't tell me there's anyone else I know, you know, or local…or please don't tell me who are the candidates," because I thought that would just, you know, be awkward or get in my head or whatever. So I didn't know, I didn't know anyone else who had applied. I was sure that they were very, you know, talented and whatever. I was intimidated by them not even knowing who they were [laughs]... And he said, "would you meet me for coffee?" And I said, "sure, I would love to," and I'll never forget… I hung up the phone and I cried. I was in my car and I cried and I said, "oh gosh, they're going to tell me that they've offered it to someone else, or they're about to," and they'll be kind because I was a board member—I was, you know, a known entity. They're probably going to just sort of be really kind about that conversation. So, I got it out of my system, and I was like all good with it. And I went to Panera on Gold Star Boulevard and I met Mike, the…search firm board leader, and he said, "I think you know why I asked you me?" And I said, "I think I do." And I was trying really hard to, you know, be an adult and not be emotional. And he said, "well, we would like to offer you the job. The search committee is unanimous in this. We really feel strongly that you are the candidate that we want, that we would like to see you in this position." And I was—I had to regroup [laughs] because I was not prepared to have a job offer—but I think I did an okay job of collecting myself and then had a, a negotiation, you know, as you do in these moments. And, I was not entirely prepared, but at any rate, I was very excited, and very, you know, anxious. And so that was just over two and a half, almost three years ago now. And here we are.

And it's the best career opportunity I've ever had. And I feel like it's been an opportunity to use all of my skill sets that I had over the years, but also the things that I'm really passionate about, and apply them. And I have a very talented team and a very engaged board—which has evolved also, you know, since I started—But lots of folks that were retained or have stayed, you know, around, which I'm super, super fortunate for and happy about and yeah… So here we are…today. Yeah [laughs].

CL: Amazing. We…I so appreciate you…telling this story. And I'm so glad that we have you as the narrator, because I feel like we've touched on everything that we want.

JB: And the only thing—and obviously I defer to you guys…

CL: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I mean, this question... well…

JB: No, go ahead—

CL: Well…what's the only thing? I want to hear…

JB: Well the only thing that I wanted—it might be the same thing, so I want to hear—but I wanted to talk a little bit about the community and Worcester and why it's important to me.

CL: Okay.

JB: But finish your thought first.

CL: Well, this is... I think this can lead into that. So just, you know, as part of the process of preparing for this interview, we obviously read your bio. And, you know—we knew—that you had accomplished quite a lot. And as we've written here: appearing in Worcester on the Worcester Business Journal's 2023 and 2024, respectively, Power 50 and Power 100 list, receiving two keys to the city of Worcester, and being listed as Worcester Business Journal's 40 under 40 recipient in 2019. So, I guess I think this can connect back to this.

JB: For sure.

CL: Point about Worcester. If you want to speak specifically to any of those accomplishments, you know, what it meant to you to earn these keys to the city, absolutely.

JB: Yeah. I have a few things that I would like to share because community is so important to me, it's everything to me.

CL: Yeah.

JB: I believe that you could have a special experience in lots of communities. It doesn't have to be here in Worcester, obviously, or in Central Mass, but mine just happens to be. It's part of the reason why I put up with, like, crappy winters [laughs] when I don't particularly like them. But, because I feel like I've really, you know, put my roots down here and built a community and found my place, and feel like I'm able to contribute to our community, too. For me, you know, power is a relative thing, right? So, when I think about those lists, like, it's very sort of surreal and strange to me, but I'm starting to learn, and I have a lot more to learn, but about just being able to accept perception is reality for people, I suppose, and I think a lot of—for me, anyway—what I bring to the table is, I believe very strongly in volunteerism. We rely heavily on volunteers here—all of our advocates are volunteers. We have a staff team, but we have hundreds of volunteers who are advocates that are appointed to cases and serve on them. And even before CASA, volunteerism is how I sort of built my community. It was how I sort of got into, even, almost, the nonprofit world and learned about it. But also, I think that when I volunteer, I meet people who I might not have otherwise met because we might have things that are totally... might be different on paper, you know? But then, there's this thing that we have… that we… are so aligned on, or we feel so strongly about. I love community work because I believe that no matter what you're doing, whether it's professional or personal or whatever—volunteerism—that you can do it better and stronger together. So, that feeds a lot of my community work. I believe that I'm not in competition with any other nonprofits, even youth-serving ones, even foster-serving ones. In fact, I believe those are our closest partners. It's something that I've heard is unique to our region and that can be experienced differently in other places, you know, in terms of competitiveness over funders or grants or relationships or whatever. We... we aren't that way here; I have a tremendous community and cohort of other peers in this work who are constantly... literally, this morning, one of the first emails I got was from a colleague.

There was five of us, six of us maybe, on the email. And she is a director of another nonprofit in the city, and she said, "It's Boss's Day and no one ever remembers us, so I want to say, you guys are all bosses and, you know, happy Boss's Day." And then we all just sent some quick little cute emails saying, like, you know, about how much we enjoy working together. But you know, they're not... we're not in competition. We think we learn from each other. We share resources, whether it's, "Hey, do you have a policy for this?" or "What do you do with this situation?" or whatever. And that's how we believe we serve our community best. And I'm very fortunate that I found that community here and people who are like-minded in that way. I volunteer—I will... I will spare you the list—but of other nonprofits that I volunteer with, whether it's, you know, on a board or whether it's like projects, like a committee or something like that, again I believe I ask a lot in the type of work I do, and I believe in giving as much as I get. I obviously... I'm not getting, but, like, I'm still doing the asking. I'm kind of like part of the brand, you know, that's sort of doing that. So, that's my personal philosophy. But I also just get excited and get energized by learning from, you know, work that other people are doing, finding those intersections both with CASA and things that are important to me. Civic engagement is important to me. We obviously

live in a very polarizing political time. Another reason why I love Massachusetts is because I am aligned with, sort of, the progressiveness of Massachusetts.

But I know there are regions, certainly—even in our state, but certainly in the country—where it would be harder to find that sort of, I think, folks who believe the way that I do politically and prioritize the same things that I do. But Worcester has always been very progressive, and I talk to people who are, you know, much my senior, including women, often women who are sort of on the forefront, I think, of sort of progressive conversations in politics. I think our Worcester city government is really special—super diverse. I don't know if you ever watched a city council meeting or even just looked at the website. You, I think, would be very pleasantly surprised to see who we have in city leadership, by and large; there's certainly pockets, like anywhere, that, you know, we have room for growth, like any place. We're not the model, I wouldn't say, but we are an inclusive, diverse city government. And our city manager is young. He was in my 40 under 40 class in 2019, and he is, you know, a second generation—I believe I'm getting this right—but he's a Latino man. And to me, that says a lot about the leadership, the direction that we want the city to be. The kids we serve at CASA and the community here in Worcester vis diverse. There's lots of, there's a huge migrant population, there's lots of students. There's lots of second, third, fourth, etcetera generation, you know, folks here, and I love that about Worcester. I loved it—like I mentioned earlier—about growing up in Fitchburg; it was a relatively diverse area. And my own family having, you know, some diversity in it. But like, I think that's so special about Worcester. And I think we still have a lot of work to do in terms of inclusivity and in terms of representation in all areas. But, you know, I'm proud to say that, especially in the nonprofit space and city government I mentioned, there's a ton of diversity.

There's a lot of women who are leading nonprofits, there are lots of BIPOC folks—in some cases both—who are leading nonprofits in this area, and I love that they're my closest partners, you know, thought partners and colleagues. And that's exciting. And so, city work, it was just never even a question to me, you know, working with nonprofits. Even when I started here, I'm like, that's not going to… Some of the things I was doing, I had to readjust just in terms of like capacity, but, you know, I've always…it's just so important to me. And anything from picking up the trash, you know, organized neighborhood trash pickup thing, or, you know, bigger projects like, you know, a GALA or what have you for another organization. It's like everything in between, I want to be part of it. I raise my hand for it. I want to, if I can make it work for scheduling, I do. And that's been like, a huge part of who I am, you know. So I think that's probably why some of these different things that you see, like in print, you know—a key to the city, turns out it doesn't open a thing [laughs]—but, it's still a wonderful honor, you know? And, I don't mean that to make light of, you know, I'm still very honored by it, obviously. But I think it's sort of a, you know, it's definitely, I would say, due to the fact that I want to give back to our community would be, I think, how I ended up on some of this list.

CL: Yeah. And it's a collective achievement.

JB: Totally. And honestly, I'm having a shift right now—I was talking to my friend, one of my friends who works, happens to work in journalism. And I was talking about that shift. Now I'm an executive director, but, you know, imposter syndrome continues on, right? But now I, I have a privilege and a responsibility to create opportunities and pathways for, my team now, too. So, it's important to me that, whether they're younger, a lot of them are, but some of them are not, that they are having…Because it's something that was like really, really strange to me. It's like I got this job. I was the same one day, and the next day…like, yeah, I'm learning new things in a different capacity. But, you know, it's going to take years for that to really be fully ingrained in me. And yet that title, it just reminded me that people put so much stock into a title, and I was still doing a lot of community work before I was hired [laughs] as executive director, and my team and lots of other folks in the community who don't have, you know, executive titles, quote unquote, are doing amazing, powerful things. So, a good reminder to me to make sure that we continue to amplify their work and elevate them into positions where they're not only being recognized—because that's not really why most of us do it—but that they are being sort of acknowledged and included and invited, and are being given opportunities, you know, to be in spaces where their voice, you know, is heard because that's something that was, struck me.

And then now this shift, right, in like, oh, now I'm sort of in a position to make sure…You know, I had lots of great mentors, and then I had some experiences that were not so pleasant, right? When I was a younger professional where people…I felt that I was not included, or my voice wasn't, wasn't, didn't have a space for it. And so I learned from the, the bad things along with the good things. I don't, I don't want to ever treat people that way or I don't ever want to lead that way. And so it's been, I consider those just as important, you know: leaders who weren't maybe as inclusive or as empowering, as important to me and I'm grateful for now. At the time it was hard. But, because I think it taught me, how not to lead as much as, you know, great mentors and people who I did learn great things from. But, you know, a lot of times I think to myself, I remember how I felt when that happened, and we're never going to do that here, you know? And that's super important to me too. So, so, yeah, I think that's probably my city stuff is definitely around, you know. I always joke, it's funny because I'm picking at the sticker on my bottle that says, you know—it's the Gandhi, everyone knows the quote—be the change you wish to see in the world. But my personal iteration of it has always been, leave the world a little better than you found it. And, I'm not, I don't ever expect to be, you know, somebody who's known for my work, you know, in a larger capacity, statewide or nationally or anything like that. It's not necessarily one of my aspirations. I mean, I want to make as big of an impact as I can, but not for that reason. But to me, it's like we all are making an impact and leaving the world better, whether it's in our neighborhood, or in our family, or in our school, or our work. Whatever it is, you know, I think the…it's the little things that become the big things. So that's always been my personal, like life is short—we don't know, I'm pretty young, but, you know, you don't know. And you know, would I be able to say, "Gosh, I think I, you know, gave more than I, than I took," right? And that's, to me, is what it's all about. So that's why my work is important to me. And volunteering and working with other organizations too. So that is great for me.

CL: Yeah, that's a great segue into our final question.

JB: Okay.

CL: Which is, you know, what is your ideal future for Worcester?

JB: I would say continuing to evolve in terms of making sure that there are spaces for various perspectives, making sure that Worcester is able to retain not only talent but also diversity. And I think, I think that I'm able to demonstrate—and also sort of bring people with me, right—to show the opportunity that there is not just in the nonprofit space, but, you know…sometimes half the battle is showing up. But then, I also am learning that showing up can also be a privilege. So I think for a long time I thought, "oh, you just need to show up. You kind of just need to be in the spaces where you kind of just keep showing up and, keep working hard and things will, opportunities will come to you." But then I learned, I'm learning part of that is a privilege, you know? So, making sure that, yes, you do need to show up and work hard, but also make sure, like look around you. And that's my dream for Worcester, it's that everyone who's in a place of power, privilege, will look around them and say, "who isn't here?" Or, "who could I create space for?" Or "who am I noticing," you know, "isn't," you know, "able to contribute maybe in a meaningful way."

And I read the other day, someone—I wish I could credit it because I can't remember who wrote it—but said—I don't think it's a new concept—but that when you're doing this work, it's not about just carving out a place where you have a space. You know, where you, you know, you feel like you have a place and you're being included, but also making sure that you're constantly looking around and looking, you know, to say, "what? What's missing here?" Or "who maybe isn't feeling included or being invited?" So to me, that's like Worcester. My dream for Worcester is, I think it's incremental; I think we do a lot of things really well and some things not as well, and that will always be an evolution. It's not like we're going to become this perfect community, obviously. But I think working with that mentality can help. Last night there was a city council agenda item that was really, really harmful, for folks who, you know, weren't born in this country. And it was very…fortunately, there was a lot of opposition, and really productive opposition to that agenda item, and I'm quite certain that it will not proceed. But it's just a good reminder, too, that we've come a long way, we have a long way to go [laughs]. The fact that these conversations are still being entertained in these spaces, it's like, "oh my gosh." So I think it's important that we can do both: acknowledge our progress and say, "wow, we have tons of work to do."

And I joke—and I'll be close on this—I joke, but I'm not kidding: It's my job to put myself out of a job, right? Like if we do our work in terms of social justice correctly, our work becomes obsolete because we have solved a problem, a systemic problem. We are not solving a systemic problem every day, we're patching a hole that society, systems have caused for these kids and families. If we can do the work in parallel with some systems change, then we have a shot at putting ourselves out of business, which I'm just fine with [laughs]. I'll make sure our whole team is taken care of and gets a whole new career. Unfortunately, I don't see that happening, you

know, in the next few years, certainly. But I think it's important to have those conversations, and we're very fortunate that we have, you know, our board is very supportive of those conversations around bigger picture change and sort of putting CASA out of business, you know, quote unquote. So, yeah, a lot of work to be done, but as you can tell, I'm excited about it. And I feel like we're making an impact.

CL: Yeah, that's a great goal. And we're glad you're here. And I feel privileged to, you know, have had this conversation. And I feel, honestly, I mean—this is off the record—but I had never… I didn't know Worcester very well. And as you mentioned, I had heard, you know, Worcester was a place of high crime. And, you know, I was like, "I don't know if I want to live in Worcester." But actually, I was telling somebody the other day, I really like Worcester.

JB: Worcester is really cool, yeah.

JB: Yeah, Worcester is really cool. Worcester has a lot of good arts initiatives and a lot of good work going on, and a lot of spaces where you can find your kind of, your own community, whatever that looks like. It's a cool place. Yeah. And I just realized I, talked the paint off the wall, and I apologize for that, but, and I know you guys also have places to go, but I just realized I'm supposed to be recording a podcast downtown at four. [laughs]

CL: Okay.

JB: Hopefully, we can wrap up and I can get you guys these things, promptly.

CL: Great.

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