

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 27

4/2/25

A Level Playing Field
In conversation with Maria Mathieson

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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A Level Playing Field

In conversation with Maria Mathieson

Season 2; Episode 27

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Hosts: Jan, Rob, Dee, & Jim. Guest: Maria Mathieson

Maria Mathieson, long time friend, Executive Director of Peabody Preparatory in Baltimore, and board member of Equity Arc, discusses the role of diversity, equity, and inclusion in providing artistic development to disadvantaged young people. She discusses collaborating with retired military musicians (as highlighted in a recent CBS "60 Minutes" segment), and other efforts in leveling the playing field for the youth of Baltimore and beyond.

[Music]

JIM: Maria is joining us today from...

MARIA: I am joining you today from Baltimore, Maryland.

JIM: Baltimore, Maryland, by way of Google meet.

JAN: So, Maria, I'll just give a quick rundown of your professional life. Maria came to the United States from Scotland. She has her degree in music education. Tell me that's correct.

MARIA: It is music history with a minor in composition.

DEE: Oh!

JAN: I see no, what do I know? Okay. And she came to work in the United States in The Salvation Army as a divisional music director.

MARIA: That is correct and in the states of Oklahoma and Arkansas, which were the furthest away possible places from Scotland that you can possibly imagine.

[Laughter]

ROB: So true. Wow!

JAN: And so she did that job, and that it was in - when she was in that position that we got to know her...

MARIA: Yeah.

JAN: ...through our participation in The Salvation Army's Territorial Band and Choir...

MARIA: Yeah.

JAN: ...and then she moved from that to the Levine School of Music?

MARIA: I was in development and fundraising for a little bit in, eh, Knox Hill, Tennessee, for a couple of years, and then I moved to the Levine School of Music, which is a large community music school in Washington, DC, and was there and for over a decade in that role, and where I was basically the head of music education there. And then I am currently serving as the executive director at the Peabody Preparatory, which is another community music school up in Baltimore, which is part of the Peabody Institute, which is one of the schools of Johns Hopkins.

JAN: That is so can you tell a little bit about that? Like, Johns Hopkins - so they have all these different institutes. Is that how it works?

MARIA: So under the Johns Hopkins umbrella you have the university and then you have the hospital side. So under the university side there are multiple schools like the School of Engineering, the School of Nursing, the School of Medicine. And the Peabody Institute is one of those schools, and under the Institute umbrella you have the Peabody Conservatory and then the Peabody Preparatory. And so, essentially, the Preparatory: we serve all of the non-credit education. So, as one of my colleagues likes to put it, "from womb to tomb." This is how we describe our music and the students who come to the prep.

JAN: Was it there that you had one of Obama's kids in your program?

MARIA: It was at Levine.

JAN: Okay.

MARIA: We had - one of our flute teachers used to go to the White House to teach Malia, and there was one day I think in the Rose Garden her car happened to be in the background when they were doing an interview, because it was it was parked somewhere, and so we were joking that her little Corolla was, you know, on a news - it was more famous than she was.

JAN: Well, so, you're the director of the preparatory correct?

MARIA: I am, yeah.

JAN: And is that - did you come in at that role or did you have a different role first?

MARIA: Um, at Peabody I came in as the director.

JAN: Okay.

MARIA: So I oversee all of our educational programs. We have one of the oldest dance programs in the country. And also the music education program as well, and we have about 2500 students, like I say ranging in age from four months in our early childhood program to "seasoned adults" who come and learn and do lessons and they love what they do all the way through. And we have about 80% of our population are sort of in that pre-k through 12 age. We certainly have students that are on the Conservatory music education track, and then we have, you know, a lot of recreational students and that type of thing. So it's - we have five campus locations. So there's a lot going on. Every day is different, I shall say.

ROB: How many faculty?

MARIA: About 140 faculty.

JAN: The cool thing right now about Maria, despite all these things that I've followed, you know, throughout, is the most recent story with Equity Arc. Talk about that. What is that like?

MARIA: So, as part of my work at Peabody, we have a fabulous program called Tune-In, and Tuned-In is a scholarship program that provides free scholarships for students who are particularly from - from Baltimore. And Baltimore is kind of you know is very predominantly sort of African-American community, particularly Baltimore City. There are a lot of challenges as an issues around that, and when my colleague started the program, one of his questions were, "Where are the students from Baltimore City at Peabody? Where are those students?" Surely there must be talented young musicians from Baltimore City and surrounding areas who should be at Peabody, and they didn't have particularly a program for them. So they recognized the need to have a full scholarship program, and a program that provided not just music and, kind of, instrumental instruction, but also the wraparound support services, like transportation, like recognizing that some of our kids are coming from neighborhoods where they rely on free and reduced lunch and over a weekend. They may not necessarily get something to eat. So is there a way that we can help support that with the program?

So we started Tuned-In with about 6 students, and 16 years later we now have about 130 students that come from Baltimore City and surrounding areas, focusing particularly on Baltimore City, surrounding areas, but also on as we like to call them "endangered instruments," so like your bassoons and your oboes and on all those types of things, so, which was a way of then being able to build up our wind orchestra program. And so that gave us the opportunity to really attempt to, you know, have a program and have a pipeline for students giving them extra support. A lot of their instruction is on a Saturday, so they're coming to us predominantly for their Saturday instruction.

So as part of that program, we then developed a program that is a sort of national program called Pathways. And Pathways is really a program that is designed for underrepresented minority students to help get them to that next stage. So you've got your sort of pre-k through 12 sort of education program, but then once you get into high school, those kids that are really serious about potentially going into music to study music, how do we help give them the additional support and sort of that depth that they need to then be able to get into collegiate level programs?

And this is where Equity Arc came in. Equity Art was formed around this sort of collective programming, around Pathways, and sort of meeting that specifically in the arc of education, this sort of pathway of this sort of pre-collegiate, senior, you know, serious musician, but [unintelligible] coming from an underrepresented minority background. And so their Equity Arts role is really a sort of a connector for a lot of these programs around the country. And because we were so heavily involved with our program here, I was asked to be part of the board as they were sort of discussing how, like, what do we need? Do we need an organization that allows us to sort of connect all of these programs together across the country? And then as part of that program, Equity Arc decided some of the things that they could offer would be to create these sort of unique experiences for students within these Pathways programs from throughout the country, to be able to come together and have some of these wonderful opportunities.

JAN: Some of our listeners will know that there was a recent 60 minutes story. A group of

young people were scheduled to meet with The President's Own Band, and be able to have a performance with them. As part of the current elimination of DEI, that performance was stopped. I learned about that from Maria.

MARIA: So over the past couple of years, we've done side-by-side orchestral performances with Chicago Symphony, Cincinnati, Nashville, and where our students have come in, spent, you know, a couple of days working side-by-side with musicians from the orchestra, and then doing a performance with the conductor of the orchestra. When The President's Own Marine Band came and said, "We would love to do that because this is a good opportunity for us to be able to serve more of our winds, brass, and percussion students that would not normally have access, or less access, in the sort of the orchestral world. And so that was kind of the genesis of where this marine band thing came about. And then of course because of this executive order with DEI - and and I know that, you know, they were gutted, you know, certainly have couple of friends who are in, you know that organization, but had to make that decision, but then This is where military musicians from around the country retired said, "Can we recreate this?" CBS came alongside and said, "Could we just offer like maybe one student an opportunity to have what kind of maybe recreate this experience?" And then that morphed into, "Actually can we just recreate the whole thing?" So there were musicians who came in from LA, from, you know, from Texas, from all across the country, as retired military musicians, to come in and give that same experience for our student population. And literally within a week where we got the call going, "CBS have said they're willing to kind of step in the gap help cover transportation and and hotel costs. Can we step in the breach to be able to then recreate this opportunity?"

So that like, you know program directors around the world We're having conversation about can we get kids and then because of the change in date that meant that some of our original students weren't available. So we had to find some of the other students who were waitlisted. We had to pull some of our waitlist students in to be able to come in for the experience and kind of trade it out. But it was it was unbelievable to see that this really felt like something that people had an opportunity to stand up and say, "This is important. We disagree with what's happening, and this is something that we can take a stand on." And I think that for me was the piece that was just unbelievable.

ROB: Yeah.

JAN: Maria it was so very inspiring to watch that story. First of all just the fact that you were able to do it. Then the kids as they spoke about the value of music in their lives. And then the retired military who were willing to, number one, many of them pay their own way to come and be part of this and speak to what's wrong with - let me put it another way - what's so vital about DEI support for kids in music.

JIM: I wanted to say something on behalf of The President's Own US Marine Band. They are in a chain of command which requires them following orders, whereas...

MARIA: Yeah, absolutely.

JIM: ...whereas the retired military musicians that came in are no longer in that chain of command.

JAN: You had some kids from Peabody who were in that performance.

MARIA: Yeah, we had three of our students who participated, which, in fact one of whom has just been accepted into the Marine Band. He's going to go to this - the music school, and is actually - I don't know if he has enlisted or is about to enlist in in that school. So funnily after there was a real connection there. As part of our Pathways program, one of the things that we do, we're able to provide, is Professional level instruments for those students so we, Peabody, buy them and then that becomes the student's instrument. And so that actual event was was the first test run of the new tuba. So the tuba got its first concert on 60 minutes, which was really cool.

JAN: I don't know if you have any facts and figures on this, but just in general. We know that minorities, people of color, are underrepresented in professional musical groups. What would you share about why that is? And why it's so important to try to bridge the gap to be more inclusive in that environment?

MARIA: Yeah, I mean in the 60 minute broadcast like the statistic is that of American orchestras is like 80% of musicians are white, and 11% were Asian, 5% are Hispanic, and 2% are black, and obviously that is not reflective of the country that we live in. What we have found particularly with our students who are coming from underrepresented minority backgrounds, I mean, Baltimore is actually a really clear example of this. Baltimore is a city that has suffered for years of systemic racist policies, including redlining, which has meant that, you know, African-American families could only purchase homes in certain neighborhoods that are chronically underfunded, and therefore their school programs aren't as strong. They don't have the resources that their wealthier county colleagues have. And as more wealthy people move to the suburbs, that's where the tax dollars went, where the money went, so there was more investment in school programs, which has left Baltimore City Public Schools really struggling for funding, really struggling to be able to provide a lot of the resources. And you know if they're gonna cut a program, the first thing they often look at is the arts. So we've had this sort of systemic disinvestment in school programs to be able to kind of capture those students who are super talented but just don't have the means. Their family, they're struggling to feed their kids let alone get them into a music program.

So that was kind of the genesis of also why creating a program like Tuned-In was so important to what we do at Peabody, because that really helped allow student populations to give them that opportunity, and to provide that that sort of pathway and access to that form of education. I think that that is what we're seeing is that as marginalized communities, the disinvestment, they don't have access to the quality music education. So they're not getting the funding, the access to quality instruments, their music programs may be bare bones at best. So that already puts them so much far behind their colleagues who come from wealthier counties who have much more support, and, you know, and obviously, even just in the public school realm, let alone if you're at private school or some of these you know much more affluent schools where you're getting all of the things - you know, all of God's children get all of the things and access to all of the things. So already our students from Baltimore were much further behind their colleagues as far as getting started in music, so they're starting later on their instrument, they don't have as high quality an instrument, they're only doing group instruction, they can't afford private instruction. So that I think really sort of sets the tone for why that is such a gap, and then why it is so important to have programs that help redress that balance a little bit and really help give those students the advantage and opportunity that their colleagues from other wealthier school districts might

have.

JAN: So this is me looking at your Facebook page and you had this picture where you have all these buttons all over you, which led me on a mission to find out what AIM was...

MARIA: Yeah.

JAN: the Academy for Impact through Music for Social Action. For any other Salvation Army Music directors out there, to me what you've been able to do in your career is you bring together the skill from that job of being a divisional music director, the skill from working in development, and then your natural inclination toward collaboration. So you can do so much more through that collaboration with other people than just say your own institution could do on its own. Could you talk just a little bit about the value of collaboration with other organizations, and how that strengthens the program you can offer through Peabody?

MARIA: My Salvation Army lens has really colored my experience and my you know the the training I got as a divisional music director, the learning I had, the work that I did has really impacted what I do now. And I think that's also why our Tuned-In program and our Pathways programs are something that are so near and dear to my heart, because I just view it as, frankly, it's a Salvation Army music program. It's like the genesis of what it is, and certainly our Tuned-In program is an El Sistema inspired program. You may or may not be familiar with the El Sistema movement in Venezuela where they use music as sort of a tool for social change and like kids go to their nucleo and and they - it's a way of keeping kids off the street and giving them something to do. And so that model, while it's not government sponsored, has been replicated here in the States, and that's kind of the genesis of what our Tuned-In program is. But if you look at sort of the tenets of what the El Sistema program is - it's really also what The Salvation Army does too - is we use music as a way to keep kids engaged, to keep them active, and to give them somewhere safe to learn and somewhere safe to go, and to provide that that opportunity. And I think because of that Salvation Army roots, where you're collaborating with musicians across - you know you're sending them to territorial music Institute, you're sending out your kids - that it's not just one corps. And as a music director in Oklahoma, there were corps that had two or three musicians, so in order to help build that experience, you need to bring them together to do other things, so you could do bigger and better things.

That has really impacted my work throughout my career, and certainly been something that I've been really keen to replicate with what I do at Peabody, is that we're good alone, but we are even better together, and the AIM and project was something, So that is on an international scale. So Peabody participated for a year with some of our teachers who spent a year and a fellowship program through AIM. But one of the interesting things that they do is they also take the leadership. So, myself and my two leaders who run my Tuned-In program, with the three of us, spent a week with leaders from other organizations from all over the world. And again just that collaboration, that brain trust - you know we're all trying to do the same thing - do a similar thing, but that ability to hear how they're doing it in Brazil or Colombia or in Greece, and all these places around the world. So you can see there are definite similarities, but each approach is different. And then, again, building that camaraderie - for example my Tuned-In director has now gone to a couple of the programs that we connected with through AIM, and that's been just super exciting to kind of see that that building. But I think the sort of the core of it is, we're always stronger together in community. It's that image of like it's one string versus ten strings wrapped together makes

strength. And that that I think is that the core of this.

JIM: You would mentioning El Sistema from Venezuela. When I was teaching young people and I would put on a video of an orchestra, things were okay. They're gonna watch it, and it's fun music. But if I put on the Venezuelan Youth Symphony with Gustavo Dudamel, suddenly - and this is, this goes right to the heart of what I think you're doing - suddenly the kids could see themselves up there. Suddenly they saw, "This is a possibility for someone like me." And this is where I think we also have the systemic problem that you've talked about with redlining in Baltimore. How are those kids ever gonna see it's possible to do something? Because they see all the barriers along the way. You're providing a way to undercut the problem. You take away the blinders and say, "This is actually possible for you."

That to me is key to another point, and that has to do with the national discussion, now, about leveling the playing field. There's one interest that says, "The playing field is leveled by advancing these possibilities for these people who may not have had these possibilities before." There's another contingency that would say, "You're trying to level the playing field by taking away from people." Can you address the idea of: you level the playing field not by disadvantaging those who have an advantage, but by giving more opportunities to people that may not be able to see that they even belong on that stage in that orchestra?

MARIA: Yeah, and I think to your point, Jim, that's sort of the crux of the matter, is why this is so important, is that for our students coming from inner-city Baltimore who just, you know, they have families who are struggling to put food on the table, they're worried about their next meal. Can they pay the rent? Can they pay the bills? They're not worrying about, "How do I take the talent that I have to then be to use that to open up additional opportunity to expand my horizon?" And I think that that's sort of the the crux of the matter is of that recognition that there isn't a problem and actually, there is a huge problem, and I think it's that sort of naivety that you're taking something that way, you're gonna lessen the experience of those kids that are getting everything in our suburbs versus our kids who don't have access to all of those things in inner-city Baltimore. You know, I've seen some of these pictures about "What is equity and inclusion?" It's not that everyone has an equal box, is that some people need two or three boxes to be able to see over the fence. And I think that that is - that's what we're trying to do is that, it's not that we're we're taking away. We are giving so that everyone can have that similar playing field. You know and I think sort of the Black Lives Matter movement, and, well, "All Lives Matter," and it's like, "Well if that were true then why is this an issue? Why is this a problem if all lives matter?" That is not in fact true, and it's obviously the same in the music, music education, dance education, and arts education. We're certainly seeing that students who have access to these wonderful programs, they're the ones that are being set up for success because they can afford all the things that it takes to be a good musician and or a good dancer or a good artist. Whereas we are just trying to give the same opportunity to some of those students, and we're not taking anything away from from our students in the suburbs. We are just helping those that don't have the opportunity in areas that are predominantly under resourced. They don't have the tax funding. *[music begins]* They don't have access in their schools. They're barely operating at a minimum.

JIM (voice-over): We recorded this first part of our conversation with Maria Mathieson on Saturday, March 29th. Today is Tuesday, April 1st, and, no fooling, Maria has just announced

she is leaving her position of Executive Director for Peabody Preparatory to assume a new position as Executive Director for the Choral Arts Society of Washington. Congratulations, Maria! And while these professional achievements continue to grow, let's not overlook Maria's other passion: religious kitsch.

MARIA: I love everything. The tackier, the better. This is how we're going to celebrate our Lord and Savior, as praying hands or a "Jesus Saves" piggy bank, or, like I - It fills me with so much stinkin' joy. It just - like if I go into a shop and I see it, I don't care how much money it costs, I will buy it.

JIM (voice-over): That and more when we conclude our conversation with Maria.

Until next time.

[Music ends]