

# Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

**Season 2 - Episode 25**

*3/19/25*

Carl, Alexander, David, & Robert



# 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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# Carl, Alexander, David, & Robert

## Season 2; Episode 25

3/19/2025

*Hosts: Jan, Rob, Dee, & Jim.*

*Jim presents 4 people who have had a significant influence on him as he has been Making His Way: Carl Sagan, Alexander Ringer, David Liptak, & Robert Bridges.*

[Music]

**JIM (voice-over):** For this series, Jan directed us to choose three people who have influenced us as we have made our way. I thought of four and left it up to the editor to eliminate one. Then I remembered who edits this podcast.

[Music]

**JIM:** Who would you like next?

**JAN:** Oh, oh, I'm going to go with my brother. That would be you, Jim.

**JIM:** Oh, that's me. Okay, I went, uh, someone who, whose career has been an influence on me and that is Carl Sagan. And the reason I'm choosing Carl Sagan is because he was, during a certain point in my life, the preeminent science explainer to everybody.

**ROB:** Mm-Hmm.

**JIM:** So he has this series called Cosmos. It was the one from 1980, 1981. He had a way of saying things that was - that would fill you with wonder, humility about your knowledge, how everything that you know is provisional, how everything is progressive if you maintain your curiosity. And it was an anti-dogmatic approach to learning things. And when that, when an episode would come on, first of all, I love the music. It was like an extended Amen, plagal cadence all the way through the way that music went. And then he would come on, whatever the topic was - I thought it went on for years; it was only 13 episodes - but then you would hear the music coming towards the end of the show and it's like, "Oh no, no, I don't want the trip to be over. I want him to keep going."

But it's more than him. It was also his wife. Now he married Ann Druyan in '81. She was a co-writer on the series along with a Steven Soder. And then after Carl Sagan died in '96, Ann Druyan and Steven - Steven works with Neil deGrasse Tyson...

**ROB:** Mm-Hmm.

**JIM:** ...at the American Museum of Natural History with the Hayden Planetarium. And so when the series was revisited in 2014, Ann and Steven were still writers on it and they got Neil deGrasse Tyson to be the Carl Sagan role in that. And he would also do some, some writing, but in terms of giving you an inroad into a different story - because all four of us

grew up with a certain story about life and meaning and everything, where we've come from. Where are we? Where are we going? And that is a certain type of story. And so now when Cosmos comes along, I'm in graduate school, and here is a different type of story, not to make one or the other true or false. It's just a different type of story, a different way of considering things. And I really liked his approach to it. So I have a few books of his. I have the Cosmos book that goes along with the series. I've got a book called "The Dragons of Eden."

**ROB:** Mm-Hmm.

**JIM:** I've got another one called "Demon Haunted World," which I think was his last book. I don't have his book "Broca's Brain," but I have his fiction, the novel "Contact"...

**ROB:** "Contact," yeah.

**JIM:** ...which then became a motion picture, but the book has depth to it that may not translate to the screen. So they left it out. So I chose Carl Sagan as a big influence, and it has to do with the moment in your life that you contact a person.

**ROB:** Hmm.

**JIM:** I was noticing that my list was male-centered and that upset me, because at the same time, I was also reading Margaret Mead...

**JAN:** Mm-Mmm.

**JIM:** ..."Coming of Age in Samoa." And, just by that time of life, I had this thing for Jane Goodall, but she was married at the time, *[laughter]* but they're, they're pioneering work. Margaret Mead, you know, anthropology was really not in solid footing at the time...

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JIM:** ...and so she had methods and techniques to her research that perhaps are not - that are outdated now. Then Jane Goodall, just on someone's advice, just goes off by herself and decides to live among chimpanzees, and discovers how closely we are related, you know..

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JIM:** ...to them. And so those two were a big influence too. And then also, because of her writing, *[music starts]* Ann Druyan would be a big influence, but I kind of put them all under the Carl Sagan - in that club of explainers.

Alexander Ringer was a professor at the University of Illinois when I knew him. He was in the musicology department. I was in the composition department. Music composition was the 5th floor - the top floor - of the music building. And the 4th floor was musicology. The ideological distance between those two floors made it the two most distant points on that entire Champaign-Urbana campus. Completely different ways of thinking.

He was there from 1958 to 1991. So who else would have been there? John Cage. Musicians will try to grasp an idea of John Cage and his approach to music versus Alexander Ringer's approach to everything. When you had a class with Alexander Ringer, the musicology students were shaking with fear. The common phrase was, "You've been put through the Ringer." That's just it. I, rather naively, decided, "This guy sounds interesting. I

want to take his class." And every time I took a musicology class, especially with him, but every time I took a musicology class, there'd be several composers who were in the class. And by the end of the semester, maybe two or three of us were left, because they would just drop the class. It'd be, just, not the approach. It's just a different way of doing things.

Alexander Ringer was educated in Amsterdam.

**JAN:** Hmm.

**JIM:** He is a survivor of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, and would cover up the tattoo on his arm. I had him for three classes. The first one was "The history of music theory from Rameau to Marx." Marx is Adolf Marx, and it's in the mid-19th century. So it was about 150 years of music theory. And we all had to do a paper, and we had to do an oral presentation in class. And I thought I had all my things ready to go. I stood up to do this presentation. I wasn't in two sentence[s] before he started to just tear me to shreds for the way I was presenting things. It was all out of order. It didn't make any sense. "No, you should do this part first. Say this." And I'm thinking, "Oh, okay." And, you know, it was fine. And people are looking at, "Oh, that poor guy up there." No, okay, that's fine. What he did was he straightened me out in thinking.

And I learned later, it was his witnessing how Hitler happened in Germany - and the way people reacted to Hitler, and did not do the right things, that allowed Hitler to take over - became a touchstone for him that, if you're going to make a presentation, your thinking better be right. You better have it all in your mind solidly. No sloppy research. No sloppy presentation. Get it right. So I survived that.

And then I thought, "I want to take another class with him." And this is before I knew of his experience under the Nazis. I took a class about opera. So, okay, I want to learn something about opera. And then in the class, the semester-long project was, you would analyze an opera. And then you would present it in a paper. And I chose Parsifal. People will immediately know that I've done something *[laughter]* wrong there. Because Parsifal is this Wagner - anti-Semite Wagner (and Ringer is Jewish, and suffered for it) - anti-Semite Wagner, and not only is it just that, it's this Christian replacement opera with Nordic myth. And so I decided, "I'll choose Parsifal," and he didn't have any objection at all. And I presented it and did it in a paper.

I remember studying all semester for this, and then I have to turn it in tomorrow, and I haven't written it yet...

**DEE:** Oh, geez.

**JIM:** ...no, the day after tomorrow. And I'm teaching classes...

**DEE:** That sounds right.

**ROB:** Sounds about right.

**JIM:** ...and so it was this all-nighter thing...

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JIM:** ...and all typed up, it was like 36 pages. And I presented my thing, and he accepted that, and he was, "That was good." And so now my feelings towards him are warming a

little bit, and he's kind of accepting what I'm saying. Because first of all, I've figured out how to do it.

Then my third class with him would have been in '81. This was the centennial of Béla Bartók. So he did a seminar on Bartók's string quartets. And I remember one class in particular. Well, a friend of mine, Jeff Briggs, was in that class, too. And I remember Jeff said something the wrong way, and Ringer just came on board. And poor Jeff. And I wanted to rescue him because I heard the mistake. I heard how Ringer accepted it, and it was two different definitions of one word. Jeff used the word "set" of notes. He shouldn't have. He should have said "collection" of notes. The word "set" set Ringer off into saying, "Oh, you composers, it was your set theory. It has nothing to do with Bartók." Oh, it was very uncomfortable.

Anyway, Ringer was in a class once making a point. He's going, and he's going, and he's going. And then he gets to the end, and then all these people are kind of like shaking their heads. And he says, well, and he goes to different people and say, "Well, you know what I was saying, right? I was trying to say this," and I don't know. And then he finally comes to me and he says, "But you understood me, didn't you?" This was the highlight of my academic career. Ringer, looking at me, a composition student, with all of these musicology students falling by the wayside, looks at me and says, "But you understood what I said, didn't you?" And I said, "I was with you through this, this, this, but then when you said this, that's where I lost it." And then he thought that he had failed something...

**JAN:** Hmm.

**JIM:** ...which was amazing. Now, as we're going on, this man that everyone feared and that I feared but had to live up to, eventually we would walk together from the music building to the student union to have tea or coffee or lunch and just talk about things. And I remember years later, I went back. He had retired. He just happened to be visiting the music building the day I happened to be visiting the music building. We're there at the elevator. And he looks at me and he points, he said, "You're Salvation Army." *[laughter]* "Yes, I am."

He was the one that said, "You've got to think correctly. You can't just go with feeling. You can't just go with whatever everyone else is doing. You've got to get this right." So Alexander Ringer. Had a devilish sense of humor. Very intelligent man. He lectured in English and German and Dutch and French...

**DEE:** Oh my gosh.

**JIM:** ...and Italian and Spanish.

**ROB:** Holy cow.

**JIM:** Did I name eight?

**DEE:** Mmm, no. Six, I think.

**JIM:** He lectured in eight languages. He was also the one, you know, if I said the Kodály hand signs, you would know what I'm talking about in teaching kids.

**DEE:** Mm-Hmm, yes.

**JIM:** Kodály was a Hungarian teacher, musician, composer. And he was the one that started

the International Kodály...

**DEE:** Oh, really!

**JIM:** ...yeah, Association and bringing Kodály's teaching techniques to the United States. So every elementary music...

**DEE:** Right.

**JIM:** ...teacher will know who I'm talking about. Hungarian. That's it. He also lectured in Hungarian because why not?

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JIM:** Powerful mind.

**DEE:** So when did he tell you about his experience at the...?

**JIM:** I heard it from somebody else.

**DEE:** But he would have eventually talked to you about it, wouldn't he?

**JIM:** We didn't talk about it.

**DEE:** Oh, because I mean, you eventually became friends, didn't you?

**JIM:** Yeah.

**DEE:** But you never talked about it?

**JIM:** No.

**DEE:** Oh, I didn't know that.

**JIM:** He didn't bring it up.

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JIM:** And that would be the proper way for it to come up.

**DEE:** Right.

**JIM:** He didn't bring it up. I would not bring that up. But when I learned that, then I realized, Bergen-Belsen is where Anne Frank met her end. This is where Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, the cellist from the Auschwitz Orchestra, finished out the war. By the way, she will turn 100 this year...

**JAN:** Wow.

**JIM:** ...on dad's birthday, July 17<sup>th</sup>.

**DEE:** Do you know where she lives? I bet it's Sarasota.

**JIM:** No, no, no. She came back and founded the English Chamber Orchestra, the ECO.

**DEE:** Oh, okay.

**JIM:** She lives in someplace in England, maybe London or the outskirts. But she's - and still is active. Her mind is all there.

**DEE:** I mean, you just mentioned Béla Bartók. And I was like, we were talking the other day about how you found out Béla Bartók's son had been living in Sarasota and we didn't find that out until after he died.

**ROB:** Really!

**DEE:** And then Stravinsky's grandson or something.

**JIM:** No, Stravinsky's son, Soulima. This is the thing. He was down in Sarasota. And, like, they would have, like, the Florida Orchestra has these pre-concert talks.

**ROB:** Right.

**DEE:** Right.

**JIM:** So they're going to do Bartók's "Concerto for Orchestra." Now, I know Bartók just because his music is amazing. I had that seminar...

**DEE:** Right.

**JIM:** ...with Alexander Ringer. And he had this piano course called "Mikrokosmos," which is a series of books that he wrote for his son, Péter.

**DEE:** Mm-Hmm.

**JIM:** His son, Péter, lived in Sarasota and would come up and do the pre-concert talks about the "Concerto for Orchestra," Bartók's last major work and one of the finest orchestral compositions of the 20th century. Just an amazing work. So he was right there.

Soulima Stravinsky, Stravinsky's son, taught at the University of Illinois right until the year I got there. He was there from 1950 to 1978. And he's the one - now, this is Stravinsky, so Stravinsky would stop by from time to time, and I would talk to people who knew him well. But Stravinsky's son was the one, you know, you would have these Monday night Composers Forums. Okay, time for some composers to play their pieces. I played pieces on that. Sometimes a guest lecturer would come by, you know, or one of the professors would give one. Alexander Ringer gave one of those and talked about his Jewish heritage and the certain mystical things out of the Kabbalist tradition. But Soulima did a - did one one night and the thing about composers, we're talking about how predictable Mozart was. And he said, "Well, let's just think about that." He would take a piece of Mozart, a melody, and said, "It sounds so obvious. It sounds inevitable, doesn't it?" Yup. And then he would leave off the last little phrase and then say, "How do you think this ends?" And everyone would sing something or write it down or something. No one ever got it. As predictable as Mozart is from first impression, he kind of said, "I'm going to prove something to you." And no one could guess how Mozart would end a phrase. And yet once you heard it, well, of course that's how it should end.

Anyway, Alexander Ringer was at the University of Illinois. He had started off, I think, out in Berkeley. I think he served as a general editor over the writings of Arnold Schoenberg.

**DEE:** Oh, wow.

**JIM:** So what's the impact? Most of this won't get in, but I just need to talk about him. His impact only was to get the thinking correct. Don't be sloppy in your thinking. And he would



teach you to ask the questions and raise your own objections so you wouldn't get it done to you in front of the class, as happened to me.

I'm sorry, that was so long, but I just need to talk about him. And I'll cut that down to an appropriate length.

**JAN:** Here's the thing, Jim. These people that have influenced us, they're personal and they're hugely significant. And it's an important thing, I think, to honor those people. There are people who go through their lives and never acknowledge that anybody had any influence on them at all. I remember a conversation about this once with somebody who couldn't claim any influence from anybody. It was the most astounding thing. I won't name that person.

**DEE:** *[laughing]* I think I know.

**JAN:** It was just like, "How do you not recognize that you don't come into this earth without help from a village?" No offense, but...

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JAN:** ...okay.

**JIM:** Well, we're all aggregate, right? There's no one just right out of the womb to the grave, unchanged by the environment.

**ROB:** Right.

**JIM:** We are all a collection of everyone we've ever met.

**JAN:** Yes.

**JIM:** Positive, negative, relative, distant, historical figure. *[music begins]* I choose Alexander Ringer, who stands as a representative for, oh man, the professors I've had and the things I've learned. They're really great lessons.

*[music: Bartók, String Quartet #2. 2nd Movement, excerpt]*

**JIM:** David Liptak, I would have to mention him. He was a friend, you know? He gave me two great lessons as a composer. One is, imagine that you're walking through a Japanese garden. And as you're walking through, the relationships change just as you're going through. The way the light hits things, the way the rocks are arranged, the way the plants are arranged, your point of view, the way the breeze is coming at you, every step you take is a different view. That's what your composition should be, a different way of looking at it. And the other thing, the most practical, the most wonderful thing he said, "A pencil has two ends for a reason." *[laughter]* That's the way he started the composition lesson.

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JAN:** It's a profound truth.

**JIM:** But that's the way - I walk in, sat down, he said, "Always remember, the pencil has two ends for a reason. Show me what you brought." And then he was - It's not about music. He was there at Michigan State, his first job out of Eastman, would ride a bicycle from his house to the campus. Rode home one day and found that his wife, soon to be ex-wife, had put all

of his possessions on the front lawn. And that's how he learned that. So when I was going through troubles, he said, "Sometimes you just have to realize things." One of the best counseling sessions I've ever had.

And then he came to Illinois looking for a job. And he was at that time living with a violinist named Catherine Tait. And they - and Illinois was looking for a composer and they were looking for a violinist. So they were down at Illinois. And I remember we went into some classroom, someplace, and he was supposed to present his music as this candidate for, would he be hired by the University of Illinois? And he's playing some music and it is contemporary music and he's playing it. And he's a rather taciturn fellow. So he's not really selling himself much. He would play a piece. "Anyone have anything to ask?" Nothing. He'd play, and I'm thinking, "He's not going to make it here." He plays another piece. Now he's played five pieces. No one is asking him anything. Like, this is not going well. So he's just sitting there. So I raised my hand. Said, "Professor Liptak. The first piece you played and the fourth piece you played, to me, sound like they're connected in some way." Because they did. I was just listening to the processes he used and the way he did it. And he stops and he does one of those, "Why, yes, they are." And then he went on and it just was a flood of information about his writing process. And then at the end, he just came over and said, "Thank you for that," he said. "Sure."

**DEE:** So he was hired?

**JIM:** Yeah, he and Catherine were both hired. They married. She later developed cancer...

**DEE:** Oh, yeah, you told me.

**JIMI:** ...and he lost her that way. And then the last I had heard from him, he was married again and quite happy. And I think he's now, he might have retired from Eastman. He went back to Eastman...

**DEE:** Mm-Hmm.

**JIM:** ...after Illinois. He went back and he chaired the composition department. When we recorded with Sunshine Brass down at the Springs Theater, they said, "Oh, we just did a recording session with a violist." I said, "Really?" Yeah. *[music begins]* It was David's piece. He had been down in Tampa recording this viola concerto he had written. I didn't know anything about it. Oh, the times we could have had there! But that was David Liptak.

*[Audio clip: Viola Concerto (David Liptak), from a video recording at Spring Theater, Tampa.]*

**JIM:** I'm taking up all of your time, but I never talk about this stuff. I don't, uh, talk about this stuff.

**JAN:** That's why it's important though. I'm just saying there's... Okay.

**JIM:** Sometimes you just have to realize things.

**JAN:** You have to pay attention for one thing.

**JIM:** Yeah. That was his... Yeah, quite a guy. My third person is Robert Bridges. He was my Corps Officer in the '80s, and it's a very simple thing. It has to do with integrity, and when I had the privileges speaking at his service, I wanted to make a certain point. That was that the man that you see as your boss, as your pastor, with his family, in the office, anywhere

you see him, he's the same guy. This was a very important lesson because you see a lot of people who, okay, now they're on their platform, now they're the boss, now there's this. And I would see that in a number of people where I thought, "Oh, that's a rough thing to do." And maybe that's just a practical thing that people do, is, they change their persona by where they are. And then he came along, and he did not do that. He did not change his persona. He was the same person everywhere you saw him. So I'll broaden it out and say it's Bob and Betty Bridges that are that way. These are people that are completely reliable in what they are saying to you. They're not trying to play you in any way. That consistency of person is so admirable, and he's what I call an individual, someone who is not divided among the different roles that he has in life. And that was a huge lesson for me. I always wanted to model however I was going to do things based on that. And of course, every person knows how they fail, you know, living up to their model's, not expectations, but their model's behavior and that. But so I fail at that. But every time I'm thinking about, no, the person I want to be with Deanna, the person I am in front of my kids at school, the person I am when I'm driving down this road at rush hour, I want to be the same person. And Bob Bridges comes to mind.

**ROB:** Yeah.

**JAN:** Good one.

*[Music]*

**JIM (voice-over):** So there are my four, and now you know who to credit or, as need dictates, to blame. Oh, and the eighth language in which Alexander Ringer lectured, it was Hebrew.

*[Music]*

Next up, Rob closes out this series with a friend, a relative, and a mentor as we continue Making Our Way.

Until next time.

*[Music ends]*