

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 28

4/9/25

Political Climate Change

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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Season 2; Episode 28

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

Our conversation with Maria Mathieson concludes with the repercussions of working in DEI efforts in the current political climate, Maria's many travel and home mishaps, and her fondness for the American Tacky artistic movement.

[Music]

JIM (voice-over): Okay, trivia time. Who said the following? "The greatness of a nation can be judged by how it treats its weakest member." Know who it is? Do an online search and the number one answer from Lord Google, from whom all information flows, is Mahatma Gandhi. Nice try, but no sources are cited and it's not found in any of Gandhi's known writings or speeches. Perhaps you thought of Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela or Frederick Douglass, and I can see why. Chances are you did not think of Pol Pot or Joseph Stalin or Saddam Hussein, or any of our more recent authoritarian figures.

Ethics, whether national or personal, must include some accounting of how we treat those who can neither help us or hurt us; of how we defend the defenseless, or don't; and of how we embrace the marginalized, or leave them to their own state. We at Making Our Way are most fortunate to count among our friends those who aspire to, and often attain, this ethical sensitivity. We keep them close so they can help keep us true.

One such friend is Maria Mathieson, whom we met in our last episode called "A Level Plainfield." Here is her story so far. Maria is the executive director of Peabody Preparatory at Johns Hopkins University. Peabody Prep engages in programs such as Tuned-In and Pathways that reach talented and aspiring musicians, dancers, and artists in under-resourced communities. Maria also serves on the board of Equity Arc, "a national coalition dedicated to increasing racial equity within the field of classical music in the United States." You may recall a recent 60 Minutes segment about Equity Arc and its efforts in coalition with The President's Own United States Marine Band to provide a coaching and performance opportunity for disadvantaged musicians. After the president's anti-DEI stance, however, the Marine Band had to withdraw from the project. That's when CPS stepped in, and retired military musicians from around the country answered the call to produce a duplicate experience to enthusiastic acclaim.

In today's political climate change, what precautions did Maria and her crew take, and what repercussions might they face?

JAN: Equity Arc is a non-profit. Is that correct?

MARIA: It is.

JAN: Are you getting, or do you expect to get pressure in our current environment in opposition to the work that you're doing?

MARIA: Yes, for sure. Equity Arc, they, from what we're hearing from our executive director, certainly everything has been positive. We're getting really positive feedback around this work. And we're definitely getting, from the Equity Arc perspective, I think they are definitely getting, you know, certainly donations have been coming in, and they've been reached out from other organizations about partnering and what that might look like and what that could look like, you know, to provide additional experiences like this. The concern that we've had, certainly as a board, is in: are funders going to be scared off because of this DEI work, because this work is exclusively funding-specific. A lot of our partnership is between the Pathways programs and higher education. And that is, I think, where we are seeing a lot of the concerns around Equity Arc and for our student population. I know, for example, in order for our students to participate, we definitely had to run that up the flagpole here at Peabody and at Johns Hopkins, because Johns Hopkins is on a list of 10 schools that they are very closely looking at. And so, you know, we are definitely having to be aware of what is being said, what is being put out there, those type of things, because of that threat of pulling funding.

JAN: It was a dark week this week for academia, and we watched what happened with Columbia. University of Michigan, just this week, got rid of their DEI, which was devastating to me because that was a large part of what made that university what it is. And I can see that as your kids want to go on to college, this will be something that impacts them. So I just didn't know, I know you don't know yet probably how to move forward with that, but I'm very much hoping that collaboration and bravery will lead toward the ability to continue this work. It's interesting, U of M Flint decided to rename their DEI office something else. They put another acronym on it. And they sort of massaged the definitions, but they're trying to go forward. And so it becomes this response, I suppose, to the political environment to try to still do the work, but maybe be a little bit under the radar. And now, all of us know about you because of 60 Minutes. And I didn't know if that in some ways, well, first, it's a positive because we learned about what you do, but it also puts a target on you in a way.

MARIA: Oh, yeah, yeah. In the 60 Minute broadcast, prior to it going live, as a board with Equity Arc, we did have a conversation and they did pull down the membership list as a preventative, cautionary target, particularly for those - that higher ed piece, because that is the one that I think we are, obviously that is where all schools, particularly at that, those sort of the ivies and the high level schools, that the no-named schools are, we are all worrying about what that's going to mean, what that's going to impact. And we've certainly had internal conversations around, "What's on our website?" "What is this going to look like?" And around our Tuned-In program, which we are dealing, "How do we talk about our Tuned-In program and not impact what it is we actually do in Tuned-In?" And Tuned-In is actually - because we are dealing with financial need - is one of our sort of elements of qualification. It means that we certainly, but we're also financial need, Baltimore City, predominantly, like focus Baltimore City, but also Baltimore County, as well as sort of the endangered instruments. And kind of particularly for Pathways, the merit piece, if you know, you're super talented, that type of thing. So we have a very diverse group that participate in

Tuned-In, but because we focus on Baltimore City, it does mean we lean much more African-American just because that's the demographic population that we have.

DEE: I wanted to follow up on the impact, I guess, of the 60 Minutes and everything that's happened. Have you seen people are more educated now on the importance of DEI, just in the general public, and getting support because people who maybe before didn't realize my vote matters, that now they realize it does matter, who actually is in control? And I'm just wondering if you've seen any sort of progress that way, that people are now - they have their eyes open, and this is something that's important.

MARIA: I mean, I think that's the hope that that's what's happening. I definitely think from the response from, you know, the equity arc is getting like the emails that they're getting, the positive that they're getting, that I think for a lot of people, this was a, it felt like a little bit of a stand. And I think that's where we are all sort of, I don't know about you all, but I kind of feel a little debilitated and like, "Where is my stand?" Like, can I stand? Is there something I can get behind that states that this is not okay? And that's what I'm hoping is that something like this helps inspire, that doing something can be impactful. Like, obviously on the kids who participated, the military musicians who participated, but that sort of broader audience of, "Oh, actually, because this was canceled because of the DEI connection, that that's not okay." You know, and I'm hopeful that that helped spark something. I'm also a realist that we are in a time where keeping everyone off kilter, and not being able to formulate behind something - a movement - we're not quite there yet. And I think that that's kind of the reality of where we are. But I'm hoping that people who watch 60 Minutes and, you know, you know, I guess, middle America or somewhere where this may be not even something they particularly thought about as to why this was important, that it may be sparked a conversation.

DEE: Yeah, it just seems like we have to keep reminding people why this is happening and where it's coming from, because it's so easy, as you know, what is it, America of amnesia?

JAN: Oh, gosh.

DEE: You know, that we need to keep making those connections and saying, "This is why your vote matters. This is why this is happening."

JAN: You know, I know I'm like a receptive audience for the 60 Minutes program, but for me, it was nothing but joyful. It was this moment of encouragement that, first, you were able to do it; second, all these people came together because of what had happened and made state in their just their being. There was a statement both about I mean, I got emotional watching it because nonetheless, I'm seeing Maria in the audience, which was an awesome moment. I said, "Rob, there's Maria." And so it kept going back to you. It was awesome. But, you know, every statement that was made to me reinforced, "Wait a minute, there are things we can do," and I need that right now because it's very hard to find that thing that we can do. So we do this podcast and have an audience of, you know, small, but at least we have a chance to have a say and to present topics that may push people a little outside of their comfort zone.

ROB: Yup.

JAN: We've all been at this table, been impacted by music in our lives in the most profound ways. And the richness that it brings, the camaraderie that it brings, the way that it helps in

all the other areas of your education.

So, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted." I'm telling you, that's the best quote I know for you. And I love that it's on your Facebook page. You've had your own challenges as a female musician. You persist. And I don't know what keeps driving you, but it's impressive.

MARIA: Well, thank you. I really appreciate that. That's super kind of you to say it. But I think it's just I'm so passionate about this work. I'm so passionate about being able to provide opportunity. I view it as my sort of my life's work is to pass on the gift of music and to pass it on to the next generation. And to share that passion with other people and to ensure that this is something, you know, this being a musician has offered me these amazing opportunities. And for me, being able to gift that to musicians that follow behind me or to musicians that I work with in other ways, *[music begins]* that is really my I view that as my life's work.

JAN: That's awesome.

JIM (voice-over): We'll return to Maria in just a moment. But while you've been listening, I've been researching this quote, "The greatness of a nation can be judged by how it treats its weakest member." I found something close from the 1976 Democratic National Convention in a speech given by Senator and former Vice President Hubert Humphrey, where he says the following. "The ultimate moral test of any government is the way it treats three groups of its citizens. First, those in the dawn of life, our children. Second, those in the shadows of life, our needy, our sick, our handicapped. Third, those in the twilight of life, our elderly." That's good. That's solid. And I have the transcript.

But here's another Gandhi Google result. Quote, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated." Again, a nice sentiment. But again, it doesn't appear with any cited sources, although some have made some nice looking memes with it. I think the Internet is broken. I'll keep looking.

Where are we with Maria? By the way, aren't you impressed with her high ideals and professionalism? I know I am. But hold that thought. Could there be a tell-all book in the offing revealing her darker side? Why, yes, there could be. In fact, I think she's writing it herself. Let's listen.

[Music ends]

JIM: Were you in Oklahoma when Jim was in Texas?

MARIA: Yes, I was.

JIM: OK, did you ever call each other just to shed a tear about the old homeland?

MARIA: So anytime we got together, there was always a, you know, just having [unintelligible Scottish stuff]. And funnily enough, I work with the conductor of our children's chorus, is a woman named Doreen Falby, and she is Scottish too. So in my interview, when I interviewed for the job, Doreen was on my committee and the first five minutes of the conversation were Doreen and I going, [more unintelligible Scottish stuff]. And everyone else in the room was going, "We have no idea what the two of them are talking about." Absolutely nothing about what they were talking about.

[Laughter]

JIM: Well, see, this is the thing. As soon as I mentioned Jim Anderson, everything after that, I didn't understand that.

[Laughter]

JAN: What did she say? I don't know.

JIM: Same thing happened with Dee. When she calls her mom, her actual speaking cadence comes out and it was like...

MARIA: Absolutely.

JIM: Wow, you just you just left Baltimore for a while there.

MARIA: I, I, I did. I did. I do, I do work - tell my colleagues here and, "You can tell how annoyed I am by the Scottishness of my accent."

JIM: There it is.

MARIA: So, like, so generally I do have it's much flattened, then a little, you know, there's not as, you know, there's a little American in my accent. The minute I talk to my family or I get annoyed or even excited, the accent just comes straight back.

JIM: Why do you wear your watch on your right wrist?

MARIA: I don't know why I do it on my right wrist, but I have always done it. I'm right handed, but I have always worn it on my right wrist.

JIM: OK.

MARIA: It was just much more comfortable for me to for it to be on my right wrist and not my left wrist.

JIM: I thought maybe your video was reversed, but then I saw the clock in the background and that was going the correct way. So I thought, "Okay, she's it's on her right wrist," and then the stem - it's an Apple Watch, right?

MARIA: It is.

JIM: The stem is going away, which would make it very awkward, but that's Okay. I'm two generations away from Scotland myself, so I may not understand these things.

JAN: So Maria is in the news. Now, Maria can be in the news for a lot of things. She has "The Misadventures of Maria" that we all follow.

MARIA: I do. I do. Yes.

JAN: Which connects a little bit to our travel portion of our podcast. Whenever Maria goes on a trip, I like to look and see how she's getting from here to there because it's never a straight line.

MARIA: I am the Goddess of Misfortune when it comes to travel. If it can go wrong, it will go wrong. And I it is always an adventure. It's something that there is always a story. It doesn't matter. Even if I am taking the simplest of trips, there will be a story.

JAN: But see, I love that. I love that you still get back on the plane every Christmas, Maria.
[Maria laughs] And you go back home. I don't know. It's amazing to me.

MARIA: It is. And you know, at this point, my arsenal for being able to pull when things go wrong is fairly stacked at this point. So I have, you know, "Stranded at an airport," or "Your flight has canceled and you now have no way to get to where you're going," or, you know, just just random stuff. Luggage never appearing. Those type of things. Just, you know, I have a whole selection of things in my toolbox that I can pull from.

JAN: Well, and then now you have a new relatively new new to you home...

MARIA: I do.

JAN: ...within the last year, which has its own, you know, series of adventures.

MARIA: Wee Blue is she - she's 100 years old and she's a cantankerous old girl, and she has definitely seen some things. So for a while, the travel gods had sort of calmed down a little bit to allow the house gods to ramp up. For example, I was in the house for less than a month and my basement flooded, and I've had plumbing disasters. I've had all sorts of just misfortune in this house, like things that you just, you're like, "What in the world is happening with this house?" I just - I can't.

JAN: Well, and Maria always has a wee man to come and take care of her problems.

MARIA: I do. Yeah. So anybody who comes to fix something is a wee man or a wee woman. So they just the wee man comes to fix. And occasionally, if I'm really unfortunate, I'll have multiple wee men like, you know, I try and stack them so I can work from home and then the wee men all come and do whatever it is they're going to need to do. So, yeah.

JAN: Okay, one more thing we may or may not, you know, we'll have to you decide if you want this in there. Your your wee Jesuses explain that. What the heck?

MARIA: So I one of the things I have loved since I came to the United States was the just there's a culture of sort of tacky. Yeah, like tack.

ROB: Really?

[Laughter abounds in this section]

MARIA: Like from when I lived in Oklahoma, one of my great joys at Christmas time was to drive around and find the tackiest Christmas light display. Like I, for that is a glorious evening of entertainment for me right there. I just love it. I just love it. And one of the things that I have absolutely found great delight in is Jesus junk. Is, 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 I - it fills me with so much stinking joy. It's 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. So I have a collection that sits in my office on top of like I have a closet. And so, and then people, because they know I love Jesus junk, if they see something will start to send me. In fact, I've got something somebody sent something in the post and I had to this day do not know who sent me two little key rings of Jesus junk here. There was Jesus saves and it was him being a goalkeeper. And I just it is so, so glorious. And in fact, Marty Mikles was, because his son Justice was auditioning for Peabody, came into my office and saw my Jesus junk collection. He's like, "Oh, Maria, I have the thing for you." So he went home to Brooklyn, went to one

of these, I guess, sort of, you know, like the Cath- the sort of Catholic candles and all this type of stuff. And he brought me back, the next time he came down, he brought me a holographic Jesus that is now sitting in my office, that sometimes sits at the end of my table.

So because of my love of Jesus junk, my friend Josie happened - bought 50 miniature Jesus as many Jesus's. And she was she was at the house and I was I must have been at the office or something. So she hid 50 mini Jesus around my house. And so every time I go into a closet or I go somewhere, I will find a mini Jesus, and they just sort of like fetch up. And then this past time I had found like 38 of them. So I was getting pretty close to having found the 50. And of course, now I'm making like Jesus Christmas trees and Jesus four leaf clovers out of all my Jesuses. And then she came back and then I was like, how are there only 25 of them? Only the reason realize that she had re-hidden 10 of them. So now I'm back finding Jesuses everywhere in my house. You know, I feel like there's a sermon illustration there.

JAN: Listen, when we we helped an elderly person in our corps move, and as a thank you, we were given a lighted Last Supper 3D with plastic flowers.

MARIA: Oh!

JIM: It'll be in you mail in a couple of weeks.

JAN: It would be glorious for you. We - so it became the thing we gave back and forth, you know?

MARIA: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's that's like like and you hang it on somebody else's wall. And it would just fetch up in a toilet. Yeah. Yeah.

JAN: Well, and wouldn't you know, so we finally decided to get, to get rid of it. If I'd known you at the time, I know. But we put it out for garage sale and we thought, "Nobody will buy this." And wouldn't you know, Maria, it was the first thing that went. It's like, "Oh, my gosh!" Anyway, I don't know. Anything closing things, Jim?

JIM: I like the key ring, the Jesus key ring. When I was a kid, there was a bumper sticker, "Jesus saves, but Esposito scores on the rebound."

JAN: That might not mean anything to her.

JIM: That's a hockey joke.

MARIA: Yeah. Yeah.

JAN: This has been such a joy to talk to you.

ROB: It's really good to see you.

MARIA: It's so good to catch up with you all. I feel like, you know, it's time hasn't passed, but it's been forever in a day that I've talked to you all. So it's so good to catch up with you all. And thank you for letting me wax, you know, lyrically-ish about something, you know, about music and, you know, something that I love. And it's just a great opportunity to kind of to chat about it and with people who get what I'm trying to do here.

JIM (voice-over): As I noted at the conclusion of our last episode, Maria is now Making Her

Way to a new venture. At the end of May, Maria takes the helm as executive director for the Choral Arts Society of Washington. *[Music begins]* We should note that the Choral Arts Society's primary performance venue is the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Well, Maria, out of the frying pan... You know.

Finally, an update on my search for whomever said, "The greatness of a nation can be judged by how it treats its weakest member." I've found nothing. It's not my fault. We'll find whomever is responsible for this editorial slip up and let you know. As Hubert Humphrey also said, "To err is human, to blame someone else is politics."

Until next time.

[Music ends]