

EPISODE 46

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:06] Announcer: You are listening to 10000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[EPISODE]

[00:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth. And this is 10000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with people who have made deliberate choices to lead in the world to take on some really interesting and gnarly challenges.

And today, for me, is a pretty cool day because I have a friend. Somebody who lives in my community. Somebody who's dented my imagination about what's possible in the world to have impact. And she is also an incredible culinary expert, which is another part of her life. Jerilyn Brusseau is my guest today. I want to get you, Jerilyn, your voice into this thing right away. Welcome to what I call the Swamp podcast.

[00:00:59] JB: Thank you, Rick. What a wonderful name.

[00:01:02] RT: Yeah. It's great to have you. It's long overdue. I come with a bunch of questions. But let me ask you to start by helping people understand a bit more about you. What do you want them to know about Jerilyn Brusseau that gives them context for what we're likely to talk about here in the next period of time?

[00:01:18] JB: I'd be happy to. When you ask me that question, it goes right back to when I was a very young child. My father was in the Second World War. My mother worked in a bank. My mother, my sister and I lived with my grandparents in Montana, Central Montana.

And my grandmother was a phenomenal baker. And she, every day, baked for the local restaurants. She baked pies and rolls for the local restaurants. And I was about a year old. And she would sit me on her table where she had a baker's table where she'd have all the doughs

and all the things she was making. And she would put these little bits of dough in my hand. And that went on for a long time because that's what she did. And I loved it. And I was little.

And what I've really seen in the last 10 years is that was the most important beginning in my life. Because there was a way in which I think there was DNA exchanged I think when she put that dough in my hands. I mean, even now thinking about it, I can feel that kind of exchange that happened. And it gave me a sense of comfort, and a sense of safety and a sense of being open that around the table is this extraordinary opportunity to be together for me to be present.

And through the years in my work in food and other things, I've really realized this in the last 10 years, that was an extraordinary beginning of my life. It took a long time for me to actually have that kind of carved into my life. But to be comfortable. To be at peace. To be open to people. To be positive to realize that we're all humans and want to connect with one another without being hoity-toity. Without being, "Oh, wow. You." No. It's just myself, me. And I can feel it from all those eons ago and all those atoms in my body that that comfort and that security that came from her came into me. And it's really still here.

[00:03:38] RT: All right. There's some seed corn there for the rest of your life, I suspect. Let's travel a little bit. Because your grandmother provided all that. But I'm guessing based on what followed, she provided you with a love of baking as well.

[00:03:51] JB: Yes.

[00:03:52] RT: And so, tell people a little bit about you as the culinary wizard, I'm going to call it. Because you traveled a long road that includes culinary work, baking work. Tell us about it. And what happened that was significant in that journey?

[00:04:07] JB: I want to say one thing that feels so right to begin with is that, internally I felt and I have felt that around the table we are all one family. And that's where we come and be exactly who we are and share with whoever is at that table with us.

I did learn how to make my grandmother's cinnamon rolls. And I dreamed all the time I was growing up because I was planning on being a doctor. I was planning on being a pediatric

surgeon. And the more I baked, the more I baked. And going through grade school and high school, and I really learned to do the roles that she loved to do. And it became kind of like a signature for me.

And my dream – and I was married and I had three little children. And I lived in Edmonds Washington. And I kept thinking it's really time to start a bakery here in Edmonds.

And so, in 1977, after much testing and deciding, my husband and I decided that we would have a bakery in downtown Edmonds. In the place that had been this old, abandoned gas station that had become a gun shop. And it was where about life ending and there were guns everywhere. And we met the fellow who owned the property and we started cleaning it out.

We really did have an experience of transformation of all the guns that have been made there, the black soot on all the windows of the gas station. And this big very, very aggressive Doberman Pinscher who was there in the building. All of that went away.

And on the day when we were all ready, the day we were ready to open, we had a mixer, 110-quart mixer. We had deck ovens. It was just an exciting time in my life. And I would just be in that space and be thinking about my grandmother. Like, this has been my dream my whole life to have this and have people come in and have things that are warm and carefully and lovingly created. Not like a fanfare. But more like a nourishment. And that's how it all began.

And on our first day before we baked, first night before we baked, we had three of our local priests in the Holy Rosary Church in Edmonds come and we had a mass and then this wonderful celebration of transforming what had been the darkness. Transforming the darkness into light. It was really incredible.

[00:06:41] RT: This was at the bakery. The former –

[00:06:43] JB: Yeah. That became our bakery.

[00:06:44] RT: You had a mass with three priests in the gun shop, bakery, gas station.

[00:06:49] JB: Everything old was swept away and it became a lovely place. Oh, gosh. We had a two-thirds-page story in the New York Times. People just loved the idea of learning that. Going out to other – I drove the valleys of the Snohomish Skagit and Watkin Valley every week picking up ingredients from local farmers. Because that was before farmers' markets. This was in 1978.

It was a very spiritual place. A place to be. People would meet there. People would come in. And I noticed it. I could see. And when they went out and said goodbye, their smile was more like this. And they loved being in this place. We designed it like a French country cafe. Food is what brings people together.

And then things went from there. One day a friend called me and said, "I'm going to Russia. I'm going to the Soviet Union in a few weeks. But before I go, they're going to come here to Edmonds. Would you be willing to host them and help me host them for three days in Edmonds?" And, wow. It was just like everything came up in my body, mind and spirit about, "Oh, I would really like to be part of that. And it absolutely terrifies me." And it went directly, directly to the moment when my brother, Daniel Cheney, US Army helicopter pilot, was shot down and killed on his 16th day in Vietnam.

And so, the moment I heard the Soviet Union, all I could think of was the dangers, the warfare, the enemies. And I realized, "Wow. What an opportunity this is. I can actually meet Soviet citizens and they're going to come to the restaurant tomorrow?" It was really amazing.

We prepared. Our local guests all came every day. And so, I told them we were going to have guests the next day. Five highly ranked Soviets who were coming. And so, we made the restaurant really nice. We put a long table down the center where they could all sit. And then all the other guests sat around the edges so they could all come and talk to the Soviet citizens. This is in 1985.

The morning came. I was nervous and I was excited. And I saw the car pull in and I stepped out the door out of the dining room to greet them. And the woman in the front seat opened the door and stepped out. And, oh, my goodness. She had this just incredible spirit. A long, long, long braid down her neck. Beautiful olive skin and round eyes, which was incredible. And she had this kind of Birkenstock sandals on and a long skirt.

I put my hand out to shake her hand and she was like, "Whoa." And she wrapped me into her bosom. And that was my first peacemaking with a Soviet citizen, which then led to starting peace table US, USSR citizen diplomacy in the Soviet Union, which we did for eight years.

[00:09:57] RT: Okay. I want to come back there. But there's another part of the baking that is pretty astounding for those of us. I think a lot of people who are listening to this podcast, at least I think who live in the United States, will have some familiarity with this angle that you also found yourself in the middle of. Can you talk a little bit about this little baking cinnamon roll venture you ended up with?

[00:10:20] JB: Sure. It happened just out of the blue one day at the bakery. I was in the kitchen. The cook had called in sick. So I was cooking lunch. Small phone on the wall. I just answered the phone and this voice said, "Hey, Jerilyn, this is Rich Coleman." Rich Coleman was the founder of Restaurants Unlimited. He had 22 restaurants at the time. And I had done some other work for him. And he said, "Hey, how'd you like to make the world's greatest cinnamon roll?" And I said, "Let's do it." And so, we did.

We started in about six – maybe four to six weeks from then to create what would be his creation, his vision of the world's greatest cinnamon roll. And of course, I didn't know all this at the time. But he had done a search around the US. He'd sent his scouts out all over the country to bring the best cinnamon rolls in certain areas and then bring them all back into their headquarters in Seattle. And they would really evaluate these rolls and see what kind of characters, characterization there was in these rolls and what would be drawing people to them.

Of course, I didn't know that his spies had come to our bakery and taken cinnamon rolls back to their office. But it was really a huge honor to be the selected cinnamon roll. And that was my grandmother's recipe from when I was a year old.

We started in. And it was a steep uphill climb because Rich is – I'm quite certain in highly respect, that he is actually a genius. And working alongside him when his genius capacity was just amazing. I've never met anyone like him before or since. And he would be thinking seven

tracks down the road while I was still deciding if the wraps were the exact same portion, 7.5 wraps of the roll, before they went into the oven.

There were big challenges. The biggest challenge is that Rich wanted these rolls to be made in these small bakeries. They would make the dough ahead. It could be refrigerated for up to three days. This was all tested. The dough would be just perfect. The team could pull it out of the refrigerator, roll it. It would rise for probably an hour in a proofer and then go into the oven and they would bake for 20 minutes or so.

And then there were always warm cinnamon rolls. That was the value, was that warm cinnamon rolls were always at the counter when guests came in. And that was the most important part for him.

He had come up with this idea to bake the rolls in a convection oven. This was 1985. Most people had not heard of a convection oven. And I had never used a convection oven. And it was so shocking to realize how the convection – so there's heat in the oven. Let's just take a regular oven. There's heat in the oven. Then convection, there is a fan and it just blows like everything. It blows to intensify the heat.

Well, for some things, like if you're doing a roast or a turkey or other things, that's fine to do convection. But tender dough, beautiful, flaky, tender, moist dough does not respond well. And I found out again and again and again, it didn't respond well.

We went through some really long days of, "What is it? How can we shift it? How can we change it?" And one day, one of the big bakeries in Seattle, they heard that we were working on this and they were sure they knew the way to do it. They called Rich and I down to their bakery. And we walked in and there were these five very tall bakers with their tall white hats and their white bakery coats. And they had these big cardboard boxes. They laid them out on the counter. And they opened the boxes and I just – I didn't gulp publicly. I looked at them and I said, "Oh. Well, thank you for inviting us."

And so we had a short meeting with them. They didn't make the grade, for sure. But they were very kind to us. We left there and got into Rich's very fancy car and we were driving up I-5

crossing the Aurora Bridge and Rich says, "What is it? What is it? Why do we keep having these failures?" Because the rolls would rise beautifully like, "Wooop." Like, this in the pan. And that spiral in the top would be perfect." And then after it came out of the oven, it would collapse vertically. It didn't collapse horizontally like this. It left the spiral on the top and the dough all caved out. It was a mess.

We're driving across the Ship Canal Bridge and I'm thinking, "What would my grandmother, Maude—" her name was Maude Delaney Spurgeon, "What would she do? How would she soften that intense heat coming? What would she do?" Well, she had no electricity. No running water. She had cupboards. What would she do to soften that heat?"

And all of a sudden, this idea came to me. I said, "Rich, we have to stop. Let's stop right here." I went in the store and got a few things. Came back out. Mixed up the next batch of dough and voila. It was perfect. Again, to my grandmother and the very simple ways of living our lives.

[00:15:52] RT: And that cinnamon roll is known as the what cinnamon roll?

[00:15:55] JB: It's called Cinnabon world-famous cinnamon rolls.

[00:15:58] RT: Yeah. And they're all over the place.

[00:16:00] JB: Yeah, they're in 65 countries now. I did work with them for 25 years. I was a consultant for them for 25 years. Did lots of things. But I love them all. They're a wonderful family.

[00:16:12] RT: Let's make some linkages here. Because for a lot of people, that accomplishment would be a lifetime achievement award. And we should note that, to a degree, you've received a lifetime achievement award from the International Association of Culinary Professionals in part because of your Cinnabon efforts. But we'll come back to that.

You mentioned a little bit that, in the midst of all this, you met the Russians and you had done some work there. But there's another event that took place in your life and involve your brother. And this is I think where things start to get a little complicated and change your life. Let's begin

there if you would and we'll pick up the story based on your brother's decision to join the Army and the consequences of that.

[00:16:59] JB: Yes. Yes. It's almost as if these are all strands that run through. And my brother, my younger brother, was this incredibly bright. I always called him the Crown Prince. He was so funny. He was so educated. He was so smart. Growing up, he was always getting into some sort of funny trouble. He'd always be thinking up new ideas.

My mom and dad, they did so much just to keep him – to groom him really to become a well-spoken leader. To take care of his chores. He raised – pulled Herefords and he raised other animals as well on our farm in Vancouver, Washington.

And he graduated from high school. I was married then. I was already married and living in Tacoma, Washington. And Dan went to Clark College for about a year in Vancouver. And he called me one night and said, "Well, sis, I've decided to join the Army." And my heart just – I mean, I love Dan a lot. My heart just fell.

Let's see. This was probably 1966. And I said, "Okay. And he said, "Well, I'm going to be at Fort Lewis. My base camp is going to be at Fort Lewis." And I was living in Tacoma at the time. So he came over to visit me. And we talked. And it was such a fragile time. There were so many American soldiers being killed every day. And Dan was –

[00:18:29] RT: In Vietnam.

[00:18:30] JB: In Vietnam. And Dan was 20 and going there. Yeah, he enlisted. His basic camp, he went to the top of his class. He was invited to officers' candidate school. He went to the top of his class. And then he went to helicopter flight school in Texas to the top of his class. And then he went to the assault helicopter training was his last training just before he left for Vietnam.

My family, my parents were – their hearts were aching. Mine were too. I had three little babies at that time. My hope was that he would be okay. I mean, that he would be okay. Well, he came home when he graduated from assault helicopter pilot school. He came back to Bellingham

where my parents live. They actually drove from Alabama all the way back to Bellingham bringing my brother's water ski boat.

And on the way home my dad said to Dan, "Hey, Dan, I almost forgot to tell you. We have a friend living with us now." And Dan said, "Well, who's that?" And my dad said, "Well, it's Gail." "Gail?" Well, Gail is the daughter of my parent's closest friends. They all went to high school together in Montana. Then they had their kids – Gail's parents were Harry and June. My parents were Bun and Ray. And our families were like two families growing up side by side.

And Dan and Gail had known each other. They lived in Moses Lake. We lived in Vancouver, Washington. It was just quite something that Gail was there, living there. She was going to Western. And Dan saw Gail up on that porch deck and that was that. I mean, my mother said they were already falling in love when they were in 8th and 9th grade. Here they are five years later.

They made the decision to be engaged before Dan left. And they had a big family party in Moses Lake with all the families celebrating. And Dan left three days after that party for Vietnam. And he landed in Vietnam about the 20th of December. And on January 6th, I got up very early in the morning. My children all slept in the same small bedroom and I was taking care of them. They had the flu.

And for some reason, I had the radio on. And the radio announcer just out of the blue said – and he was saying the news. And he said two American helicopter pilots died, were killed this morning 20 miles Northwest of Saigon. And I got a chill that went down the back of my spine. And I knew it was Dan. And I knew it was. And about four hours later, my husband came home from work and said Dan has been killed. And I was pretty sure that was the case.

I was standing at the back door. I was just completely in my own world. Dan – oh, my gosh. The most incredible – my parents. All I could think of. Of course, I felt the incredible pain of losing my brother. We were such buddies. And at the same moment, I realized my parents were becoming part of these hundreds of thousands of families with injuries, terminal injuries. Their sons and daughters coming home in a casket and the loss to so many hundreds of thousands of families.

And it seemed like that was half of the universe. And in the next instant, I realized that the other half of the universe was the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese people are losing – just as we are losing, they are losing and losing millions of family members on their land. And so many injuries and agent orange and all the things that were happening.

And in this instant – this all came in an instant. I heard this voice say, "Someday, somehow, some way, ordinary American families like mine must reach out to the Vietnamese people to honor their losses as well as our own and to begin building bridges of trust and understanding." And I had no idea how that could ever happen. I only knew that it must.

[00:22:45] RT: And then you were – on July 11th 1995 is a significant day in our history and then the Vietnamese country's history because that's when we normalize diplomatic relations with each other. That day impacted you. And what happened? Tell people what began then.

[00:23:09] JB: My husband and I were in Berlin. We had just co-facilitated a conference on peacemaking. It was the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.

[00:23:17] RT: No irony here, huh?

[00:23:18] JB: No irony there. They came from all over Europe. And it was very, very touching. And we left the conference and went out to the airport. And when I boarded, the flight attendant handed me The Herald Tribune. And literally, the headlines jumped off the page. US normalizes with Vietnam.

And Danaan, my husband, was sitting next to me and I just kind of a little nudge and I said, "It's time to go." And he said, "Okay. We'll go. And I'm going to raise you." Oh, whenever he said that I would just be, "Oh, no."

He was a very brilliant nuclear physicist and a conflict resolution professional who traveled all over the world. He left the atomic energy at a moment when he realized he was helping to bring an end to the world. And he put his whole being into peace in the world.

He said, "Okay, I'm going to raise you and we're going to sponsor humanitarian demining in the most war-torn province." And I said, "Okay." I knew that was going to be scary as everything. And we came back to Seattle. And it was just amazing. It was like a ribbon rolling out like something that had been all together in a fact, a little fact container. And all the facts rolled forward.

People would say – like, out of the blue, someone said to me a few days later, "Jerilyn, I know a Vietnam veteran who's been back to Vietnam. Would you like to talk to him? His name is Alex Wells. He lives in Atlanta." And I said, "Oh, yes."

I called Alex and I started talking to him about, "Tell me about it. What's it like on the ground?" And then my husband went to the Department of Defense and talked to them a lot about what could we imagine. What could we think forward?

And thanks to our most stick-your-neck-out visionary friends, eight of them. We sat with them and we asked them if they would hold this vision with us of bringing forward, building bridges of peace and understanding with the Vietnamese people. And clearing landmines and bombs in the most war-torn province of Vietnam. We didn't want money. We just wanted their love and their spiritual support.

And exactly six months later, we landed in Hanoi. And our governor then was Mike Lowry. And he wrote this really beautiful letter of introduction for us. And on our second day in Hanoi, we were invited in to meet one of the leaders of the country, Mr. Vu Xuan Hong, who was the president of the Union of Friendship Organizations under the Secretary General of Vietnam.

And he was standing on the steps of this French chateau in the quarter that's all the embassies are there. And this is this beautiful French chateau. And he's on the front porch and he says – he's smiling and waving to us and he says, "Come in. Come in. It's time to close the past and open the future." And we were just so touched.

And we went into the room to have tea together. And he was pouring tea for us and he looked up both of our eyes, he said, "You know, we've been waiting for the American people for a very long time. Please tell us your hopes and ideas." We told him our intention was to meet the

Vietnamese people to honor their losses as we did with him that day. We honored the losses in his own family and the losses in all the entire country.

And that we came in the spirit of healing. And that our hope was to work together to build bridges of trust and understanding. And that our organization would sponsor all of the training needed and the equipment needed for training the Vietnamese provincial military to clear the landmines and bombs.

And Mr. Hong was sitting at the table. He was kind of like bursting. He was kind of like dancing. He was so happy and he had this big smile and he said, "I will invite you to Quang Tri province tonight." "Okay."

So that night we took a 15-hour train ride from Hanoi to Dong Ha, the capital. Then it was just a kind of little huts. And as the train was – as we were coming into daylight, the dawn was breaking, all we could see for as far as our eyes could see were bomb craters. Bomb craters after bomb – and just the soil just erased of trees. And it was a tragic sight. And when the train stopped in Dong Ha, the Department of Foreign Affairs, three of them, were at the train station waiting to meet us right when we stepped off the train. Big handshakes. Big smiles. Thank you for coming. They spoke English very well. Thank you for coming. Thank you for coming.

We went to their office and we talked. And it was like an almost unimaginable scenario. We are sitting in chairs in the most war-torn province of Vietnam that is needing attention and healing so greatly. And we were developing an agreement and an understanding that we would work together.

And they said, "Let's go out in the province. We have three ideas in mind of different places." So we went out to see those places in a van. There were no paved roads. There was one paved road, the main highway. And when we got out to this one area that was fairly near, quite near the town, they said, "We, think this could be the best area. Because this was one of the most brutal battles of the war in Quang Tri province. Lost incredible numbers of Vietnamese and Americans."

We couldn't take a step anywhere. We could only take a step down a path. And what we realized is that we were walking on a path through a minefield. And other people were coming. Women were riding bicycles or motorbikes. Kids were – they were leading their cows with the rope all on the same path. And I realized that one of my feet to the right or the left could have been the end of me. Just realizing that this is what the Vietnamese people live with every single day.

And we said, "Yes," of course. And Danaan was so great. He typed with one finger on his left hand. And he typed up the Memorandum of Understanding that we've worked together. We would provide all the money. We were going to raise \$860,000 between – that was January and August to be able to bring – we would bring retired American EOD officers to be of moral support. And they could help the provincial military deminers learn to use these new pieces of equipment which came from Catholic relief services and Oxfam Hong Kong. And we said that we would work together into the future. And from that piece of paper, we're still working in the same place for the same people for 28 years.

[00:30:37] RT: What's the name of the organization?

[00:30:39] JB: The organization is called PeaceTrees Vietnam. That we could clear the land and bring together the former adversaries. Because the tree is the third side. The tree is the neutral side. All the feeling goes into the tree, which grows very strong.

That was January. The whole month of August and half of September, Danaan was in Vietnam with them all. And they cleared 18 acres. And there were more than 1200 unexploded ammunitions on that property. It was just unbelievable. Then they did an extra clearing again to be sure there was nothing left there. And the Americans could help them with that.

And then it was ready. We were ready to bring 43 volunteers from seven countries to Vietnam. They all came to Seattle. They were flying over together that we would be the first tree planters to transform the energy of the most brutal battle of the war in Quang Tri to transform that into trees of peace and a place where people can come and listen to the wind and see the birds return.

And just two days before we were leaving, my husband, Danaan, had a massive heart attack when he stepped in the walkway onto the ferry from Bainbridge Island, where we live, to Seattle. And he died there. And that was another important step in following and leaning into the vision.

And it took about I'd say probably two days for me to decide if I would go because other people were telling me I shouldn't go. This was all my idea. I would go. And I finally told my grown-up, wonderful children that I would go in the bedroom and sit on a chair with a candle. And that I would know I would have the message of going or not going so that it actually worked.

I was sitting on the chair for probably an hour and I heard this voice, I heard this message come, "It's time for you to go." And I knew that was Danaan. And I said out loud, "How will I get there?" And he said, "I will carry you."

We put together a really lovely memorial service at the Unity Church downtown. 800 people came. And the next day, we flew to Vietnam. And that was the beginning of PeaceTrees Vietnam.

[00:33:12] RT: That was the beginning.

[00:33:15] JB: November of 1996.

[00:33:18] RT: so I have a few questions I want to ask about you, the leader of PeaceTrees Vietnam. But before we do that, let's bring people statistically current with your decision to go back and carry this work forward. Because that was 1996.

[00:33:33] JB: November.

[00:33:33] RT: And this is 2023. So, 27 years roughly later, right?

[00:33:38] JB: Yes. Yes.

[00:33:39] RT: I pulled this information off the PeaceTrees Vietnam website because I find it startling to read this. And we will put a link to PeaceTrees Vietnam in the show notes.

[00:33:51] JB: Wonderful.

[00:33:52] RT: But let me just share with people the impact that you have had since that day. Nearly 7,000 acres of land have been cleared of mines. 148,000 plus explosive ordinance have been removed or destroyed. And that benefits nearly 300,000 people. Almost two hundred thousand individuals have received explosive ordinance risk education. 219 victims and 62 families affected by accidents have been supported. You've put over five thousand children through kindergarten. You have 22 kindergartens, gartens with an 's'. 12 libraries. Two community centers and a hundred family homes built. And it's called PeaceTrees Vietnam for a reason. Over 48,000 trees planted by 1,400 citizen diplomats. Holy cow.

Jerilyn, this is called 10000 Swamp Leaders. And so, I have some questions on the leading side for you. Because my orientation around this kind of work is that there are no leaders. But there are people who choose to raise your hand and lead, which means they have an idea. It's usually involves something really messy, gnarly, complex. No clean answers. No simple solutions. And also, probably a serious lack of authority to just make people do something. Over this period of time, you fostered and grown an organization on both sides in Vietnam and in the United States.

[00:35:31] JB: Yes.

[00:35:31] RT: I want you to talk a little bit about what have you learned about yourself and what the capacity of a person like yourself can have and pull from when they decide to raise their hand and make a difference in some endeavor like this? What have you learned about Jerilyn Brusseau that you didn't know?

[00:35:51] JB: That is a wonderful question. Thank you, Rick. It's a deep journey. That's what I know about this, is a very deep journey. And it is so fueled by the loss of my brother that he came here to do what he believed was right. He died saving another pilot. Oh, I'm seeing the images of what I would share is the depth of relationship that is possible and available with the Vietnamese people. That's the deepest place for me.

I just wrote a few minutes ago to the gentleman we work with in Hanoi, the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations. I've been working with him for 28 years. And exactly that, that I can speak with the Vietnamese people. We highly regard the opportunity to build trust and understanding where there was only loss for so many decades. And to walk on the path of trust. To walk on the path of collaboration. To walk on the path of the future will unfold.

We didn't know how that would ever happen. And there have been, for sure, hard times. We had two incidents that were very difficult times. Not regarding landmines and bombs. Regarding other situations. But it had nothing to do with our work with the Vietnamese.

We have this growing building of peace. The building of strength. The building of – it's such respect. I didn't know. I didn't know I had all this capacity to be so present with the Vietnamese people with MiG pilots who flew and made it back. With the wives of MiG pilot whose pilot didn't make it back. We are all one. And that I didn't know that I had that capacity.

In the beginning, there was such great loss. But in a certain way, that loss began immediately transforming into vision. And now we have 200 deminers. 200 deminers. They are the most highly trained demining teams in Southeast Asia. Thanks to the US Department of State Weapons removal and Abatement Program.

I learned to be in the diplomatic circle. I learned to be in the Vietnam circle in the countryside where an American woman could not go to the countryside in Vietnam unless she was escorted by a Vietnamese leader. All of these things are coming to me now of what has grown on the inside. The possibility of continuing and growing and growing and passing this on, which is very important to me. Passing this on to the next generation. How we continue building these bridges. Creating paths to walk on if there isn't one there now. Transforming adversarial relationships into openness and receptivity and learning about each other.

[00:39:18] RT: Okay. That provokes another question for me then. Because this organization – this work is probably far from done. How do you, as the leader or a person of influence inside PeaceTrees Vietnam now – and we should say that on the website you'll see there's a board of directors. There's a lot of people involved. And you have to scrub the website very hard to find Jerilyn Brusseau's name in there. It's not obvious. And I'm pretty sure that's by design.

But in your position, in your role, in your commitment, how do you help people who are witnessing this either inside PeaceTrees Vietnam or maybe a whole another endeavor that they are interested in getting involved? How do you help people be authors for impact and not just stand by and witness it? What counsel do you have? Because we have people listening who will say, "I'd like to be doing something like that but I don't know how." Or why me? Or how do I get other people involved? Because I can't do this by myself. How do you help people find a toehold to use themselves to join the effort and make impact inside PeaceTrees Vietnam? What have you learned?

[00:40:32] JB: I've learned, studied, experienced the depth that's required. There's the depth that is required to hold the possibilities of the future. I mean, we were in a place where – I think if people had been with us when we went in 1996, they would have said, "I think I should go home." I mean, it was startlingly, startlingly, appallingly the land was destroyed. The spirit of everything was destroyed.

But this something inside way deep down that we're going to stick with this. I'm going to stick with this. Because we can see that there's a future ahead. But we're not starting big. We're starting small. Then we started building kindergartens. We started – I mean, to imagine the poverty and the hunger was unimaginable. And anything we could do could be helpful. If we cleared a quarter of a block of land that would mean families could grow some food on it, that would be really incredible.

I think that if I just focus on this, is the vision, which is very deep in my soul. And the energy and the resilience. I think resilience is a huge part of it. Because when we take on something that's way larger than we are and take on something that we don't know what the path will be but we're committed to the path. Then trusting ourselves is super important and not to get ahead of ourselves.

That's one thing I'm really happy about when I'm just talking with you and all your 10000 friends. That, to realize that, whatever would mean the most to us to transform in the world, whatever the accomplishment is, whatever the situation is that we think about that, to really go inside and

nourish the spirit of impossibility. Because there's a lot of people around saying, "Oh, this is really impossible. I don't know why you're doing this." We had a lot of that in the beginning.

Here in Seattle, Washington, we had people actually turn and walk away. You just can't do that. Well, actually, all together we can. Holding that possibility. And it's very difficult to look way out ahead and see what that will look like. I didn't know we would have 200 deminers in 28 years. And they're the most highly trained. It's just unbelievable.

I didn't know we'd be now demining in two provinces, Quang Tri province and Quang Binh province. Quang Binh is the southernmost province of the North. Quang Binh was only bombed. There was no ground combat. Quang Tri, next to it, where we started, is incredible, incredible ground combat that just wiped out everything.

Whatever the situation is, I think for all of us is pondering. Like, what is it? What is it in me that is being called forth? And how will I trust that part of myself to stay aligned with it and to continue to learn and grow every day?

[00:43:58] RT: And Jerilyn, I'm going to imagine that for every person who turned away from you and said, "This can't be done." Maybe not every person. Maybe there are more of those at the outset. But you did find people who wanted to go on this journey in some ways with you.

[00:44:13] JB: Yes. For sure.

[00:44:14] RT: Right? So safe to say that you can't do this by yourself. You can't go alone.

[00:44:20] JB: Absolutely not. I think in the beginning, when Danaan, I realized. It was like he handed this, "Okay, here's my part. Okay. All right. We'll do that." And it's worked ever since.

[00:44:36] RT: 23 years. I was at your 80th birthday party a couple months ago, I think.

[00:44:40] JB: You were. It was really lovely. That was a huge honor.

[00:44:46] RT: It was a magical day. I doubt nothing about you. One of my questions, as we come to the end here, is what's ahead for Jerilyn Brusseau, PeaceTrees Vietnam or other things? As you sit here now, what's ahead for you?

[00:45:00] JB: That is such a great question. Well, there are things ahead. I'm thinking of a culinary possibility that I may just dive into. I go to Vietnam at least three times a year as I told you a few minutes ago. What feels like the most important part for me to play is to escort Vietnam veterans and their wives and Gold Star family members who've lost someone in Vietnam.

The groups I take are usually eight people. Maybe ten. We have two pilots and one incredible Marine coming with us this time. And their wives and then one Vietnamese, one of our board members. And a woman who sponsored the next kindergarten that's being dedicated to number 23.

What's ahead is really looking deeply I really want to run a half marathon in the next year. And I've been walking, walking, walking, walking. Really getting ready because I'm recovering from a long 14-month period of COVID, as you know. But I'm over it. And I'm thinking about – I'm thinking about in Vietnam, maybe gathering of people in my age group, and meeting with them and talking with them and really passing on to our children. Their children. Our children. Because several of our colleague leaders in Vietnam have said, "You know, we're so sad but the young people in Vietnam do not really know what happened in the war because the families are reluctant to tell them."

I'd like to really focus on that and how we could do some kind of living room talks. And this is all very gentle. This is not some – but ways in which the message could come to the next generation.

[00:46:49] RT: Jerilyn Brusseau, the world is healthier and a better place because of your work, your decisions, your husband, your brother and all the people on both sides of the ocean of the Pacific who are working jointly to tend to something that's a better place for people to live. I just thank you for what you bring to the world very much. Thank you for being with us.

[00:47:15] JB: Thank you, Rick. I'm deeply, deeply grateful. Thank you.

[OUTRO]

[00:47:21] Announcer: Thank you for listening to 10000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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