

EPISODE 60

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:20] RT: Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast, if you're a regular listener, where we have conversations with people who've made a decision to raise their hand and lead in this crazy world, doing some very difficult work for the common good. The purpose of that conversation is to help us understand who these people are and what we can learn from them. Today is a cruel day for me, because most of my guests are people I only know a little bit, or I've never met at all.

On the other hand, today I have the distinct pleasure of having Janie Ekberg in my podcast. Janie is one of three people that I carry around with me, who serve as a role model for how to use self for leading and mobilizing people for common good. She is a bloody master at this work. I know this, because I'm one of hundreds of people she mobilized for a cause. This podcast is a little more personal for me than the other ones. For all my study of practicing adaptive leadership, community building, mobilizing groups, no book, no teacher, or any prior life experience has impacted me more than Janie Ekberg did around leading. She doesn't know this. She's hearing this for the first time. Janie, welcome to the swamp. It's so cool to have you here.

[0:01:43] JE: Well, Rick. You just made me cry.

[0:01:47] RT: We're off to a good start then. Perfect.

[0:01:51] JE: Oh, my goodness. Rick's one of the people that I hold high in my life, and I had no idea that I was there with him, too. Holy Pete. Thank you, Rick. That was –

[0:02:00] RT: You're welcome. It's true.

[0:02:00] JE: - really beautiful.

[0:02:01] RT: It's true. What do you want them to know about you that I haven't said?

[0:02:05] JE: Oh, well. I'll just tell you a quick background. I grew up in Cape Harbor, a small community similar to Bainbridge Island outside Tacoma. Went through high school, went to the University of Washington, taught junior high and high school. Moved to Bainbridge Island, which was the best thing I ever did in my life. We had children. Wanted our kids to grow up like the wonderful joy that I had, playing on the beach, lifting up rocks, finding crabs, playing in the woods, making forts. That's what our kids had. It was wonderful.

They grew up, had a wonderful education, went to great schools, and are off on their lives. The joy of my life now is my grandchildren. But unfortunately, we took our children on trips when they were young around the world. They flew and left us. I've done a lot of things in my life. I've loved it all. It's been really involved with people. But I think that the joy of my life and what I hope I get to talk to about with Rick is this program we did together, Camp Siberia.

I told our kids when they would come home from their trip to Siberia, I said, "Don't say you don't have words to explain this. You have to find the words." I didn't think about this at a time. It's been a long time. It's joy. It's connection. It's love. It's just the greatest emotion of your life, and you get to share that with these people. All the things I've done, I've loved. That and my grandchildren are the top of my life.

[0:03:46] RT: Well, so since you mentioned Camp Siberia, let's begin there. I will say for listeners, there's a few other things we'll cover in this conversation beyond this. I think this is the intersection point for you and I. Imagine listeners right now thinking Camp Siberia. What kind of weird name is that? Because everything they know about Siberia and camps, it was never anything good. For listeners, sketch out a little bit about what the point of Camp Siberia was and how it came about, because that in and of itself, before the thing ever actually ran, is its own story. What did people need to know about this thing in order to have an understanding of it?

[0:04:19] JE: It's a combination of luck and magic and hard work, and just being in the right place at the right time. Looking at the date, I just wanted to remember the date. In 1988, this remarkable man came from the Soviet Union to the United States, looking for a theater to do an exchange with. He was with Rotary, so he traveled around the United States. He ended up somehow on Bainbridge Island through his Rotary connection. We just happened to have a play going. We have an amazing community theater. Having a play was Greece, actually, at the time. He came to art theater, that at that time was in a refurbished grocery store and saw this amazing program and said, "Hey, this is the theater that I want to do an exchange with."

He had a theater for children in Novosibirsk, which is the largest city in Siberia, third largest city in the country, about straight above the tip of India in the middle of Siberia. Actually, the geographic center of the former Soviet Union. He met the director, and they got together with a group of people in Novosibirsk on Bainbridge Island, wrote an original play called Lullaby for Tomorrow, putting together American and Russian fairy tales. One of the things he was doing with his kids in Siberia was trying to teach them English, but in a fun way, in theater. They learned all their parts.

This play was going to be produced by 20 American kids and 20 Russian kids put together. The Russian kids learned their parts in English and our kids, of course, learned their parts in English. They worked for a whole year, got together on Bainbridge Island and did their first performance at a larger theater by that time. It was magic. They traveled around the United States, Wolf Trap, the National Children's Theater in Washington, D.C. It was a huge success and a wonderful feeling of kids together, adults together from the Soviet Union and from the United States.

Then they traveled to Russia. Well, sorry, the Soviet Union. they went to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Novosibirsk, and a lot of cities in Siberia performing. The group from Bainbridge Island that were the chaperones became so close, and so connected to their chaperone, their counterpart in Novosibirsk that one of the leaders decided he wanted to have another exchange. They decided to do an artist exchange. I was lucky enough to be invited. At the time, I had a business creating wearable art and did wearable art, as well as investments for churches and had a wonderful time doing it. They wanted me to come. Twisting my arm, I went. You know, that sentence changed your life. Well, oh, my goodness gracious.

Stepped off the airplane in 1990 in Moscow, with about every 10th light bulb working and got on an old 40s bus and drove down the main streets of Moscow, where you couldn't even see in the windows, because everything was so dirty. It was breathtaking. I was in the 5th grade when Sputnik went up and we were behind Russia, the Soviet Union, what I learned. I was so surprised. There was just nothing.

It was very interesting. Artists and theater, painting, every artist in the United States is on a lower level and doctors and – excuse me. I didn't mean intellectually. I meant, being able to live and make money. Doctors and lawyers are on a higher level. Well, it was exactly the opposite in the Soviet Union. The artists and theater people were at the top of the social ladder. It was very interesting. We had a wonderful time. We visited a lot of artists' studios. We had a big show in Moscow and a big show in Novosibirsk and we met amazing people. Just changed my whole feeling about that country. I made some wonderful friends.

Well, we came home. The following year, the big theater in Novosibirsk, similar to theater on Broadway, was invited to come to Seattle, Washington to do a play, *Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Seattle Children's Theater. They all came. All the actors and the director, choreographer, everybody came. That was in 1991. If you all remember back to 1991, the Soviet Union fell in 1991, and we had all of these people, it just gives me a shivers to even think about it. We had all of our friends from Novosibirsk, actors, directors, everything in our homes, watching on TV as Gorbachev was kidnapped. For three days, they were terrified, wondering if they'd ever get home again, wondering what was going to happen to their country, to their families, because we didn't know it was going to be over in three days.

Then the third day, they released Gorbachev. He resigned. Yeltsin took over, he dissolved the Central Committee and divided the party from, well, just got rid of the party completely and took over. I'll tell you, we became so close during that time, because they were just terrified about their lives. They performed and it was a wonderful, wonderful time. At that time, I was also designing costumes for our theater. The director happened to go to one of the performances that we had in and saw my costumes. This was community theater and said, "Janie, why don't you come to Novosibirsk and design costumes for our theater?" This is a Broadway theater. I thought, "Are you kidding?" Then I thought, "Why not? Maybe I can do this. I don't know."

I was really lucky and was able to talk to a lot of my suppliers, a lot of the people I worked with, and told them what was going on. There was nothing in Russia. Fabric was impossible to find. I had about 200 yards of fabric donated to me. I took that all over to Russia. Planned everything. I mean, I'm leaving a lot of it out. Anyway, we got to Russia. The director met me at the airport, who wouldn't let us through customs, because I had 200 yards of material. They thought, I was going to sell it at the market the next day. We went to all these different offices, trying to get in finally. He also worked at the Maly Theater, which is one of the leading theaters in Moscow.

He went back to the original customs agent and said, "I can give you \$10 and tickets." \$10 was a lot at that time. "And tickets to the Maly Theater." She said, "Okay, go through." That whole program started. I spent three months – I had designed all the costumes. I worked with six women who didn't speak English. I didn't speak Russian. We worked together from morning till night for three months and created 180 costumes. It was just a magical, magical time.

While I worked at the theater, I also got to watch the theater in action. This amazing director decided there were more orphans in Novosibirsk, in Russia, after the fall of the Soviet Union, than there were after the Second World War. The theater wanted to do something to help these kids. They closed the theater once or twice a month to the public and invited all of the children from every orphanage in the city that they could get a hold of to come to a children's performance and then have a party afterwards and have a wonderful time.

I was fortunate enough to be able to go to a couple of those. I just saw these kids and it broke my heart. Every one of them, the little boys had suits on and the little girls had their hair up with big bows. Watching these little children without families, just enjoy it. It just went to my heart. I said to the director, "I need to meet these kids. I need to go to these orphanages. I need to see what's going on." I was lucky enough, in the middle of the winter, with a snow high, we drove up to this funny looking brick Quonset hut, and it looked like no place for children.

However, I walked inside and here was this loving woman with these little children that were waiting for me to come. It was a warm, wonderful, loving – the children sang me songs and they had drawn pictures for me. I loved being there. I went back a number of times and then came home. When I got home, oh, they gave me a lot of their pictures. When I came home, I belonged to this wonderful, liberal, amazing church that has outreach and does all these

wonderful things. I talked to the Sunday school and said, can we do some outreach with the Sunday school kids? Because I've got these pictures.

I go back in the wintertime and that's Valentine's Day. What if you all made Valentines? I took them to the kids and then I took Valentine materials to the children at the orphanage, who loved it, because they hadn't seen anything like it and brought it back. That's what I did for a while.

[0:14:10] RT: Then something else happened. Just so context for the listeners here, because I go to the same church that you're referring to. That church does a lot of things, as you said, as outreach to varying projects around the community of Bainbridge Island and in Seattle, etc. Not too far abroad at that point in time, but that was soon to change, because they had an event, as I recollect, and you clean me up, with my memories a little shaky here. On a Sunday after service, where individuals such as yourself could set up a little display of a project, either that was already being funded by Grace Church and it was a chance to update, or an idea for a project that you're looking to get people involved with and hopefully, contribute money.

All right, so I come across you. I only know you sort of at this point at Grace. Everybody knows you at Grace, in some small way. That was where I started. I run across you with a little kiosk thing you've got set up here, with some cockamamie story that you start pitching to me. That is the beginning for me of this thing called Camp Siberia. Help people understand something happened between the Valentine's and that moment that produced this expanded idea. What went on there and what was Camp Siberia at that point in your mind and what in the world were you trying to do with it?

[0:15:31] JE: Well, the theater had a 100th anniversary. I was invited to come to Siberia, to the 100th anniversary. I went to this wonderful celebration and I was so lucky to have all these friends at the theater, because I'd been there for three months and I – for year after year by that time, for three or four years. After this big celebration, we all – not all of us, but a number of us got on this train and rode the train about an hour outside Novosibirsk, this little community of dachas. A dacha is just a little hut house, kind of, for protection during the summer when you're growing all the food that you need for the winter. They're not fancy houses. They have outhouses. They have a bedroom, or not even a bedroom or two. Maybe just a room and a kitchen and whatever.

We had a fun celebration around the fire that night. The next day, we had to all pack up and leave. My friend, Natasha, said, “We didn't have time to go to the art market this time, but I have an idea for your money,” because I bought art every time I was in Russia. She said, “Do you see those two plots behind my house? They're for sale.” I said, “Natasha, what would I do with property in Novosibirsk, in Siberia?” She said, “Janie, they're \$300 a piece.” I said, “Sold.” I could own land. I didn't care if it was in Siberia. I bought the property. It had to be in her daughter's name. The property sat there for a year or two.

As this was during the time that I was visiting all the orphans. I don't know where the crazy idea came from, but I thought, wait a minute. Maybe we could do a summer camp for the orphans. Maybe could take the Sunday school kids who were making valentines and take them to Siberia and do a camp for orphans, and I would have to build a house. I mean, it was a little crazy. We had to get a lot of people involved in this. Rick, wonderful, Rick. Thank you, Rick, 10,000 times, because I had this wild idea and everything I've done in my life, I have a crazy idea and I have a lot of energy and I have passion for things, but I don't have every way to figure things out.

When you can hatch somebody like Rick with the great skill of organization and leadership skills and teaching, I mean, we had it. I worked with my friend, Natasha, and we worked on getting a house built. There was a great, big mistake here, because they didn't have computers. They only had a fax machine. There was a very sad thing that happened. The first crew that we hired was unfortunately all killed by the robbers in Siberia, who wanted their tools and everything, so we had to start over again.

Natasha sent me the designs of what the house would be. I looked at this house and I thought, “No way. That house is not large enough.” However, I didn't realize that their measurements were in meters. I drew my measurements that I wanted my house to be in feet. I sent it back. I said, “Natasha, that's not big enough. It needs to be this size.” I didn't say anything about feet, are meters. She just assumed I meant meters. We ended up with a house three times the size of what we had planned. Rick will tell you this –

[0:19:13] RT: It was still too small.

[0:19:16] JE: We were coming on the train and you look at this little village of little dachas, and then he says, “Humongous giant house.” Thank you, thank you, thank you, because we could fit 45 people in the house.

[0:19:30] RT: All right. Let's get into it now then, now that we've cracked open this Camp Siberia thing. For listeners, I just want to underscore a couple of things you say, because this is how it happens when people do this stuff, which is it does oftentimes begin with a “crazy idea.” It begins with a question, what if? What if we took the kids from Seattle area to Siberia, and we're talking small kids at that point, to meet the orphans and do all this stuff. Now this thing evolves as we will get into here in a second, for prudent reasons as well. When I come across you, it's your idea to do just this. You want to take some people from our community to produce a summer camp in Siberia, a place that we should say, for most Americans is persona non grata in their upbringing, to put on a summer camp. The ideas don't get any crazier than this, at least in the community that we live in. I know that because we experienced it.

Yes, you got me involved and you got a few other adults involved, enough to form up a board, a group of people who believed in the cause you're putting together and to see if we could pull this off. We took it from concept to some actions, which is your basic model of life. Let's not talk about it more. Let's go get more people involved. The process quickly turned into, how do we – if you don't mind me grabbing a little bit of the content here, we decided that what we needed was not more young kids. We needed counselors for the campers. That's what camps have. They have counselors. They're like teenage kids, or college kids or something and they run the games. They do the arts and crafts. They entertain the kids. They become friends with the kids. That was the thing we decided to do.

We needed counselors. Let's put it in context. It's about 2000 at this point. While it's not the Soviet Union, the idea of recruiting American kids from parents who grew up with the Soviet Union as the big, dark, bad place and pitch up to them, “We want to send your kids to Siberia,” is a little weird for adults to figure out. Talk a little bit about how we pulled that off. How did we get – is it, would turn out 18, 19 kids, the first group, 19 kids to go to Russia to be counselors for Russian orphans in the middle of Siberia.

[0:21:54] JE: One of the people who was really interested in this was amazing woman, Cassie Pika. Cassie had four children and two children high school age that had a lot of friends. They were the center of the social group at high school. Cassie said, "I think that we could find enough kids that would like to do this." In the beginning, we took all those kids that were friends, that knew each other. Our first time we went was absolutely a learning experience. None of us knew exactly what was going to happen, how it was going to happen. We wanted to go to Moscow and St. Petersburg. I was lucky enough that my daughter spent a year between high school and college in Novosibirsk learning Russian, dancing in the theater. She also was a facilities person for the Eifman Ballet when they traveled in the United States and in Russia.

She knew logistics, Rick, new planning, and teaching kids. I worked on the crafts. We did all of these things and we did our camp. It was great. It was far from perfect. In fact, at the end of it, this group in Novosibirsk interviewed me and they said, "Would you do this again?" I said, "Are you kidding?" That was at the end of that. We learned from that first time, some of the things we needed to change, we figured out all those things. Then before we knew it, we had double the kids who wanted to go apply, and then we had triple the kids who wanted to go apply. We had 73 high school kids apply for 18 spots at one point.

I think that was the only part that I didn't like about Camp Siberia was saying no to all these kids. I mean, they had to raise their own money. They had to get together for six, seven months, getting to know each other, working on leadership skills, working on all things, getting ready to go to camp. We had all these kids that wanted to go, and that was the only hard part for me was saying no to all these kids.

What happened is such magic happened between the campers, the children, the Russian children and the American kids. Magic happened. You cry watching. The hardest part for me, we had two sessions each summer. We would walk those children back to the train and say goodbye. Oh, it even makes me cry now. Those big, strong high school boys would say goodbye to their little campers with tears in their eyes and walk back to the dacha sobbing. It was, I think, the first time in their lives, they felt love, not for their parents, not for their brothers and sisters, their family, their girlfriend, their boyfriend. They felt this deep love to give to another human and the children felt the same in return. That was just magic. Rick was so wonderful in

helping us figure out how the kids had to write applications. They had to have interviews. They had to do all of these things.

[0:25:14] RT: We sent Camp Siberia carried on for –

[0:25:17] JE: 12 years.

[0:25:18] RT: - 12 years, sending roughly 20 kids from Bainbridge Island to Siberia, to work with

campers, orphans. I think we do know that not only did these kids, our kids make big impact on these kids in Siberia, but it changed their lives, these Bainbridge Island kids' lives. I'm pretty sure the trajectory of a lot of these, because they're now married, they have kids of their own, they're professionals, a lot of these people's choices in lives about how they're spending and using themselves today are greatly influenced by the experience of Camp Siberia, which was this wild, crazy idea that Janie Ekberg came up with.

People still talk about this organization on this island, like it was mythical, and I think it probably was mythical for a lot of people. Even though if you were in Siberia, there was a large part that were not mythical. They were reality.

[0:26:12] JE: I just want to say one thing there. The whole program was meant to help the orphans. But really, it did help the orphans. I mean, what it did for our kids, and Rick did a lovely thing for me. I had cancer a while back, and he wrote to our kids to say, send Janie a letter, something. They were wonderful. One of them, I'll never forget, a young man said, "Janie, you have sent an army of us out into the world to make a difference." Because they saw what they could do. That wasn't my goal. I'm really thrilled that that happened, but they really got it. They got what they needed to do in their lives.

[0:26:53] RT: For listeners, in the context of why we do this podcast, is this began with a woman who had really zero authority to come up with this idea and make it happen, but you raised your hand, you had a cause, and then you do, I think, which is another essential thing for people who are – you said this early on, you couldn't do this by yourself. You had to find ways to get other

people to come on board and pick up parts of it and mobilize, first, a group that became the board, and then the students became the counselors, and then keep it alive year after year.

That, in a community setting, I think, is what leading usually always entails. In your particular instance, you elected to be involved in other things in this community beyond Camp Siberia. I want to help people understand the breadth and depth of who you are in this community. You got a couple other platforms, at least, that I know of, and probably others I don't know about. There's an organization on the island called Bainbridge Island Volunteer Caregivers. Whole different conversation than taking kids to Siberia, but equally as important. share with people a little bit context, what is Bainbridge Island Volunteer Caregivers? What's the work, and why is it you do it?

[0:28:09] JE: Unfortunately, Putin ended Camp Siberia. He ended all adoptions, Russian children, and by Americans. He ended any activity with orphanages and Americans. My heart was broken, and I needed to fill it up. I had been working with helping fundraising for Island Volunteer Caregivers, which is the most amazing organization ever. I said to my friends that I was helping with these fundraisers, "Hey, I want to get more involved." They said, "Oh, great. Come join our board."

I jumped from children into people who needed help just as much, older people and people with disabilities, trying to keep these people in their homes as long as possible by giving them help with things like, transportation, to doctor's appointments, to anything they need to do. Small housekeeping, mostly companionship. The same thing was happening with this program. The volunteers were volunteering to drive, or they were volunteering to do manual jobs for these people. The connections that happened with – we call them our care receivers and our volunteer caregivers. Between the caregivers and the care receivers, these amazing relationships developed.

This program started in 1996, I think, with five women who saw the need in the community and decided they wanted to do something about helping older people. It grew from those five volunteers through the time. I was on the board for almost 15 years, and we saw it go from two part-time paid volunteers to now we have five full-time paid employees. What we've grown to is amazing life enrichment programs for there's art, there's theater, the opera comes to our movie

theater, that program. There's a creaky knees walking program, and all of this involves the care receiver and the caregiver. We must have 400 care receivers and about 300 volunteers.

Every day, there's an email that goes out to all the volunteers and says, these are all the things we need all week. There's probably 30 things a day that need to be picked up. These volunteers jump at all of the opportunities and nothing's ever left. The program is just amazing. I got really involved in the fundraising of that and was in charge of the auction for about five or six years, which was great, because I had the most amazing committee that was working on that. We had wonderful time coming up with some more crazy, wonderful ideas for the auction.

It's just one of the most amazing organizations that yesterday, I was taking a walk with my dog, and I ran into this daughter of Janet West, who is a icon on Bainbridge Island. She was here from Maine, helping to take care of her brother who has Parkinson's. She was just here for a couple of days. She said, "I can't be here all the time, because I'm in Maine. Thank you to Island Volunteer Caregivers, they're helping my brother." She said, "I come a couple months now and again and stay in the hotel in Winslow." I said, "Oh, forget it." She lived four houses, grew up four houses from my house. I said, "We have a guest house. Come stay in my guest house and take care of your brother and IVC will help you." IVC is just the most amazing organization. I love it. I love it as much as I loved Camp Siberia. I love seeing people helping people, making a difference.

[0:32:15] RT: Well, I want to come back to that part, but there's one more little song line here that I want to stick in, or give you a chance to stick in, because you mentioned theater has been a big part of your life, both as an enjoyable function and as a creator and a costume maker and etc. Bainbridge has a theater and you found yourself in another role supporting the Bainbridge Island Theater. This is a little chance to brag. It's a huge accomplishment for the community that everybody benefits from. What in you and the group of people you were involved with, what did you pull off for the Bainbridge Island Theater recently?

[0:32:49] JE: It is absolutely, remarkably amazing. This community raised 18 million dollars to redo our theater from 25 years ago that cost a million dollars in the beginning. One of the really wonderful things is Peter O'Connor, who started this whole thing of the exchanges to Russia, who is the reason for Camp Siberia is the reason for all of that, because he invited me to Russia

in the first place. He designed the first theater. That first theater. Then I got involved in that theater doing the costumes design and everything and all of the actors were my best friends. I mean, it was a community of these wonderful people.

When BPA decided to grow and redo the theater, we have no longer Frank Buxton, who the theater is now named after, the Buck Center for Performing Arts, and his wife Cynthia Sears, who are stalwart – they are the greatest, most generous givers on this island. They have given us most of our beautiful art museum and most of our beautiful new theater. We needed to raise more money than that. There were a group of us. Some people doing large donors, some people writing grants, some people talking to businesses.

I had a group of four of us. It was myself and Marilyn Deersley and Carol White and Karen Connolly. We were in charge of community parties, smaller people. Unfortunately, we started our campaign, but then COVID happened. We had meant to have a lot of parties all the way along and involve the whole community. Smaller donors. We ended up having about eight, or nine parties in a period of about five months. It was wonderful. We invited all these people who got to come in and hear about the theater and give some money to the theater. We always had entertainment and food, and it was a wonderful party and everybody got to be involved.

Then at one of the meetings, the leader said, “We want this theater to be on the backs of the community. We want as many people's names written to put on a plaque underneath the theater, underneath the stage.” I talked to every person I knew. All of our friends talked to everybody we knew. “Give me \$5. Give me \$10. Give me whatever. You want your name under the theater, under the stage?” It was another absolutely amazing feat.

Then when Dominic Cantwell, who has been the director for the last 13 years and just retired, when she cut that ribbon and there were a thousand people from Bainbridge Island at the opening of that theater. It's a jewel beyond jewels.

[0:36:02] RT: It's very special. In Bainbridge Island, they do not let people such as yourself do all the work you do in the community and have a go unnoticed or unacclaimed. You are what is called a Bainbridge Island treasure. You even get a crown. I also know, Janie, that the last thing you're doing when you're doing this work is trying to get recognition and be put in the center of

the spotlight. You've left them no choice. They put you in the center of the spotlight. They made you a Bainbridge Island treasure. I have some questions related to that part, because I think for people listening, we need to help them a little bit to understand how this all happens.

Let me begin with, where does this whole community orientation come from for you? What is it about community and living in the community and stuff that spurs you? Because there's a lot of people on this island for whom, they're not motivated by that. What is it in you that's driving your involvement in community?

[0:37:06] JE: Well, I think it started with my kids in school. Got involved in fundraising and special projects and all those things that started in school. It was just so much fun. I met other people who like to do those things, too. Weaving through the life of our children, we all got involved in working for the community. What our community at that time, was the schools. I think Bainbridge has – I think almost everybody who lives on Bainbridge knows how lucky we are to have the quality of schools that we have. That that happens because people are so involved in the schools. I think for young people, young mothers who are working and taking care of their children and doing everything they can, that's about where they can start and have that amount of time, so that their volunteerism goes toward their kids.

Then as these kids grow and leave, you want that same feeling of making a difference. For me, it just fell into my lap with the – well, I was doing things at church and I was – oh, I forgot. I was on the helpline board. I don't know, I just got started, and then Arboretum and the schools. I just got started doing these things that filled me up. I guess, that's how it got started. I hadn't thought about it. I'm sorry, it's not a very good answer.

[0:38:43] RT: It's fine. Being in a reflective space here, so when you look back overall at this work, and it's obviously not done, I'm convinced six months after you've passed away, you're still working on this stuff, you just haven't gone – you're going to be at it for a while. What has surprised you about yourself in doing this work over a period of time? What surprises you?

[0:39:07] JE: A lot of the things that happened with Camp Siberia were problems beyond anything I thought that I could solve. It absolutely surprised me that I could do that. Two times this happened. The first time I had my daughter with me, who is fluent in Russian. Aeroflot is

notorious for selling, or trading tickets for luggage. When we arrived in Moscow from Novosibirsk at the end of camp, there were no tickets for us to get back to Seattle. We had to find them. Allison found it the first time. The second time, it was me. I have rudimentary Russian.

I had 23 people who had to get back to the United States. I thought, how am I going to do this? With my rudimentary Russian, I was at the – the kids say they were on the floor for eight hours in the airport. I think it was closer to four. I had to somehow get across to the people that we had no money. We had no tickets. We couldn't leave that day. We needed to stay in a hotel. We needed food. We needed all these things that was thousands of dollars. In the end, I don't know how I did it, but I got rooms for 23 people and food and transportation. Then I got tickets on three different airlines back to the United States, and thought that I was all done and that we would all end up in Seattle similar times.

Two of the airlines were not Russian, European Airlines, and then one was Russian. I went on the last one with a small group of kids and put most of the kids and the chaperones on the other better airlines. I finally got home. I think I slept the whole way, because I was so tired and so nervous about how did this happen and how did we do it? We did it. Ended up in Seattle. Called my daughter to tell her I arrived. She said, "Oh, mom." We're here with the rest of the kids. She said, "Oh, mom. No, you're not there in New York." Because it had been a storm at JFK and they were sent to Saratoga, or another one. There's no international airport and they're sitting on the airplane.

These kids had to get back JFK. Then we had to get new tickets for them to get back to Seattle. We couldn't get them on the same plane. There were three different planes again, but there weren't enough chaperones. Those last two kids had to go without a chaperone. I called the parents to tell them that they are right. The gate is right next to the other gate. They're going a half an hour later. Flight attendants know. Everything's okay. One of the parents said, "Well, that's not okay." I said, "You know what? You're not going to recognize your child. Your child is self-assured, confident. Your child will be fine, and there's nothing else I can do."

When we finished that, I don't know if this is the answer you wanted, but it surprised me that I absolutely did that. Surprises in all the things I've done, I was super surprised when I became a treasure.

[0:42:31] RT: That doesn't surprise me at all. All right, we're coming to the end here. Since you are an island treasure and you wear a crown, you're imminently qualified to take this question on. There are a lot of people out there listening who are younger in their careers and in their lives. You've traveled some road and you've learned some things. I believe that there's a tribal element to this podcast, which is in most tribes, where you and I live in the Northwest, there's a lot of Native American tribes, and we know that the elders pass on stories and wisdom to the future generations, so they at least don't make the same mistakes that the elders made. But actually, to perform more effectively. What piece of advice do you have for people out there listening who want to be involved in community who want to make a difference in their community? What could you give them that if they took that, that would help them in some small way to get work done?

[0:43:28] JE: I think if you have a compelling idea, if you have something that you are passionate about and have a lot of energy and enthusiasm about, but you're still not sure you can do it, but you're not going to give up, you are going to go straight through and you're going to – if you have that energy and that enthusiasm and that passion, you're going to attract people who want to be around that. Because it is fun, no matter how hard the job is, it is fun to work with people who want to make something happen.

I mean, the whole time of Camp Siberia was fun. It was terrifying half the time, but it was fun. My whole thing, working with all of the people in IVC, I love them all. They're my best friends. We all worked through really hard times with people's problems and nobody ever gave up. Everybody worked and worked and worked. Then look at the theater. Holy Pete. Okay, we want to raise 18 million dollars. You want to raise what? I can't even imagine another wonderful group of people who worked together so hard. If you work hard enough and you just don't give up, you have to be persistent. You have to see the end and not let anything break it in the meantime. You have to keep your eye on the end and bring your friends along with you and you'll make it.

[0:45:04] RT: That's a brilliant answer. Thank you for that. Janie Ekberg, thank you so much for coming on the podcast, coming to the swamp and telling the stories. You've made a difference in this community, you've made a big difference in my life. I'm so grateful for that. Thank you very much.

[0:45:20] JE: Thank you, Rick. This has been delightful. I was terrified and I think I talked forever, but it's been delightful. Thank you.

[0:45:28] RT: Great to have you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:45:31] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please, take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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