Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

Recording Date: January 23, 2018
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

Suzi LeVine

SUMMARY

East Coast native Suzi LeVine moved to Seattle in 1993, fresh from earning degrees in Engineering and English at Brown University, the last marketing person hired to work on the MS-DOS team at Microsoft. That led to a position on the team that launched Windows 95, an executive role at Expedia, and an exciting and non-linear career working in both the private and public sector, while also volunteering for a wide variety of non-profits and political campaigns. Self-described as a "Wife, Mom, Citizen, Apprenticeship Advocate, and Catalyst," Suzi is the co-founder of the cooperative Jewish community Kavana, was a key volunteer on the Obama For America campaign, served as the United States Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein from 2014 to 2017, and is now commissioner of the Employment Security Department for the State of Washington.

Jeff Schwager: Start this recorder. You've seen the questions which I very [emphasis] rarely give somebody the questions in advance, but…

Suzi LeVine: It's all right, I already forgot them [laughs].

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs], pretend you're surprised. Okay, that going.

Suzi LeVine: Who are you again?

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs], well, first, congratulations on being chosen for this exhibit. We're really excited to have you as part of it, um.

Suzi LeVine: Thank you so much. I'm very humbled to be a part of it. There are so many amazing women in Washington State and amazing Jewish women here who have really made a difference in our world. And really, you look in tikkun olam in the dictionary and there's pictures of these incredible women, so I'm very humbled to be among them.

Jeff Schwager: Well, we're excited to have you on board.

Suzi LeVine: Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: So, let me begin with, um…, uh, an easy question, maybe. How did your career prior to your ambassadorship prepare you for your ambassadorship?

Suzi LeVine: Well, thanks for that question because I think a lot of people assume that you just instantly become an ambassador.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: And let me clarify something… within our ambassador corps, one third of our ambassadors are non-career ambassadors and two-thirds are career.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative].

Suzi LeVine: And so the career folks have come up 20 to 30 years through their career as Foreign Service officers to ultimately get to that level. And non-career come from the private sector, they come from the public sector, they might have been in the military. There's really a broad array of sources for that non-career, and it's that you get to know the president and they want you as their representative.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative].

Suzi LeVine: My career was very nonlinear before that. I graduated with a degree in engineering and a degree in English, and I started at Microsoft in 1993, worked there for many years, and then Expedia. And then after Expedia, which I left in 2005, and I had been an executive there, I then stayed home with my kids and started a couple of nonprofit organizations, including Kavana in the Jewish community, and including an advisory board at the University of Washington I-LABS, and then went back to Microsoft and then left Microsoft again. And throughout, from 2007 through 2013 was also volunteering both on the Obama campaign and then for the White House. All of that to say, my entire career prepared me for my job as ambassador.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative].

Suzi LeVine: So whether it was how I work with and build partnerships with businesses, whether it was doing youth outreach, whether it was creating startups, whether it was understanding the education sector and helping in Queen Anne be one of the founding families for a public school, whether it was the work in the Jewish community, and how do you think about diversity? {is this considered a question?} All of those things culminated in my job as ambassador, so.

Jeff Schwager: Good, um… Both Microsoft and Expedia changed the world in huge ways. Um, for I mean, it's almost inconceivable to, to, to think of the world without them now. Um, what role did you play in those changes?

Suzi LeVine: Um, sometimes it feels like a fairy tale in terms of the opportunities that I have been blessed to have throughout my career. So, I was the last person hired onto MS-DOS at Microsoft, and that team became the core Windows 95 team.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative].

Suzi LeVine: So when you think about, when people think about these unbelievable moments in the history of technology, the Windows 95 launch was one of them.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: On that product in particular, I was the person who organized the world tour, doing many of the 25 different locations. I was the one who ran the manufacturing from the product side and did the forecasting. I was also, uh, the person who got to demonstrate Internet Explorer for the very first time publicly with Jay Leno during-

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs].

Suzi LeVine: -the launch of Windows 95. So, being a part of that exceptional team and there was an incredible team feeling and spirit with that. And so, being a part of that was a very [emphasis] seminal moment. And even when I'm, when I've spoken with groups of young people and I jokingly reference that time as the Jurassic period of technology-

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs].

Suzi LeVine: -even then, any one of those people can identify that moment in time of Windows 95.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: When I moved to the Expedia team in 1998, I did not know, that [stutters], it was a part of Microsoft at that time. And I did not know that we would be spinning out as a separate company. So again, this incredibly seminal moment of spinning out, having an IPO and going from being, I think we were third in the industry in online travel to being the leader in online travel. And I was running our communications and public relations at that time, and it was such a moment when all of a sudden, online travel became… one of the primary ways that people… put together and plan, and book their travel.

Suzi LeVine: Uh huh [affirmative].

Suzi LeVine: So again, another very [emphasis] important moment in time. Uh, I'm also blessed that when Rachel Nussbaum and I co-founded Kavana, that too was a very [empahsis] special time in the Jewish community. Innovative, small Jewish, uh, startups were starting to get some traction. You had IKAR down in LA, you had Hadar in New York, but not so much up here in the

Northwest and in other places across the country. And so, again, we were at this very seminal moment in time, looking at models like Rick Warren's church down in Southern California, looking at the Queen Anne Cooperative Preschool, looking at social venture partners. What are the innovative models, not just from the Jewish community, that we can draw from for building this innovative community? And now it's amazing. Kavana is part of the Emergent Network which brings together many different communities across the country to learn from and innovate together. So, I again, I feel so blessed to have been a part of... those moments and more throughout my career.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm [affirmative], uh, Rabbi-

Suzi LeVine: I'm not done yet.

Jeff Schwager: Rabbi Nussbaum, by the way, is another of our Agents of Change-

Suzi LeVine: Oh, fantastic, good choice.

Jeff Schwager: -will be interviewing her, I think, later this week. Great choice. Um.

Suzi LeVine: Great choice, she's outstanding.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. So... Tech companies, um, especially at the time you worked there, hopefully less so now, had a reputation of being very challenging places for women. And I'm curious, uh, if you experience that. And if so, what was that like for you? I assume Microsoft and Expedia were largely male organizations. Certainly Microsoft.

Suzi LeVine: They were, both were. So... having studied engineering, I was accustomed to an environment where there were very few women. When I was doing my problem sets for my physics classes or my thermodynamics classes, there were not a lot of women in that group, so it didn't feel awkward or strange for me. I also had been in crew, you know, you have the rowers and then you have the coxswain. I had been coxswain for a men's team, so it wasn't an environment in which I felt strange. Um, and it was an amazing and wonderful and dynamic set of people. That said, over the course of my career, there have been moments in time where either it's demonstrated, here's why diversity matters, where my voice was important because I brought a diverse view that the others in the room, because they were men, hadn't considered. Or there were moments in my career that I can look at and say, you know, I wasn't treated the way I should have been treated because I'm female. And so those did happen over the course of my career. And it also in my college time that I was in university. And I look at those moments and I think, well, how do I grow from that? What can I do to make a difference? What can I do so that others don't have that kind of experience going forward? Or how do I help those guys understand the implications of that? Because those weren't malicious moments. They weren't, "how does somebody keep me down" They were... That's why it's unconscious bias in many of these cases.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, um.

Suzi LeVine: I'll share with you one funny story. So, I had just finished Brown University and it was my first week at Microsoft. And again, I was the last person hired into the MS-DOS team. And we were coming together to name a feature in the upcoming release of the product. And the team had some ideas and they presented their leading idea. And for this feature, they wanted to call it something like Maxi Protection Technology. Now, when I shared this with audiences, half the room laughs, half the room thinks it's an awesome idea, "what was wrong with that?" So I raised my little female hand and I say, hey fellas, this sounds like something you're only going to use once a month.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs].

Suzi LeVine: And to their credit, they listened to me even though I was a new voice in the room, and they didn't name it that, it ultimately was named Data Protection Technology. But I use it as a, as a humorous and important illustration that had a woman not been in the room, had it not been a diverse group, they wouldn't have had a better idea for that name.

Jeff Schwager: Right.

Suzi LeVine: I'm curious as to who was in the room when they named the iPad. Going to leave it there.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs] I guess I'm a really woke guy-

Suzi LeVine: [Laughs].

Jeff Schwager: -because I understood that right away

Suzi LeVine: You laughed right out of the out of the out of the gate. [Interviewer laughs] Good job Jeff. That's fantastic.

Jeff Schwager: Um..., how did working in government change your view of how our government works? Um, did you come in expecting one set of things and quickly learn that, that's not what you should expect? Or was it what you expected?

Suzi LeVine: I didn't have any expectations going into this particular job. Um, I'm going to roll back to when I was in college and I did a summer internship at NASA. I actually did two. Oh, wow. And the first one was just pure science, I was evaporating gold to make surfaces that would capture comet dust. But my second summer was documenting the process of creating a spacecraft. And it was understanding the bureaucracy that would have to go into that process that made me not want to work in government. The number of years in advance of acquiring equipment one needed to put in for obtaining it, and the number of signatures required just felt heavy [emphasis]. Now, granted, I was still in college and I didn't understand the need for bureaucracy, but I was overwhelmed by it then.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm, huh [affirmative].

Suzi LeVine: Going into this position, I was just so excited to serve the Obama administration and do what I could for my community, my nation, and for the world. And when you come in as an ambassador, it's actually, it's a very different kind of role. You're the CEO of a little company, right? And it's the company is called the United States of America in that country. Or if you think about it like, for me, it was an easy transition from Microsoft where you have country managers and subsidiaries. It was like I was the country manager, and I was able to define the priorities. I was able to build the relationships. I was able to listen and figure out what is our marketing plan, all of those things. And I had an amazing team. I think the thing that I won't say surprised me, but delighted me the most, that I didn't expect... were the unbelievable, was the unbelievable quality of individuals who had chosen this as their careers and the diverse sources of those individuals. So, whether it was a small Christian college in East Texas, whether it was Yale University's most prestigious program, all of these different sources, or whether it was somebody who barely graduated from community college, generated exceptionally talented individuals, and then really getting a sense of our foreign service as our frontline. There's a line that people often say that war is failed diplomacy. Our diplomats are the ones who are making sure that relationships don't degrade. They're protecting our security. They're also protecting our economic well-being. And we in the United States don't often see that because... they actually, by statute, are not allowed to market the work that happens abroad back into the United States. So, a lot of people don't have visibility, now with social media, they have more visibility. So, people were able to follow along with my work and the work of many of my counterparts. But by and large, people don't know a lot of what our Foreign Service officers do, or our locally engaged staff, and more than half of my staff was actually local staff from Switzerland. And so the [emphasis] people and the quality and the dedication that those individuals have to the well-being of our nation, really, it continues to blow me away, especially those people who are staying now with what's going on in our country.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Yeah, I noticed that you're uh, sure everyone noticed that your resignation came in on a particular day. Um, was that a statement of protest from you or coincidental?

Suzi LeVine: So it's not coincidental. Uh, especially as a non-career ambassador, you are expected to turn in your resignation with the transition of power. What has happened in the past is occasionally an individual, because they may have kids in school that they want to continue, will request an extension through the end of the school year. But by and large, the non careers will transition with the president who has named them to their position, who has uh, who has nominated them to their position. And so no, I was incredibly proud to have served for President Obama in that capacity and for the United States of America. [Phone ringing] And I turned in my resignation, as did all of the non-career ambassadors for that day. And then we were able to put things in place to be able to come home with the kids that day. But it was, you know, I would like to say it was my choice, and at the same time, I also recognized that, uh, that President Trump did not extend anybody into his, um, into his term.

Jeff Schwager: Would you have, maybe this question goes too far, but would you have wanted to serve President Trump? Is that something you would have?

Suzi LeVine: No. No, it doesn't go too far.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: I need to be able to believe in the policies and practices. And as ambassador, you are the personal representative of the president of the United States. My boss was President Obama, and I needed to be able to feel in good faith about all of those policies that I was representing, and that if I had issues or concerns or what have you, that I had channels through which to share them. And so, again, until the moment I stepped on the plane on January 20th, I was able to feel confident in that and know that in coming home A. I was coming home. This is an amazing place to come home to, and that we also have a lot of work to do here in

terms of helping build jobs and helping restore our democracy.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Yeah. So, how do you, um how do you see that, how do you see your role as a former ambassador playing out moving forward? What changes do you want to make here? And especially, uh, if I can say you're part of the opposition at the moment. Is that a fair statement?

Suzi LeVine: I'm a glass half full kind of girl.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh, okay.

Suzi LeVine: And I'm a citizen, is what I am. And I don't think about opposition. I don't think about here's who's in power. I think about the people of the United States, the citizenry. We're the ones with the power. And it's a question of how do we put that forward, and how do we light people up and get them to vote? Get everybody to vote. Um, and so how do I take what my experience was and bring it back here? Well, a couple of key ways. What we heard out of the 2016 election was that, by and large, there are many people in our nation who feel like they don't have access to the American Dream.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: When you look at various surveys they show that people themselves don't feel it, but more importantly they don't think their kids have access to it.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: Whereas for, for generations people have felt like okay, my kids are going to do better than I... That is on the decline.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: And what we saw and experienced in Switzerland around the Swiss model of apprenticeship and how the Swiss economy hums, is something from which we can learn and apply here and adapt here, not just in Washington State but across the United States, that will give people access to that American dream and to the dignity of work. And so my husband and I, when we came back, we have been doing presentations and meetings and convenings all over the United States. We've met with at least 12 different governors or their staffs. We actually organized and brought Governor Inslee and a delegation of 45 business, philanthropic, government, and academic leaders to Switzerland to see their system. And we believe that by, again, expanding the paths that people have, that we will be able to ameliorate one of the key issues that we heard and that we know is only going to expand in the future if [emphasis] we don't address it. And so that is one way that I am taking my experience and really bringing it back. And the beautiful thing is, again, my husband and I, we went on these visits, we visited hundreds of companies and met with thousands of apprentices. And uh, and so we're both very passionate about it. And so we together are partnering to make this difference here in Washington state. In fact, this morning, we were down in Olympia testifying at the hearing in, that's talking about a new piece of legislation on this front. So, that's one way in terms of restoring our democracy. The key focus there for us is addressing gerrymandering and the gerrymandering that was done. Gerrymandering has existed since 1812, when Elbridge Gerry, the governor of Massachusetts at that time, did the first round of gerrymandering. It's called gerrymandering because of he [emphasis] got one of the districts to be shaped like a salamander. And so the Boston Gazette brought together his name and the word salamander and called it gerrymandering. That said, they didn't have as much technology then as we have now. And so we can do it on a much more surgical basis, which is what happened in 2011. And it broke our democracy. We previously had over 100 different districts across our nation that were swing districts, where those representatives had an incentive to listen to those who might not have voted for them. We are now at fewer than 25 because of what was done in 2011, and we've seen it in the results at the federal level, but we're also seeing it in the results at the state level, whether it's in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, North Carolina. So, my husband and I are also working very hard so that we can address the gerrymandering so that after the next census in 2020, when the next redistricting happens in 2021, that we can get back to fair districts. It's not a matter of left or right. It's a matter of fair, because then our representatives, whether at the state or the federal level, will need to listen to all Americans and not just a small subset of those Americans.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative], I know President Obama has been focused on that as well. Is that something you're working directly with him and his people on, or is this a separate project of your own?

Suzi LeVine: We are working with Eric Holder's organization, tnat is the organization that President Obama is supporting. So working closely with, with Attorney General Holder and his team. It's called the National Democratic Redistricting Committee. So yes, we're working very closely with them and helping them think about the redistricting process, the census, what are some of

the issues that may come up and how do we support them and enable them.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Great.

Suzi LeVine: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um, you talked about apprenticeship and that's something I wanted to ask you about.

Suzi LeVine: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um I don't really know much about it. And I know that here, certainly there's this huge focus on everyone going to college and this feeling that if your kids don't go to college, then you've somehow failed them. And I, I believe that the apprenticeship model is, uh, a way to change that dynamic. And can you talk about that and explain that?

Suzi LeVine: Absolutely. So, the Suzi LeVine of 2013 thinks that the Suzi LeVine of 2018 is a heretic.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs]

Suzi LeVine: Let's get that straight. Um, and that's because I now recognize that the path to success has many beginnings, and they don't all start with a university degree. And our kids know this too [laughs]. And they recite this back to us with some frequency [jingling noise in the background]. What we saw in Switzerland, when people here in the United States think about apprenticeship, they think about plumbers, carpenters and welders and electricians, which we need more of. And they are amazing jobs. They get paid very well. They do great work. And in fact, they have continued to be the stewards of apprenticeship in the United States for now a couple of centuries. And that's awesome. But what parents think that they want and need is more for their kids. They want a path. They want to know that their kids don't have a dead end or a dead end job. Well, if you go back in history, you go back to the founding of our country, was from individuals who were apprentices, right? Alexander Hamilton. He started as an apprentice in the West Indies in trade. We have his experiences as an apprentice to thank for our customs system and for our Coast Guard. Thank you, apprenticeship. All right. Ben Franklin started as a printing apprentice. Actually, he didn't start as a printing apprentice [stutters]. He was a cutlery apprentice, and he failed at that, and then he rerouted. And we have him to thank for so much in our nation. Over time, especially in the 20th century, access to education and the democratization of that access became really a hallmark for the United States. First, it was having up through ninth grade by the start of the 20th century and then up through high school by the middle of the 20th century. And then, oh my goodness, with the GI Bill in 1944. That democratized access to higher education for everybody coming back from the war, which was amazing [emphasis] and opened up so many more opportunities for folks. But the downside of that moment was that it prioritized and set at, that going to higher education to university as the prerequisite for the American Dream, as opposed to one among many paths to the American Dream. And over time, other paths have become more and more denigrated. I remember when I was in high school, right. It was those [emphasis] kids who did vo-tech, right? It was those. And they've changed the name over time. But by and large, it's been those [emphasis] kids as opposed to everybody's kids.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: What we saw in Switzerland, they don't have those [emphasis] kids. What they have is 7 in 10 of all kids go into apprenticeship, not high school, So starting at 15. But if you rewind even further, overall, here in the United States, you hear a lot of people, especially politicians, talking about we need to make sure that our kids are college ready [says mimicking a politician]. Yeah, sometimes they'll say college and career ready.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: I would argue we need to make our kids career ready. College is one among many paths. It's going to take a big cultural shift to get people over the hump, because again, we've really programmed people on this point and we've programmed employers. Employers post jobs for requiring a university degree that don't require a university degree.

Jeff Schwager: Right.

Suzi LeVine: And so it's been an arms race among these employers of who can have the, "you know what, I now require an MBA. Oh, I require a PhD [said mocking employers]." Well, some jobs certainly do, but not all jobs. Right. Does the parking lot attendant need a college degree? So it's become a replacement for we're looking for these skills or these capabilities. And in some cases that, that helps in terms of giving you some, some gauge. But it isn't the ultimate. So, in Switzerland what we saw was a system. It's not a program. It is a system where again 70% of kids do apprenticeship, not high school. In the seventh grade, businesses start doing career fairs. After that in the eighth grade, the young people get to do something called "schnuppern," which means

sniffing in German where they get to spend one-

Jeff Schwager: How do you spell that?

Suzi LeVine: "Schnuppern," uh, in German, I think it's schnuppern [spells out]. But we can confirm that. Where you spend one to five days trying something out. So, you might be on the train and there's a very, very young [high pitch voice] and very small ticket taker taking your, taking your tickets and they're trying it out. We met one young man once at an IT apprenticeship who his father worked on a factory floor, so he figured I'm going to work on a factory floor. And he went and he learned that he does not like the smell of the factory floor, of the oils. And so now he's an IT apprentice. Right, because through "schnuppern," sniffing, literally, he actually determined, "I can't stand the smell [jokingly imitating the apprentice]." And so... 70% of kids do that. So, eighth grade, they try it out. Excuse me, ninth grade, they tried. 10th grade they begin. And it's a full range from white collar to blue collar. So, it's pharmaceutical technicians. It's IT professionals. It is bankers. It is, um, paralegals. It is veterinary assistants. It is mechanical engineers. It's really, really broad array that they have. And they are then in the 10th grade starting and it's a three to four year program, three or four days a week, you're working one or two days a week, you're in school. And the school is tailored to the type of apprenticeship you're in. So, if you're a hairdresser, you are studying chemistry, you are studying sociology, you're studying language. All apprentices are studying citizenship and small business accounting. So, every apprentice there finishes and knows how to run a business and how to vote. Yay! Um..., the key thing, the key structural aspect of it that makes it, I believe, the most palatable system to the United States is that they've built in permeability. So, you can go from your apprenticeship on to higher education, and 30% of Swiss apprentices do. And it's prestigious. When you look across Swiss society, you have CEOs, you have federal councillors, which is the equivalent of their presidency. You have university heads. These are people who started as apprentices. Sergio Ermotti, who has $3 trillion under management, is the CEO of UBS. He started as a banking apprentice. So, and you can look throughout and people see that you have entrepreneurs who are creating startups who started as apprentices. So, it's pervasive in society. And one of the things that is really appealing is that it's not a government program, and nor is it a government, how do we address poverty program. It is a system that's led by businesses. Businesses fund 60% of it and they get a positive ROI. So, it's not corporate social responsibility, it's not altruism. It is a business decision.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative]

Suzi LeVine: And last year it was about $5.8 billion that they invested in at 1% of Swiss GDP. And they generally get a 7 to 10% return on their investment for the 100 to $150,000 that they invest in these apprentices over the course of three to four years. It's exceptional, but it's not so exceptional that we can't do it. And so what we've been doing is talking with, again, different governors working very closely with them. In Colorado, my husband and I are both on the board of a new statewide business-led youth apprenticeship system, that was a public-private partnership that was created out of a visit, a delegation that came from Colorado, led by Governor Hickenlooper, that we were able to receive and help them with their organization, of their trip and stuff. And so we've been tracking closely on what they're doing and helping them. And then, uh, and now again, we're on their board as they're moving forward and having great success with their efforts. We're watching that closely here in Washington state. We had this delegation with Governor Inslee, and there's a lot of momentum on this front. And Washington State has a lot of programs in apprenticeship. Really amazing programs. But they're not a system. It's not cohesive. You know, it's, it's not that, you know, I can have an apprentice who comes out of the LeVine Corporation and goes to the, to the Schwager corporation. Is it Schwager. Okay, I'm giving you a German pronunciation.

Jeff Schwager: Yes.

Suzi LeVine: Schwager [imitating harsh German accent]

Jeff Schwager: Schwager [imitating harsh German accent]. Yes.

Suzi LeVine: Um, and you would know exactly what you're getting [ping in background]. And similarly, I wouldn't worry that you're stealing, I'm, you're stealing my talent because I know I could get some from you, too. And together we grow the pie instead of stealing each other's pieces of pie. So, there's also collaboration among the businesses. So, there's a lot to learn from that. And we believe that this is one of the core answers to how does our country continue to grow and prosper into this next century.

Jeff Schwager: So it seems to me like there's one of the most obvious corporations to get involved in this sort of thing right here in Washington. It's also one of the biggest companies in the world, and you probably know a lot of people who work there since you used to work there.

Suzi LeVine: So Microsoft has been very involved already.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh [affirmative]

Suzi LeVine: Um, they, um, we had Brad Smith came and visited us in Switzerland when we were there. And then as a part of this delegation, Microsoft was one of the, was one of the sponsors of the delegation. And Mary Snapp from Microsoft Philanthropies joined. Microsoft also has been a big funder for Skillful, which is a nonprofit that is working on how do you get businesses to shift from degrees to skills as a part of their job descriptions. So, Microsoft is very dedicated to this. And in fact, last year, I haven't seen this year's legislation, legislative report. Last year their legislative recommendations were full [emphasis] of this. And then Brad Smith also just, um, was the chair of the Career Connect Washington Task Force that Governor Inslee set up that ran from last May until basically now. So, so Microsoft is very engaged and involved in this.

Jeff Schwager: Great.

Suzi LeVine: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. That's wonderful. Um.

Suzi LeVine: But we also want others to. Right. It can't just be Microsoft. That's the whole thing. It's got to be an ecosystem, right? It's got to be Microsoft and Amazon and Facebook and Google who all have a presence here. But it's also got to be Starbucks, right, who has their apps that they're developing or other entities utilizing technology. There's a number of places to put this together. And in fact, in Zurich, where Google has their largest facility out, their largest development facility outside of the United States, they actually just launched an app developer apprenticeship program this past fall that fits into the overall Swiss ecosystem, but for Google, it's new.

Jeff Schwager: It seems like something that so many people teach themselves from a young age, that it's a field that would just lend itself to that sort of thing.

Suzi LeVine: You hear so many stories right about so and so didn't even go to high school. So and so didn't go to college.

Jeff Schwager: They're usually hackers, but [laughs].

Suzi LeVine: Well, you know, it's interesting, one of the, one of... the achievements that we had was we were able to put together a CEO summit at the White House with Swiss executives. And there we were with Secretary Pritzker and Secretary Perez and a number of members of the National Economic Council. And one of the CEOs from Switzerland, a gentleman named André Kudelski, who if you've ever gone either through a car park or a ski lift or something where it says "SKIDATA," they're the ones who do SKIDATA.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh[affirmative].

Suzi LeVine: Anyway, he basically said, "You know, you have a choice. You either have these people go to work and get excited and really put their energies, their technological prowess into producing things that are for good and positive and contributing to society or they become hackers. Which do you want?"

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: Pay them a paycheck or pay them a ransom, you decide

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs].

Suzi LeVine: Right? So it was a very interesting point. A lot of people have this sense of, you know, school is kind of boring. And either people endure it or some people don't. And in Switzerland, they don't think about it as, you do have to qualify to go to high school, you have to basically, it is tracking and that gets people's knickers in a twist. But if you think about it, again, because there are no dead ends and you can go on. People [dog barks] are resolved with that. But what you have [dog barks]. Exciting. But what you have is, um, an environment in which, uh..., people recognize, again, the prestige of the opportunity.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: So, anyway.

Jeff Schwager: Cool, um. I wanted to ask you about your, your, uh, Jewish background.

Suzi LeVine: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Were you raised in an observant family? Uh, how did, how did, uh, your life in Judaism evolve?

Suzi LeVine: So I was raised in a family that was conservative. Um, and we kept kosher, growing up, we did Shabbat dinners. I went to Hebrew school three days a week: Monday, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. And our family life was very Jewish, went to Israel a couple of times over the course of my growing up. And then, um, when I was 18, I went to Israel for, I think it was three and a half months that I went, and I lived up in Safed and did a program there called Livnot U'Lehibanot. And I went to summer camp, a Jewish summer camp, um, with an organization called Habonim Dror, which I don't know if you've heard of it, but basically, um, they run the camps like kibbutzim. So, I had a lot of Jewish in my life growing up. And then after my time that I spent in Israel on this program, that was a very religious program, when I came back, I had a whole different sense of what community was about, and that was when I had transferred. I started my freshman year at Rutgers, and I transferred to Brown, and I got very involved in the Hillel at Brown, and that started me basically as a community organizer and getting involved in the Jewish Student Union there. And then when I came out here, I got involved in Grads Plus at Hillel at the University of Washington. And then I met my husband. I'm pointing this way because he's over in that room. And, uh, and then starting to think about what does it mean, what does a Jewish, a meaningful Jewish life. So anyway.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. So how would, um, how would you say Jewish values have influenced your work and your life?

Suzi LeVine: The values from my Judaism that really have... pervaded my life and my actions, I wake up every single day thinking about how do I make the world a better place. If you were to crack open my arteries and do analysis of my blood, you would see tikkun olam flowing, right? It wouldn't just be whatever DNA strands, it would say tikkun olam. Um, it's who I am. It's what I do. It's what motivates me. It's what, I've had a very non-linear course over the, over my career, but my north star has always been that. And when I am weighing decisions on what to do, what not to do, that is one of the overwhelming factors in my decision making. That comes from seeing my mom doing that in the Jewish community, seeing leaders in our in our Jewish community and their decisions. Um, and having studied, I'll give you an example. It's a little one. So, I was very honored to have been able to do the Wexner program here. I remember one of our first classes talked about business ethics, and there's a passage in the Torah that talks about, or you interpret it as paying your laborers on the day of their work. And... it is so much at the core of the dignity of work. How do you show respect for people? How do you show respect for their time, for their work, for their intellect, for their contribution to society? And so those are some of the ways that my Jewish values inform my life. The other thing is, as somebody who keeps kosher, I have to be extremely mindful with what I consume, how I spend my time, right? It makes me much more aware of others and how, and how I can help them with whatever their needs might be. And so that kashrut has given me this, both the sense of individuality because um, pepperoni pizza day I was the one with the cream cheese sandwich.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: But also this sense of we have to be aware of what's going into our bodies at any given moment in time. We can't take that for granted. And we also need to be aware of what we are serving and providing others.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Um, you grew up in New Jersey, is that right?

Suzi LeVine: I did, I was born near Philadelphia and then when we were seven I moved, we moved to South Jersey and then I grew up near Atlantic City.

Jeff Schwager: Um huh. Um, Um. It's very, I, I also come from the East coast. It's very different.

Suzi LeVine: Whereabouts?

Jeff Schwager: I was born in Poughkeepsie.

Suzi LeVine: Okay. We used to race up in Poughkeepsie when I was on crew.

Jeff Schwager: Uh huh. And I lived in a little town called Hopewell Junction when I was little. Uh, in the, in the Hudson Valley. Um, it's very different here in Seattle in terms of, uh, you don't. Judaism is not as common in Seattle. It's not, um, it feels, we feel like other more here, I think. Um, and I'm curious, uh, if that's something that's affected you and if that had any, um. If that worried you when you, when you came to Seattle originally?

Suzi LeVine: It didn't worry me at all when I came to Seattle. I, when you come to this city in the midst of a boom at Microsoft, straight out of college, um, the world's your oyster. Although, I guess that's not very kosher, but, you know, the world's yours babka [laughs]. And I got involved right away at grads plus at the University of Washington Hillel. So, I had an instant community there. I had an instant community at Microsoft. I didn't feel like I was missing anything with regards to that versus an East Coast

Jewish community. And because I came straight out of university here, my community had been a university community. So, it was different than that which one might have, if you're a family in, you know, whatever, Short Hills. Um, so I had a very different experience that way. And then I made my Jewish community.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: It was something where what I, so when, when Rachel and I co-founded Kavana that stemmed from, gosh I'm feeling a little old for Hillel, just had my, I'm about to have a second baby, and I really don't want to nurse another kid through high holiday services.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs]

Suzi LeVine: And so [laughs].

Suzi LeVine: It felt a little awkward [high pitch]. And, um, and so I was going to go around and interview rabbis, and I had my whole list of questions. And I started with Rachel and I asked her, so here's this, here's that, here's the other thing that I'm looking for. And it was basically Hillel for grown ups was what I was seeking. And she said, I'm sorry, that doesn't exist. But if you find it, let me know because I want that too. And then I spoke to Rabbi Dan. I said, "Dan, when are you going to, when are you going to start a synagogue?" And he said, "I'm not, but maybe you will." And I didn't start a synagogue. Right. What we started was a cooperative. It was very distinctly not. And in fact, our first year, that following year, in 2006, we did not have high holiday services because we didn't want that. Right. It's not about being a three day a year Jew, and it's not, it was about how do we provide a very multidimensional environment in which people could figure out what is, what is a meaningful Jewish life for them. And so I created, co-created the community that I wanted, and I never felt like I was lacking. In fact, it met my needs better than my East Coast upbringing, which, frankly, was very guilt based.

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs]

Suzi LeVine: Right. Seriously, it was, it was, you know, six million people died, so you have to be Jewish. Yeah, that was, that was the basis for it. And I dreaded Hebrew school. It was awful. I loved the rabbi. He was lovely. Um, but it was, it was dreadful. It was. How do you receive torture? Every Monday and Wednesday from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. and then on Saturday, when all of your friends are doing other super fun things, you're not and I learned so much. And yes, now I know all the songs and I know all of the everythings. But why couldn't it have been like camp?

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: Right. Why did it have to be so awful? And the great thing is, is that we created something that is like camp. So when my daughter goes on Tuesday evenings, she has pizza, she's got friends and it's like camp and she's learning. So anyway.

Jeff Schwager: Cool. Um, can you talk a little more specifically about the goals of Kavana?

Suzi LeVine: Absolutely.

Suzi LeVine: Kavana, when we started it [lets out a breath] 11 years ago, the goal was really to provide a community in which people could build personalized Jewish life, right. What is meaningful to them? And nondenominational or post-denominational and a cooperative. I mentioned before that one of the inspirations was the Queen Anne Cooperative Preschool. Right. How are individuals, producers and not just consumers of this community. What does every individual have that they can contribute to the to the to the community? So my husband, for example, did Kavana men cook, right. We hosted a lot of stuff in our basement. A lot of people hosted a lot of stuff in their spaces. We had one woman who, um, acquired our Torah on eBay, and then she brought in, um, a soferet to come and with the entire community, repair this Torah. And so there's like these, it was, it was and is this incredible community aspect. Um, so the goal was to help everybody, both individually have a more meaningful Jewish life and for them to help contribute to a larger community, a larger sense of community. I think it's been doing a great job on that front. Some of the design elements that I think are essential. One is that it's an evolutionary community. So for whomever is involved, it will morph. It will change over time and is not meant to be a static community. What exists today with Kavana is different than what existed ten years ago with Kavana or five years ago with Kavana. And it is designed to be a highest common denominator community, not a lowest common denominator community. If you come in and you're not Jewish, you're married to somebody or you're dating somebody who's Jewish and you don't know anything about Judaism, it isn't an environment in which we slow down our speech [slows down speech] and speak more simply. If anything, it is all right, let's find the really challenging place that engages and excites you and taps into your own knowledge system and brings you in that way.

Suzi LeVine: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: And uh, and so... those are some of the elements of which I'm very proud of what we've created and that have persisted and that have enabled it to be a nimble community that has really been seen across the country as a source of innovation and inspiration.

Jeff Schwager: Great. Um, I wanted to ask you about mentorship, and, um, I..., I presume that as, um, such an impressive woman that you have been tapped as a mentor by many people. But let me start by asking if there were mentors in your life who were particularly important to you, and if you can talk about those experiences?

Suzi LeVine: I do have individuals who have and are mentors to me.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: I have not gotten into as formal a mentorship structure as some people have or as some people are. Uh, I, I fully support and believe that those things are great, but I haven't really been in an environment where people are like, okay, you need to pick your mentors now. My mentors have just happened.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: There are people I think are great and wise, and from whom I love to learn, and where we have just an incredible chemistry and bond. Um, frankly, most of them are men. There are a couple of women who I have in my life that I look at that way, and I don't have a set frequency, and I'm like, okay, it's second Tuesday of the month. I better get on my mentorship meetings and calls.

Jeff Schwager: Sure.

Suzi LeVine: Um.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, I didn't mean in any sort of formal way.

Suzi LeVine: But I think that, I think that a lot of people assume that there is a structure to mentorship, and they feel like, oh, I haven't done that yet. And for me, what has been reassuring is I didn't try to have mentors and I don't try to be a mentor. What I do have is people in my life that I learn from and look up to, whether it is my husband, whether it is my mother, whether it is Michelle Rosen, whether it is Bob Watt, whether it is Will Poole. These are just some of the people from whom I learn and grow, whether it's my good friend Dana Shell Smith, who was our ambassador to Qatar. Michael Hauser, who was our ambassador to Cameroon. Like people who are both peers and mentors, as well as people who have had much more experiences, many more experiences than I have. So, mentorship can take on many forms and I think that some people feel like, oh my God, I haven't, I haven't done this thing. And I want to reassure those individuals that it doesn't have to be a high stress, high stakes thing. For some people it is and it does and they do want structure and that's great. And there are some companies who really establish here's our mentorship program. Awesome.

Suzi LeVine: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: Not everybody.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Okay.

Suzi LeVine: So and as far as being a mentor, again there are a number of people with whom I touch base on a regular basis, who pick my brain and say, hey, you know what, I'm thinking about this, can you talk to me? What, what do you what, what do you think are the pros and the cons of this decision? Or do you know somebody who can connect me with somebody? And there are some people who have done the more formal thing of, "will you be my mentor?" And... if I don't know them, if I don't feel like there is a relationship there that we have where, um, if that person's just trying to check a box.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: I don't think it's going to help them. You know, anyway.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Good. I'm going to scan my list of questions here.

Suzi LeVine: Okay.

Jeff Schwager: Since I, since I composed one. Um. How are we doing on time?

Suzi LeVine: I'm okay. I just need to leave at-

Jeff Schwager: 2:15. And we're right at two now, so. So, we're going to wrap up pretty soon. Um, I'm curious about your thoughts on the MeToo movement that's happening now. And, um, how you see that changing the world, uh, in the future and, um, take it from there, yeah.

Suzi LeVine: Uh, it's about respect.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: And that this is ... raising people's voices and giving a space for their voices is amazing. And that it is [phone pings] encouraging people to question their actions and their words that they might have thought were hilarious, or that they might have thought were benign or not a big deal. And for them to finally be aware that they had much more impact than they realized, I think is fantastic [emphasis]. I don't like that it has to happen, obviously, but if it changes, if it gives, if it gives, somebody pause. Let me let me give you an example. Uh. I've had a couple of experiences in my life. One is just about words and I'll just talk one about the one about words at this point. When I was getting my engineering degree, my thesis advisor was the dean of the College of Engineering and we had a very good rapport. Nice Jewish man. We would joke, yuk it up a lot. And I shared with him over the course of my time of developing my thesis, uh, instances that I thought were inappropriate around textbook language, professorial language, where I had a textbook that described inertia, and they used a picture of Dagwood telling Blondie to get him a sandwich. Right. That's not okay. Or I had a professor who made a snide comment, and I shared those with my thesis advisor because they upset me. And as a feminist, they upset me even more. And he listened. And so when I was receiving my degree on the stage, and he's standing here and I'm standing there, he thought he was being very funny and very familiar and very close to me when he introduced me as "Suzi Davidson," my maiden name, "that nice little girl." And yet, here I was, a grown woman at my moment of glory. And he put me down. Yeah, he thought he was being funny. And I filed my first complaint that day. And he did send me an apology. And I know, again, he wasn't being malicious.

Jeff Schwager: Right.

Suzi LeVine: He was being clueless.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: And if this type of movement causes somebody to pause before saying something like that. We are many, many, many years since that incident occurred. And I remember it like it happened five minutes ago.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Suzi LeVine: Think about all of the young women engineers who would say, you know what, to heck with it, I'm done [blows raspberries]. I don't want to work with these guys.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Suzi LeVine: Right. So if we can prevent that from happening. Awesome. Or empowering individuals who [deep breath], will understand that saying no is okay and that hearing no is not, you can't just hear no. You need to hear yes.

Jeff Schwager: What do you mean?

Suzi LeVine: It is not just no means no anymore. It is that. Yes means yes.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. Yeah, no, I get.

Suzi LeVine: And the other day, my phenomenal 15-year-old son corrected me. We were singing a funny song by the, um... Uh, what is the band name? They have a song, "no means no. No is always no no no no no no no no [says to a beat]." Um. Eric, who is that?

Eric LeVine: Hold on {?}

Suzi LeVine: Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: Who is it?

Suzi LeVine: He's going to tell me a second. I'm blanking. It's, their very popular band, and they did some-

Eric LeVine: They Might Be Giants.

Suzi LeVine: They Might Be Giants. They did a kids album, and that was one of the songs. And then Sydney, my son says to me, "mom, that's not good enough. It needs to be. Yes means yes."

Jeff Schwager: [Laughs]

Suzi LeVine: Awesome. Go 15-year-old boy, wooh! Right. So.

Jeff Schwager: And does he? I'm curious if he sees that as, uh, a common attitude among his peers or if he is particularly woke?

Suzi LeVine: I don't know, I don't know. He's a feminist. Proud. And he stands up for the young women in his class, and he stands up for anybody and everybody in his class who needs standing up for. Yeah, he's an upstander is what he does and who he is. And I don't know the survey of his class, but I do know that among his friends, they support him. And they I think, they practice the same treatment of each other in terms of respect. So, he's in a great peer group.

Jeff Schwager: Well that's good.

Suzi LeVine: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Tell me about, uh, and this will be our last question because I know you do have to go. Um, tell me about what your plans are moving forward. You've talked a bit about gerrymandering, um, in your work there and apprenticeship. What, what are your goals moving forward and what do you want to change in the world?

Suzi LeVine: That's a big question. Um, so I am not working for pay at this moment in time. I am, um, I am comfortable with the discomfort of not knowing exactly what's next for me, and my goal continues to be what my goal has always been, which is making the world a better place. And among the ways in which to do that right now are these two points of how do we help everybody have the dignity of work and move that ball forward in that dimension, especially focusing on apprenticeship? And what can we learn from the Swiss model and how can we share that? How can I use my knowledge and my experiences and my husband's knowledge and his experiences? And how can we make a difference there? And then restoring our democracy. We've got a lot of work to do, but we have a lot of great momentum, and I feel confident that if we can turn out voters and get people to really start talking and listening with each other, then we will be able to get back to having a representative democracy by November 3rd, 2022, which will be the day after the first election on new district maps.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. You've used that phrase a couple of times that "restoring our democracy," and I'm curious if that is a phrase you started using in January of 2017, or if that is a more generic phrase. Um, because when I hear it now and we have the president, we have it means one thing to me and if someone had said that before, it would mean something else. So, I'm curious what it means to you.

Suzi LeVine: I've actually been using it since 2012.

Jeff Schwager: Okay.

Suzi LeVine: When the first elections happened on new maps because that's when we really stopped having a representative democracy. When our Congress is such that you have a million and a half more votes for Democrats, and yet you have a 17 seat minority, that is not a representative democracy. And so it is not good for anybody, Republican or Democrat, when you have that kind of imbalance. And when you have a situation where the politicians are choosing their voters instead of voters choosing their politicians. And so to get back to that place is going to take a lot of work. And that place is not one that's left or right. It is fair [emphasis]. It is how we have fair districts. So, there will be a lot of action at the legal level at the Supreme Court, at the state court level, it's already happening right now. But it's also going to be about how do we, excuse me {how do I make note that this is not a response to the question, but more of an almost pre-sneeze or yawn excuse me}, increase voter turnout and help everybody understand that their vote really does count. We have a lot of people who would suggest, oh, I'm not going to vote, my vote doesn't count. Everybody's vote counts. And if people do not vote, they can't complain.

Jeff Schwager: Yes! I couldn't agree more.

Suzi LeVine: All right.

Jeff Schwager: Or as I, as I said to my friends a while back, if you voted for Ralph Nader, you can't complain.

Suzi LeVine: Well, they did vote for somebody.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, they voted, but.

Suzi LeVine: Right.

Jeff Schwager: God forbid that they were the deciding vote. Um, it has been so fascinating to talk to you.

Suzi LeVine: Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: Um, your career is just a marvel to me.

Suzi LeVine: It's kind of you to say.

Jeff Schwager: My mother was one of the first computer programmers at IBM in the 60s.

Suzi LeVine: Oh, so cool! That's fantastic!

Jeff Schwager: And so, uh [recording ends].