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Leslie Ray Bernstein

SUMMARY

Leslie Ray Bernstein reflects on her upbringing in Seattle and how her Jewish identity and relationship to Judaism evolved over time, including a formative trip to Israel at age 16. She describes her career in the textile industry and how it connected her to influential networks that eventually led her into deeper involvement with the arts and community organizations. Bernstein discusses her leadership and board work with theater institutions, including Act Theater, as well as her participation in national anti-racism efforts to promote greater equity and accountability in the performing arts. She also reflects on major life transitions—from a period of travel and change in early adulthood to returning to Seattle later in life—alongside her experiences navigating COVID-19's impact on the arts and her ongoing sense of reflection and renewal.

Max Sarkowsky: Hello, Leslie, Welcome to this interview for the Hero Washington Committee. let's just start by telling us who you are and introducing yourself, and just telling us a little bit about your upbringing and how you sort of got to where you are today.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: You know, those are really big questions, right? Yeah. So, of course, I thought, how do you answer that question? How do you summarize a life in, like, five minutes before anyone's actually falling asleep, but how did I get here? As I was thinking about that particular question, I would say I thought more about my I kind of thought more about my. I sort of chunked my life into three parts. Right? Like, there's the first part, I would say age 0 to 18, and I would consider that part of my life. Kind of grew up here in Seattle, was born in Seattle. My parents came here from the East Coast. My father went to work at Boeing. So they came from New Jersey. They went to the University of Michigan. My father went to work for Boeing, and they moved out to Seattle. 56 years ago. They're in the same house. And I was born on their third anniversary. So that's when I came into the world. And I would say that segment of my life. The house is in Bellevue. My parents were adopted by the Jewish community. So there were five families that we grew up with. And I was part of this extended community. So I would say, you know, that part of my life was marked by family, community. We went to Temple de Hirsch. And you're probably too young to know this, but the old Temple de Hirsch used to be located in the now Wilburton neighborhood, and it's long since moved. But we used to walk through the woods to Temple. That's kind of like where I grew up in Sunday School. And then went to Sunday School till I was 16, and then took the trip to Israel as part of what you do when you're 16. Yeah. And that was a significant and wonderful trip at age 16, with 20 of us from Seattle and 20 folks from California. So that's kind of like 0 to 16. You know, I went to Sammamish High School. I was your pretty, whatever you want to call, normal kid. growing up in Bellevue, going to school at Sammamish High School. Then I would say the next phase was, you know, 20 to 40, and I would call that era, let's see, I would call that era, like, marked by adventure, chaos, drama, despair, destruction, surrender, breakdown. A lot happened in the next 20 years. I moved away at 18, went to the University of Michigan, and then I traveled. I got involved in a lot of things, and I would say it took me down many paths and many adventures, some dangerous, some not so dangerous, but always adventurous. It could also be considered by my parents, their rebellious years, that sort of thing. Um, got married, had two children in Chicago, and spent really from 18 at Michigan, then lived in Chicago. And then in the year 2000, I moved back to Seattle.

Max Sarkowsky: Okay.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: And that was probably, well, I'm not good at math, but like around 40 ish, my 40 ish, and till now, current time. And I would say this phase of my life is, uh, I would say marked by solitude, reflection, repentance, breakthroughs, self-

ization, and kind of a return home, if that makes sense. Yeah. So I would say that's the biography of Leslie. How was that? About five minutes.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. I mean, you didn't even need to stick to five minutes if you wanted to keep going. We would be more than happy to hear.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: I'd leave room for questions. Right. You're the interviewer. So I gave you a broad, a broad brush. You can dive in anywhere.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah, when you talked about that sort of community that happened when your parents moved to Bellevue, you said. Yeah. What do you talk about that was influential? Was that sense of community? Were the arts involved in that sense of community at all at that point?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: No, no, no. Actually, not really. I think, to the dismay of my mother, who would have liked us to immerse ourselves in a world she came from, she came from New York, and she came from a very creative and artistic and academic, and family background. And I think, you know, before this interview, of course, she wanted me to remember all the times she took me to the museum and took me to the plays and did this and that. And I kind of said, you know, don't remember that, Mom.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Yeah. But I think it's in me. Right? Like, I think it was. It's in me, although it took some time to kind of manifest, but that was marked by, I would say, a sense of just community. Like literally, I felt I had five moms, five dads. We were all like brothers and sisters. And this was a family that my mom and dad created. It is not a real family. Not blood family. It is all aunts and uncles and siblings and cousins that are not blood through family.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. And was that family all Jewish, or was it sort of all different faiths or backgrounds?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: All Jewish?

Max Sarkowsky: Okay.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: All Jewish? Um, all Jewish? Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, we would have our we, and we all lived like the kids. So what we all did together was we all went to the Jewish Community Center. You know, I did gymnastics when I was 10 or 11, and I mean, I probably started younger at the Jewish Community Center. There are photos of us, you know, in the archives at the Jewish Community Center. But it was a very social and cultural experience. It was not a spiritual or deeply religious experience at all. You know, we got together for Rosh Hashanah, for Yom Kippur, for Passover, sometimes. Purim. That's about it. Yeah. Um, so that and each of those families had their communities. So, you know, even during the Jewish holidays, that group of five families had their groups of families. So it was kind of a web.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. That sounds like a great idea. What would you call that childhood?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Yeah, I mean yeah. And we all went off to school and you know from 18 until I returned in the year 2000, I mean we all as peers, as the kids, as the siblings, we all lived very separate, went our ways, had our friends, went to different schools, you know, but still, now that, you know, we're back in Seattle, you know, we still gather for the kids bar mitzvahs or the weddings Things or the family. Jewish tradition. Kind of events, though still. Keep us connected.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Do you. Do you think you returned to the Seattle area in 2000 for any particular reason? Was it to kind of get back to that community, or was it something else that brought you back after all that adventuring happened?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Um, actually, what brought me back was in the year 2000, I was working in Chicago. I loved our life in Chicago. Just take a pause. It was. It was I. I saw so much after living in what I would call, you know, a fairly safe and secluded Bellevue upbringing. Um, and went away at 18 and came back in the year 2000, and I think I had just been exposed to so much more culture. Diverse, experiential, like different lifestyles of people who were living differently during my decades in the Midwest. My daughter was born in Chicago, and my son and daughter went to school in Michigan. I know she went to school in Wisconsin, sorry, but sort of a Midwest experience. And we lived in that area in Chicago in a very I would say, transitioning neighborhood. So it was a street. There were brownstones, and there were buildings in transition. There were community watch teams. There were some sort of good houses and not so good houses. And the neighborhood, you know, we sat outside and played Euchre in the street, and we drank beer together and told stories together. And we got real together and. And, um, the neighborhood changed. So I had a real sense of camaraderie and community in the way we lived in, in that neighborhood in Chicago. It's in the Rogers Park neighborhood. Um, you know, when the first Starbucks was going to go there, there was bashing

against it. And, you know, it was just really cool. It was really cool. And we bought this old building and gutted it and had to get rid of tenants to move in new people. And so it was a really cool time. So all that to say, I didn't want to move back to Seattle, however my brother, who is, was in California, had graduated from Berkeley and was doing his residency in Tufts in Boston and then went on to work in Rochester and then. Yeah. So he was an ER doctor in Rochester, and I might be getting that slightly wrong. But anyway, I had a work transition opportunity to move back to Seattle. And I remember calling my brother and I said, hey, if you go, I'll go. Let's make a deal to move back home together. And he was doing ER air work, and he had some ability to be flexible. And so when we moved back, I remember celebrating my parents 40th wedding anniversary with their two kids coming home because Jay moved home, and I moved home at that same time. And for me, I had an opportunity for work. I took the opportunity, but the deeper experience was, um, well, and today it's quite different. But I will just say this candidly. I used to refer to my parents as dear old dad and mean old mom. And so I now will tell you in the at age 56, I will say I was very wrong about dear old dad and mean old mom, and I've since been able to do so much self-reflection and reckoning and repentance to say now magnificent, amazing, mom. And so our relationship today is one of the great joys. Um, and one of the great outcomes that I'm not quite sure I could have ever anticipated. Um, in moving back to Seattle.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. How Jewish to be to repent and think and process.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Right. Like it's very Jewish. Yeah. Yeah.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Yeah. Um. In Chicago, how much did your Jewish life go there and did it sort of fall away and then come back when you came back to Seattle? Or was it always sort of a part of your life?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Well, I actually. So in college, I actually attended some. So I would say the question of Jewish is an interesting one because I would qualify, I would say about myself, like a through line is this seeker self, right? Like, there's always a sense that somehow I am part of something bigger than myself. And with that comes a significant curiosity, a deep yearning, and a real seeker spirit. So it brought me down many paths. Um, many of which folks outside of my universe would have called them Cult Directions. So, you know, I was at the University of Michigan campus I went to both Hillel and the Hare Krishna community. When I was in Chicago. I went to both the black church. No synagogue, but in Chicago. I lived with my cousin and my mom's sister, so I had an opportunity to connect with my real family, which was interesting to learn stories about my real family and their background. So I would say there was that in Chicago, and when I came back in the era of returning to Seattle, Washington, I went down, you know. Energy paths. I went down Christian paths. I abandoned Judaism, actually, not totally intentionally, but it didn't provide for me this deeper place. And as I say, the era of return is marked by, you know, real destruction and chaos and devastation and breakdowns. You know, it was the end of my first marriage. I found myself sort of flat on my back, saying, After 40 years I've been riding this roller coaster, and the car just went off the track. And I took that experience to. Kind of, for better or worse, take a look at and strip down and rip open. Who am I, and how did I get here?

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: And I took that process, you know, for the next 20 years, really to heart, you know, the kind of transformation that is messy. Thinking about the interview, I said if I were to put a title on the interview, or what brings me joy or reckoning today, is that life? I'm sorry. Change. Real change is really messy. Yeah. And if we're going to really change, it's going to be really messy. And the fact that we're at a moment when the world is really messy, it's also the opportunity where real change can occur. I think that we're not there in the questioning yet.

Max Sarkowsky: But.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: COVID provided an incredible pause, and personally, my journey. I believe it all starts with the pause, and that can be a terrible pause or a profound pause, but nonetheless a pause. And it's been long enough that we have this opportunity to say. To see everything. And to ask ourselves, how will we respond? And what will I do now? You know, that's sort of, I think, a Jewish value to like. Somehow, I think it is. But what do we do now?

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: What do I do now? How do I act in this moment? So I think that really, I can't undo that. That's happening. And that's sort of now. And now there's this interview. And how do you reflect and say, Wow, what do you do now?

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. And well, asking questions certainly is a Jewish value. Yes.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: So yes.

Max Sarkowsky: In that sense. But yeah, we'll get back to the COVID and the current day stuff. But you sort of touched on a job that brought you back to Seattle. Yes. So let's just talk about your work in Seattle. What are the things that you've done in Seattle work-wise, and leading up to now, being on the board of ACT Theater?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: So I went into the business of the textile industry I've been selling. I was selling sheets and bed linens and working in the textile industry. Okay, I have to tell this little anecdote because. Right. That's storytelling. So after I graduated from Michigan, I was still there. I had some aspirations to travel abroad after college. It did not work out for me as planned. I ended up working for a seal coating company, doing driveway painting and paving with a friend from college. We would spend our days painting parking lots and spend our evenings, you know, scraping our skin from tar. And so it was a real physical work, and it landed me an opportunity to work in a video store, which I had a video store in Michigan, because I sold the driveway job to the owner of the party store, who couldn't believe I then did the job, who then had a strip mall in a neighboring community outside of Ann Arbor, who then told me to go to work in the video store, which is where I started working. So I had a video store job. In comes this gentleman one day to repair the heating and cooling, and in that moment, he said to me, This is like a little summary. He said, I've never quite met anyone like you. You are so full of life, so much energy, and so lonely. And I thought I was always surrounded by people. And I thought he just saw right into my soul. And I am going to spend the rest of my life with this man. So we got married. Little to say, it wasn't exactly the plan my parents had for me. So, fast forward several years. The video store was closing. I said to my family, my mother, I'm going to do something to show you that I am not a rat. But actually, this person is really important to me. So I'm going to go into a career that is in sales, that is in textiles, like somehow making a deal. And I got into the textile business, and I started working there, and then I was moved to Chicago, and I never actually wanted to be in the business. However, I was good at the business. And so there I was in Chicago, working again, but I never wanted to. There were a lot of changes in the organization because the retail environment was changing. The Bon Marché was closing the Costco sales manager was leaving. And so they told me I was based out of Chicago. They told me we need a new sales manager in Seattle. And I thought. I didn't think I wanted to move to Seattle. But okay. I was offered a great work offer, work-wise, to move back to Seattle. So in 2000, I was the Costco sales rep and the Bon Marché sales rep, and started working in textiles in that industry from 2000 until I left in 2010. And yeah. So that's what brought me here. And then the person who was running the company was the CEO. His name was Michael Bernstein. I had worked for him since I started in 1993, when I first went to that company. In my mind, Michael Bernstein was, and I say this, with the most endearing spirit, mean Michael, you know, the scary boss man. In 2004, I had to report to him because Costco was our biggest customer. So he flew out to our first Costco meeting. We were having a hot dog, and he asked me a question about the business. And at that point, I wanted to be fired. I was ready to be done. A lot of things were moving, and I had aspirations to be part of a Montessori school and an administrator with an amazing teacher. Her name is Marty Mulugheta, who is where my kids went to early childhood education. And I was going to leave to work at that school. She told me you can't afford to leave and work at that school. Um, but anyway, I wasn't fired. And to make a long story short, my husband today is Michael Bernstein.

Max Sarkowsky: It all comes around.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: So, Yeah. So Michael moved out to Seattle, and now we are married. Michael is from New York. Michael is a collector. Michael had an enormous and significant pottery collection, a basket collection, and a photography collection. He'd been involved in the arts since he graduated from law school in 1965, the year I was born.

Max Sarkowsky: Okay. So was he sort of your gateway into the arts?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: He was definitely. And while we were there, when he came to Seattle to, you know, have a visit, I decided to create a date night, and I googled galleries in Seattle, and the first thing that came up was the Traver Gallery on Second and Union. So Michael and I went to that gallery. You know, I'm acting like I know what I'm talking about. And, we met Bill and Bill, the owner of that gallery. Michael and I went in together, and, you know, it's a long story, but that's the short story, right? Like, deep dive, very fast, very quickly into the arts world. And one thing I will say, which I give my husband an enormous amount of gratitude and credit for, is that he said to me, So tell me what you like. And I think about this all the time. The scary nature of what is art and how to enter art without shame, intimidation, education, sort of deeper intellectual understanding of the artist, the art maker, its meaning, he said. I just want to know what you like. And, quite literally, I couldn't articulate what I like. And he made it a point to, as a collector, to only continue to purchase together more art, if that's what we were going to do. And you talked to a collector, and you can't not collect. Right. That's in their blood. And so I learned how to. Find my own Expression, interest, and voice in art. And I found that through not the end product of the art, but in the artist and the art communities. And that is how we got involved in the art communities that we are a part of here in Seattle. And, and I would say that includes Seattle Art Museum, that includes Pilchuck, the glass community that includes Pratt, that includes the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, that includes, the Photography Center Northwest, the Seattle Film Festival, I mean reach in the in the arts community through this kind of web of community. Right. Like I'm always pulling these threads that take me from one connector to the next.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah, that's lovely. Like entry point, but also so interesting because I feel like so many people talk about, like, ah, yeah, I arts from the very beginning, but it's really nice to hear someone getting involved in the arts, like in a later part of life. And not just like childhood.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Yes.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: And so to me, that kind of shapes the idea of like, access, exposure. Experience. You know, it's about the experience. So. Okay, you're going to ask me the next question, but I think I know what it is, but I'm going to let you ask it.

Max Sarkowsky: Um, well, how did you first get involved in board work?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: About the theatre?

Max Sarkowsky: Oh, okay.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Board work first because I.

Max Sarkowsky: First on my list.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Okay, okay. Okay, okay. That's good, that's good, that's good, that's good. Because I wasn't.

Max Sarkowsky: Sure, if theater came first or board.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: No, it did not. It did not. But you're right. I'm going to let you lead. So board work because. So what happens is now we're in Seattle, we're involved in the arts. Um, we're going to get married. It's 2012, and Michael is going to get married. Uh, second, you know, it's a big deal, right? It's a big it's a big it's a big it's a big deal. So we don't need anything. We got a lot of dishes and furniture and clothes and baskets, and platters. So I think, what are we going to do? And my life changed dramatically once, you know, once I entered what I would consider this kind of big new world. This is kind of a big new life I live now. So I went to work at the JFS food bank for a while, and I went to work at the Recovery Cafe. Two things that resonated with me personally. Give back or give back to the Recovery Cafe. Because I know what it means to recover. I know what that journey is about, and I have tremendous respect for communities that exist to support and foster a creative healing society. Okay. So that's that. And then also Jewish Family Service, but the food bank. Talking to Suzanne Gorin, I came to know her through the food bank. And I said, Here we are, Michael and Leslie Bernstein. I'm ready to give my whole self to a community, to work, to give, to participate. Who will have us? We're kind of intense, I get that. We're kind of a lot of energy, I get that, but who will have us? And, Suzanne said, well, let me get back to you on that. And then she came back after I'd been working in the food bank for a while, and said, We want to invite you to join the board at JFS. And I said, Oh, not me, Michael, for sure. Michael, like, he's got the resume. He's a lawyer. He has the skills, and he has what is necessary to serve on a board. So he joined the board of JFS, and I continued to be a volunteer, a community advocate, an ambassador, a connector, and started to say to myself, What's right for me? None of these boards felt right for me. So, do you want to ask the next question?

Max Sarkowsky: So then, how did you get involved in the theatre?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: So one day, this woman, whose name is Stephanie Hilbert, invites, reached out and invited me randomly. One of these, random as my mother calls them. My life could be marked by a thousand Bashert moments, right? Like literally a thousand Bashert moments. Yeah, so Stephanie gave me two tickets to see a play at ACT Theater. So, Michael and I go to see Cat on a Hot Tin Roof at ACT Theater. That was our first time at ACT Theater. It's a small stage. It's an intimate stage I have always enjoyed. And while I was in the textile business, by the way, we were in New York at least twice a year. I loved theater, I loved the idea of, like, as I'm doing even an interview, right? Like getting so connected, I could just immerse myself into another being to try to know you as much as I can. Right? So in, in, in ACT Theater, that small space, we sit inside of that theater, and I was like, what is happening here? And my husband, who's much more about the known title Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Tennessee Williams, I didn't know that. I just went to see a play. So I came out, I thought, the best thing ever. We saw three plays that season back to back. And I went back to my friend Stephanie, who had given me the tickets, and I said, Oh, like. Wow. And she said, Do you want to serve on the board? And I said, Why would they have me? And she said, Why wouldn't they want you? I mean, you embody the audience. You are what every theater maker, what every actor and performer wants to sit in the audience, to lean in, to absorb, to grow, to be moved, to walk away to. Like, why wouldn't they? So I remember, you know, preparing for my interview with, um, Chuck Sitkin and Carlos Scandiuzzi, and my husband, who I had remembered worked for, watched me prepare for this interview. And he said, You have never worked this hard. You have never. And I said to him, I don't think I've ever wanted anything more.

And so I did the interview, and I joined the board of ACT Theater, and this is my sixth year. And so that's how I got involved in theater. And I remember John Lang, artistic director, saying, I feel like I'm watching someone dive headfirst into self-actualization, and the journey's been interesting and fantastic. And so I will wait for the next question. But that's how I got involved in theater.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. So at the time, Carlos Guendouzi was the chair of the board, then?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: No, no, Carlos Guendouzi was the managing director. He was on staff.

Max Sarkowsky: Okay.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: And Chuck Sitkin, who just recently passed away, was a beautiful, generous. special man, he was the board chair at that time. At that time, he had been serving his second term as board chair. And then there was a different chair, and then he came back as the chair. So before me, it was Chuck Sitkin. I mean, prior to when I joined the board, it was Chuck Sitkin.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Okay. Just trying to arrange the pieces in my brain. Yeah. Um, yeah, I think I remember that production of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof that you saw. Probably.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: It was incredible. And at the same season, I saw Bloomsday, and I saw Threesome. I don't know if you remember any of those plays, but all of them were like, Bang Bang, Wong. Like, they were just one more intense, more profound, more awesome experience than the next. That season was amazing.

Max Sarkowsky: I always love ACT's programming, so it's not surprising that they were all very impactful. Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Oh, I will say one thing that is important. The year I joined was the first year that John Lang became the artistic director. He had previously been the associate artistic director.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Better edit this part out. He had been the previous associate director, and Becky Whitmer was the managing director, so she was becoming the managing director, and John was the artistic director, and they had a tech talk where, you know, sort of they do this interview for patrons and audience members. And John and Becky were talking to each other. Becky was interviewing John, and I remember being in the audience watching that, listening to the vision, the direction, who they were, and what they were doing, and sitting in my seat at that time, saying, I just want to be where they are. Like, that's what I know. And I think that's when I thought I could join this board.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Yeah, okay. So I guess zooming forward a little bit. But now, more specifically, like these are the questions about your work on the board and then as chair. So tell us about your work on anti-racism for theatre professionals locally and nationally.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: So, okay, we're in a crazy time, as you know. Um, we're to jump forward, and then you can ask questions backwards. Um, in. June of 2020. Okay, so I become board chair.

Max Sarkowsky: Okay.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: My first board meeting as board chair was in February 2020. So I was from October 2019 until February 2020 when I was going to have my first welcome to the new board. So, in October, I knew I was going to be board chair, and 2020 was my first board meeting. For four months, I spent time trying to write my opening speech. I was very nervous, and one of the things I was most nervous about was standing in the boardroom and holding the space in a way that I would feel was inclusive and collaborative, and open. And I thought, how do you do that in a board room? Just the very nature of how a boardroom is structured. Yeah. So I thought, well, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. In the meantime, have the opening. We had our retreat in February 2020, and then we had the season opener announcing the season on March 6th. And then that was the last time since. Since that, I have been outside of this house, right? Yeah. So Covid hit. So every meeting from that point forward was conducted on Zoom. And it allowed me to do what I do best, which is connect with and talk to people. My kids say, Mom, you're on the phone all day, every day. What are you doing? You know, getting to know the folks in the community. That is the extraordinary board of directors, that is ACT Theatre's trustees. In July, because I was board chair, there was an effort to bring together the National Lort Theatres, League of Regional Theatres, and Ten Chimneys, hosted, if you will, a summit on anti-racism in the American Theatre. And that was back in July, and I received a note. Do you want to go? I said yes because, as my friend says, I have a big why plastered on my head, always saying yes. So there were about 140 people from about 70 regional theaters across the country, in partnership with Black Theater United and Ten Chimneys conducted this summit on anti-racism in the American

theater. So I would say that was like me, Leslie Ray, growing up in Seattle, you know, growing up in Bellevue, Washington, then having moved to Chicago, reckoning with a deep dive into again the world we live in, almost a repeat of the roller coaster. How did I get here? And immersed in these workshops with managing directors, artistic directors, and board chairs from across the country. Um, and I will say that was a profound experience. And at the same time, we had to start to reckon with, reflect on, and repent. Choose to be. Accountable. Responsible. To interrogate. To question. To reinvent, to rebuild, to dismantle, to do all of those things. And are we willing to do those things? Are we willing, as an industry, the American theatre? Are we willing as a region? Seattle? Are we willing as an organization, ACT Theater, to do those things? And that has been the journey in my involvement since July, is to really unpack and create and present and talk to people to get buy-in, to get a deep and a deep understanding of where you are on the spectrum of us becoming an anti-racist, multicultural organization? There is a continuum. Where are you on it? Let's meet each other where we are. Let's push forward to this kind of bridge, and let's cross this bridge together. And I think I felt like, you know, not to coin a phrase, but like No Child Left Behind, it was very important to me that no person was left behind as we thrust into this new world. And I think that's kind of the role that I played, because as the art, as staff, as the community thrusts forward, it was important for me not to leave behind the long-standing legacy of friends, subscribers to the community. That is hugely broad. There are a lot of people who love ACT.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Um, and so I would say that summarizes my work in the field and where we are today, and, proudly, what I feel today is that there are organizations that are talking about, thinking about, and reflecting on what it means to be anti-racist. ACT Theatre is doing that now, not only thinking about it, talking about it, and acting and reflecting on it, but actually choosing and doing things. And I think because of COVID, because of the pandemic, because our doors are closed. After all, they have been closed. It is one of those extraordinary moments where you ask yourself, What will we do now? Because in six months, when we go back in some way, the time that we're spending doing what we're doing now will not be there. So I think that's something that summarizes it.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. So, as a board and as board chair, how much influence do you have over the organization beyond the artistic director? Because and sort of my brain's understanding of how boards work, it's sort of like you have the most interface with the artistic director, and then they sort of have control over the rest of the organization. But I'm not sure if that's just how, because I'm thinking of like, college boards, like they hire the college president. The college president does everything else. So in terms of the theater, like when it comes to this anti-racism work? How much control and ability do you have to shape things at the organization?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: So, so my lane as the board, right? So, there are three lanes, right? There's a staff lane. There's an artistic lane and there's a board lane. So I feel like I know my lane. So my ability to affect and influence is directly related to the people who are making decisions. Our role as a board is to ensure the sustainability of the institution. Ah, our role of the board is to support and nurture the initiatives of the executive and artistic director, and to the extent that the board members really support and acknowledge and reckon with and and also kind of integrate in their DNA and embody the values that we say we are, is that area that is what the board can influence. And the board is also made up of advocates, ambassadors, and the audience. Right. Like so, we come to the shows, and we tell our friends about the shows. We engage our friends in the information and the inspiration, and the insight that we gain from the shows. The mission of ACT Theatre is artistic ambition and civic engagement. Unite! Sometimes I put myself at the heart of that. So a show sparks a moment that inspires an action in the community. And that's the way I think it makes sense to me in what is my influence.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. That's great.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Does that make sense?

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Yeah, I think it does. I also kind of was a sloppy, uh, answer asking of the question, but I think I was also just. Wondering, like, sort of it. Let's see. Are you trying to have ACT become like a national leader in this and like a role model for other theaters?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Well, actually, and I'm not sure if you saw the Seattle Times article that was just supporting the Seattle Theatre Group. So Seattle is being seen as a model of what can happen when real cooperation and collaboration across the sector occur. So John Laing's is part of a theatre group of other artistic theatres. Becky, as a manager, meets with other managing directors. The sense of cooperation rather than competition is so true in this theatre community. The idea that we are all part of an important ecosystem, and we all do better if we all do better. Right. And so if the community goes to ACT and there's a certain code of conduct that we have thoughtfully integrated into how you show up in the theatre, what you can expect when you come to ACT, who you can contact, if that doesn't happen. Like real measures of accountability, a real, discerning, careful, thoughtful

approach to every decision. And then you go to The 5th Ave., and then you go into the Rep, and then you go to Intiman, and you find the same kinds of things happening. We feel that we can lead in this way as an industry. I mean, artists have always been at the front and at the forefront of change. They have so. So I think we can. I think storytelling can. I mean, I think what this is that we are doing, right? Like because everyone has a story and, and I think that when we start doing that as a board, as a team and we start demystifying the art and the staff and the board and breaking down what it means to serve on a board, just like I had no idea it was my first board, and we make policy and we make, responsibility and policy such that there is a place for everyone in service of this mission. We've done a really great thing of breaking down barriers and institutional thinking and limiting thoughts that say, Oh, I've never done that. So therefore I can't do that. And I think my life is just an example of that. Like I keep plopping myself into places I've never been, and then I feel like I'm swimming and there's only one way to figure it out. Like swimming? Yeah. You know, like. And sometimes it's messy, but it's really rewarding, right? Like, just dive in. All the learning and reading and studying and policy making, all of that's good and important. But also just dive in.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: And. And hope you don't drown. Yeah.

Max Sarkowsky: It is one of those barriers that ACT has been breaking down. Is one of them helping to break down barriers for entry for audience members from all backgrounds and financial means to be able to come to shows?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Um, yes. Right. Like we're not open yet, right? But we have a digital season now. Yeah. And the digital season is. So we launched our digital our first digital season. We just launched this month. You can go online at theater.org and purchase your digital season. Um, and. And the ability to, to outreach, to access and to support what's happening to introduce who we are to a much broader community is already opening doors, right? Like people across the country are tuning in to watch shows, right? So if we continue to do what we say we're going to do, if we continue to make a truly inclusive and excellent experience, so that when you walk into ACT Theater from street to stage, you find a way to get there. I mean, you have to go, right? You have to go. You have to say, I choose to go. So you have to do that, and if you do that and your experience from street to stage is extraordinary, you're going to go tell your friends. Whoa. Because we all make time for the things that we want to do that move us or inspire us. Right. Like, time is this weird also construct of like, I don't have time. It's a very convenient excuse. So we all know that we make time for what we need to make time for. So sharing the real power of theatre, to, well, our vision, right? Theatre has the power to expand our understanding of community and our humanity. I believe that. So the goal is to get you in and then it's it's our responsibility once in to have it be an extraordinary experience, and and are reflecting now is asking ourselves, we can't expect you to come in because it's also a habit. It's also whatever you have that holds you back. But what if we, you know, go out and say, hey, what keeps you from coming in? What are the barriers? What is a real barrier to entry that keeps you from saying, I'd like to go, but I can't because and and will you share that with us authentically and honestly? Will people actually say, hey, this is why I can't go like for me to have said to join the Seattle Art Museum supporters group and say I don't know anything about art, or to become board chair and say, I can't name three playwrights. It's a little naive. It's a little idealistic, takes a little bit of courage, a little bit of bravery. A lot of support. A lot of other people are saying, you can do this. You are better than you think you are. I see what you don't see, all of that. And that is where I find the community of the theater. It is really right of the artists who say, I found my tribe inside this arena, and I yearn to be back with my people. So it's like heartbreak, you know? Like. So that is the power of theater. And do you know that from a play? Maybe. Maybe not. But you can know that if the experience sort of somehow embodies you in a way that you can't quite explain, but you want to come back for more?

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. That's great. That was a perfect answer. And it also leads me to the last question, okay. Which is what you're saying, we're not open yet. It's COVID times. So we just love to hear your insights about the past year, specifically as chair of the board of ACT during the COVID-19 pandemic, and about the theater needing to pivot in the ways that you're pivoting, specifically.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: I mean, our managing director sort of summarized it in sort of four phases, right? Like there was survival, there was stabilization, you know, survive, survive, stabilize. And thrive. I think I'm missing one of the key ones. So, there was a period of survival. Literal survival. You know, imagine the ship is sinking. It is. And you do what you do when you have to survive. As board chair, we had to step back. We had to watch and not dive and not put more weight on that ship, which is sinking. But to say, how can we, what can we do as a board? What can I do as a board chair? While you are on this boat is sinking. What can I do out here? How can I? What can I do? And so as board chair, what I did is I kept in contact with the trustees to stay engaged and enthusiastic and inspired, while we really had nothing to give them, right? A ship is sinking, and I want you to contribute. I want you to keep giving. I want you to believe. I want you to see this vision. Please believe. Trust. Follow and donate, and tell your friends. So that was the survival mode. And what ACT did was reach out. Um, it was a wonderful experience to realize that everyone who was a subscriber. I mean, not everyone, but the majorisubscribing community, the ticket holder community, and said, you hav ty of subscribers said our marketing team outreach, did outreach to the e a choice. You know, you can go get a rain

check. You can have a refund, or you can give those resources back to the theater. Virtually. I mean, I don't have the percentage at the top of my head, but it was a significantly high number of folks who turned them into contributions, which we don't take for granted. Like these people are with us. They're still in the boat. And the boat was sinking. So there was that. There was survival. And we thank goodness for the PPTP loan. We thank goodness for the extraordinary staff, our finance director, our managing director, who have a long-term relationship with Commerce Bank, who we were able to procure these loans that literally saved, saved the theater. Um, it was terribly devastating, though, at times. Right. Like, there were furloughs and layoffs. And another thing as a board, we we did was say, um, we called it the Random Acts of Kindness campaign, where we could set up an opportunity to do random acts of kindness and to send gift cards through, you know, gift cards to sort of through a pool to, to on an as needed basis, um, be utilized for whatever the team need for whenever they needed it and for however they needed it. So that was a really wonderful effort. The Random Acts of Kindness is something that we did as a board. Um, and in the meantime, the artistic team had to, you know, the core team, John brought in the core company members, and they, you know, it was an incredible artistic pivot. And the season launched, and I'm watching it with great pride and joy, saying, Wow, it's technically incredible. Its actors are profound. Like, how do they do what they do? I am still boggled by the excellence in acting, in the technical, in the pivot. Like that piece of it. Just. How they do that, I don't know. And they do it because it's who they are. That's what an artist does. They create because that's the only thing they can do.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Did I answer the question?

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. No, no, it was great. Um, was is this digital season, like, completely new things? Yes. Is it because I know some theaters have been just sort of taking recordings from past seasons and putting them on as their digital season? But this is it's a new season.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Yes. Because to make so in order to make excellent work in a zoom technology. There was a lot of pressure to just pivot quickly to say, take this, put it out there. But there's also a lot of layers of complexity because of the Screen Actors Guild and the, um, the SAG and our union, um, our actors' union. Right. Like, there are different union layers that we and as an artistic community and as a theater-making organization, don't have control over the union rules. Um, but within the space that they could respond, we've had to still create. And it was very important to ACT, to produce excelletal. There was a lot of pressure to do that. I mean, there was a lot of pressu nt and extraordinary work, not just another version of Pivot and Go Digi re to do that. But I think the resistance and the resilience to wait for the right thing to produce that reflects the best of who you are is, is is what ACT has been doing and continues to do. Like if we don't. Do not compromise to do something quickly. And I think that's again, I said earlier, sort of the moment of pause, like if we take the time seriously to interrogate ourselves, our work, our art, our mission, our purpose, it goes deep, really fast. And if you take the moment to do that, honestly, what comes from that is going to be extraordinary.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Well, I'm just going to close here by saying, you know, if there's anything else you want to add, feel free to do so. But my last question would just be, what are you looking forward to? What's keeping you hopeful right now into the future?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: I mean, what's keeping me hopeful is that real change is really occurring, and I am really inspired because it's really messy. And if it weren't, I don't think that real change is possible. And I mean to truly become inclusive and collaborative, when that hasn't been true in most cases. I mean, every organization wants to have a sense of community, and every organization is struggling with how to keep people. And I think if you are who you say you are and your organization represents who it says it is, and we all help each other to do better and to be accountable to those things that we believe in. That is hopeful. And it may be messy, and it is messy. And this is not to disrespect the unbelievable trauma taking place in the world today. But if we don't sit in that trauma sometimes and feel that we cannot expand ourselves and to find out what we as people of privilege, as a person of privilege to know what I need to do, I have to sit in the pain and the trauma and reckon with that to know, okay this is what I'm going to do next. So I'm reckoning with it all the time.

Max Sarkowsky: Well, thank you so much, Leslie. I'm going to. Unless there's anything else, I'm going to stop the recording. We good?

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Yes. Thank you. Totally. Yeah.

Max Sarkowsky: Thank you. Leslie.

Leslie Ray Bernstein: Great. It's been great.