

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 5

10/9/24

"Unforgettable"

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois - Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Easter Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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Unforgettable

Season 2; Episode 5

10/9/2024

Host: Jim

Reflecting on the recent devastation from Hurricane Helene, Jim relates a series of coincidences while working Hurricane Andrew relief in 1992. And speaking of coincidences, this episode was delayed as Jim & Dee prepared their home for the arrival of Hurricane Mitchell.

JIM (voice-over): Hello. The main content of this podcast was recorded on October 3rd, last Thursday, as you'll hear. When Hurricane Helene came through, it reminded me of work I had done in relief of Hurricane Andrew back in 1992, and I had a remarkable week of one coincidence after another. And after a while, I started to get a feeling like someone was kind of looking over my shoulder watching out for me. You'll hear about that, and you'll be able to make up your own mind.

But speaking of coincidences, here it is. Though I had recorded this last week around this hurricane theme, right now I'm sitting in my home that I have boarded up because Hurricane Milton is about to hit. It's mostly quiet in my neighborhood. I have the whole house boarded up. I have a generator in back for expected power loss, and hopefully I'll have enough fuel to last until power is put back on. Dee and I have spent a couple of days boarding up our house to prepare for this. Jan and Rob are on vacation out west, which we'll hear about in a future episode, and Dee and I are going over to their house to board that place up. So while I have called this episode "unforgettable," I do want us to consider this question: How many coincidences does it take to add up to something miraculous? And with that in mind, here's our episode.

[Music]

JIM: When I was a kid, and let's put this at about half a century ago, a quartet of us would go out to play Christmas music in downtown Detroit. This was for The Salvation Army at one of those red kettles. The best spot was the north end of Hudson's on Woodward Avenue. There was a small alcove next to the main door where we could stand out of the wind, and where tons of pedestrians would pass by. Nearby, there was often a man roasting chestnuts in a large wheeled cart. And farther down, Hare Krishnas would dance, play tambourines, and hand out literature. And they looked cold. And sometimes their tambourines were in time with our music and sometimes not.

We would time our plane to the traffic light. When the walk signal was on, we'd launch into our best "Jingle Bells" or "Deck the Halls." Those were the best tunes for catching a whole crossing of pedestrians. They would put some coins or bills in the red kettle and then thank us for what we were doing, maybe for the music, mostly for the work The Salvation Army itself was doing. I remember one elderly World War I vet who thanked me for what I did for him during the Great War, over half a century before. But I was just a kid standing on a cold

Detroit street corner representing a long heritage of Salvation Army service.

20 years later, when I was ordained as clergy, or as The Salvation Army says, when I was commissioned as an officer, I wondered, "What would I do? - What could I do really? - that would merit thanks from someone half a century on? Would some kid on a street corner in, say, 2041 ever be thanked for the work I was now doing? Or would I simply be forgotten? I got a hint of an answer to that question fairly soon. And I'd like to tell you all about it.

[Music]

I started drinking coffee on October 5th, 1992, and before Jan accuses me of invented memories, let me tell you why I know that. In October of '92, I was the Salvation Army officer in charge in Alexandria, Virginia. And on Sunday, October 3rd, I was at men's camp when Colonel Warren Fulton, the Divisional Commander, informed me that I would be flying out to Florida the next day. My assignment? I was to assume command of The Salvation Army's Hurricane Andrew relief work in Homestead. It would take a week. I packed a bag and was on my way.

The officer I was relieving was Captain Dan Proctor, an old friend. He met me at the Fort Lauderdale Airport. He was driving a bright red minivan he had rented. And I remember his warning, "Cheyne," he said, "this van is on my personal credit card. Don't mess it up." On the drive down to Homestead, he briefed me on what my job would be. We'd be working out of a large red tent that had belonged to some preacher, but the preacher was in jail for money troubles or something. And anyway, we were using this tent. And we had two main operations going on there. One was a mobile canteen that delivered food to the residents of Homestead, and the other was building supplies. The Army had partnered with some charities that were helping people fix up their homes with plywood, shingles, paint, whatever donations we happened to get. There were also many volunteers there who lived in pup tents underneath the big tent. And I was supposed to be the point person to work with the military, the local police to keep everyone safe. Homestead was under a nighttime curfew and anyone who was caught out after sunset would get arrested. So people would come to this tent just towards sundown, hoping to kind of stay there for the night, but we didn't have the accommodations for that. So there was an intake center a little farther down the road, and I would direct people that way.

We were running on a generator, and all of our supplies, including gas, were coming from Fort Lauderdale. There was a CB radio there, and we would just call for whatever we need, and they would send it as long as they had it. We used a lot of bottled water, which was running short when I got there. And Dan also said there were a couple of officers who were coming to help me out. One was Steve Long and the other was Mike Hawley. This was strange to me because they were captains, and I was a lieutenant, and I just didn't get how this chain of command was supposed to work. And Dan said, "You'll learn it's best not to ask questions like that." Then he told me the best news of all, he said, "Tomorrow morning breakfast is your cook's last meal, and then he's out of there." "And then what am I supposed to do?" He said, "Well, that's what the job is, solving problems." And one of the last things he said, of course, was, "Cheyne, don't mess up the van. It's on my personal card."

Monday, October 5th.

I met with Captains Long and Hawley and confessed to them that the situation was a bit awkward for me, but they had no problem with it. They just wanted to know what needed to be done. So I asked Captain Long to take charge of the canteen operation and Captain Hawley to head up the building supplies, while I would handle communications and securing supplies from Fort Lauderdale, working with the local authorities, and generally troubleshooting any problems that might come up. And the first problem was obvious. None of us could cook.

I called all the volunteers together and found out they had already become accustomed to certain jobs. Some people knew what the canteen operation was like, and they also knew which neighborhoods were not safe to go in. Sometimes the canteen would be mobbed, and it was almost toppled over once. So they knew which neighborhoods were safe for food delivery, and those volunteers would be working with Captain Long. Then there were others who understood what to look for with building materials donations. There were a number of companies who were doing a great job, but some companies saw this as an opportunity to dump off bad product to The Salvation Army and write it off as a donation. We had to be especially on the lookout for lead paint. So those volunteers I put with Captain Hawley. And then sat down to breakfast.

There were only a couple things to drink, bottled water or coffee, and so there it was on Monday, October 5, 1992, in Homestead, Florida, that I had my first cup of coffee. (There it is, Jan.) And coffee was helpful because I'd get about four hours of sleep a night there. The coffee didn't keep me awake, but it kept me jittery enough so I could get some work done.

[Music]

So there was my first cup of coffee on that Monday morning, and also, true to his word, right after breakfast that Monday morning, the cook packed his things, shook my hand, said, "Good luck," and walked away.

Now, this red tent we were in was in a field alongside US-1. Two women had walked from US-1 towards our tent. And so I went out to intercept them. "Can I help you?" These were two hospice nurses who had planned to take a vacation out of Key West on a cruise. But when they got down there, they found out they had been swindled in some way. So their vacation was ruined, but they had time on their hands. So working their way back up US-1, they saw our tent and wanted to know if they could help in any way. So the first question that came to my mind was, "Can you cook?" And they said they would love to. So one cook leaves, two show up. So I had a couple of volunteers pitch a tent for them, and there we were, problem solved.

That afternoon, I took that red van out to have a look around, see what the surroundings were like, see what the community was like. There were security checkpoints all over town. But with that van and with The Salvation Army shield on its side, I always waved through every checkpoint without any questions asked at all. A good reputation goes a long way.

Tuesday, October 6th.

There was a yellow school bus parked right next to our tent. No one knew where the keys were or even if it ran. So it just sat there. But someone had taken some boards and a blue tarp and fashioned a shower stall on the side of it. And that's the only shower that we had. And the idea was you would take a gallon of water, slip behind the tarp, and as modestly as

you thought necessary, give yourself some comfort from the heat and from the bugs. And everyone knew they were to avert their gaze.

Now, also in that field, where the red tent was, there was a water tower. And that made an excellent landmark for any helicopters that needed a place to land. And so they would come in, they knew they could get coffee at our tent, and they quickly learned what time we were serving meals as well. And so they kind of came around that time. But on Tuesday, someone donated to us some buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken. And right on cue, a helicopter lands and someone says, "Hide the chicken." But I thought, "No, this could work out." A military officer sat down opposite me and as he was eating the chicken, he said, "You know, my colonel is going to have a very important meeting tonight and a bucket of this chicken would make that meeting go a lot better." And my inner radar O'Reilly kicked in and I said, "I suppose it would. What would that be worth to you?" And he said, "What do you need?" So I pointed to the bus and I said, "See that blue thing over there? That's our shower." He said, "You're kidding." And it turned out he happened to be in charge of a unit that was stationed at the Homestead Sports Complex. And he said, "You know, we've got showers out there. They're working fine. You tell your people to come out anytime they want, let the guard know they're with The Salvation Army and they can have a shower anytime they want one." And all of that, I thought, for just a bucket of chicken? And this is when I started to notice how things were happening. We lose a cook and suddenly two nurses show up saying, yes, they can cook. This chicken just shows up on time for this officer to come in, ask for it, and then a little barter happens and suddenly I've got showers for the people working at our tent. And I started to think, "Something's going on here."

[Music]

The heat in South Florida is probably not what these two nurses were looking for in a vacation. And so it wasn't really a surprise Wednesday evening at dinner when they said that after breakfast on Thursday, they'd be on their way. Well, now what do I do?

Here's what happened. After dinner, as night was coming on, I noticed a man coming to the tent who had been walking along US 1. "May I help you?" I asked. And he said, "Well, I'm looking for a place to stay." So I said, "Well, there's an intake center on down..." But he interrupted me. He said, "No, I'm not looking for charity. I'm willing to work." I said, "Well, what do you do?" And he said, "My restaurant closed because of the storm. I'm a chef." "A chef? Why, of course you are." I said, "Come with me." And I had the volunteers pitch another tent. Problem solved. But this was only Wednesday.

[Music ends]

Thursday, October 8th.

We said a sad goodbye to our two angel nurses after breakfast. Our supply of bottled water was running low, and Fort Lauderdale didn't have any they could send to us right away.

Here's the next part. Most of the crews who came into the tent to get building supplies were Haitian and spoke no English. By itself, that was not a problem. They were good workers. They're trusted. We saw them all the time, just a wave and a handshake, and they were about their business. But in the late afternoon, one was operating a forklift and clipped one of the wooden tent poles, which snapped and hit one of the workers in the head. And it looked serious. The nurses were gone. We had no medical staff. So I sent

someone to radio in for an ambulance. Someone said, "He might have a concussion. Aren't we supposed to keep him awake?" which sounded good, but there was no way to communicate this to him or to any of his fellow workers. And just then, a stranger was standing next to me trying to get my attention. And I waved him off saying something like, "I'll be with you in a moment. We have an injured man here and we're trying to help him, but he's Haitian and we can't make him understand," and then the man said, "Sir, I speak Creole." "Well, of course you do. Would you please tell him and his friends that he needs to stay awake and that an ambulance is on the way?" And the man went and spoke with the workers.

Meanwhile, someone from the military approached looking for whomever was in charge. "That's me," I said. "What do you need?" He said something like, "Well, our unit is stuck here until we exhaust all of our supplies and I'm trying to get rid of stuff so we can ship out." And you know what I asked him, don't you? "You wouldn't happen to have any bottled water, would you?" He said, "Pallets of it. How much do you need?" I said, "Just a minute. I'll go with you. Just give me a moment." I turned back to the work crew who were sitting there with his friend awaiting the ambulance and the man who spoke Creole wasn't there anymore. I never found out who he was, what he had wanted, why he had stopped by. So I asked Captain Hawley to hold things down while I went off with this soldier to where his unit was stationed.

We loaded a few pallets of water in his truck and headed back to the tent. When we got there, the ambulance had taken the worker away and he would be fine. And now we had a new supply of bottled water. Problem solved.

And that's when Captain Long told me we were running out of ice. And if we didn't get ice soon, all of our food supplies would be ruined. And I said, "No problem. We'll take care of it first thing in the morning." And I could see that he wasn't really understanding how we were going to take care of it, but he didn't ask for an explanation. I don't think I would have had one had he asked.

Friday, October 9th...

...and I probably don't need to tell you something remarkable happened. As breakfast was still going on, a large blue semi pulled in and it didn't look like any of the usual shipments of building supplies. So I went out to talk to the driver. "May I help you?" He spoke quickly as if in a hurry. "Look," he said, "this is a refrigerated truck. It's loaded with ice. Do with it what you want. All I ask is that it's empty by Monday morning when I come back for it." Full of ice. Of course it was. Well, that was quick.

There's a movie I like, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. And it's in that movie that Sean Connery playing Henry Jones says this. He says, "I find if I just sit down to think, a solution presents itself." So here were solutions presenting themselves day after day. To be honest, I don't know what was going on, but here again, problem solved.

[Music]

Saturday, October 10th.

There are two reasons that I cherish October 10th, and here is one of them.

I was sitting by the radio when the call came in. Someone in Ohio named Bertha had a

sister who lived in Homestead, but she hadn't heard from her since the hurricane. No word at all. Could we check on her? Sure, I'll take care of it. Captain Long was out with the canteen. Things were running smoothly with the building supplies, so I asked Captain Mike Hawley to come with me. We had an address and a map, but most of the street signs in Homestead were blown down. So how do we find our way around? Well, homeowners had spray painted their addresses on the plywood they used to cover their windows, or they had sprayed it right on their garage doors, along with the name of their insurance providers, should any adjusters happen by. And that's how we navigated.

I asked Mike about his officership. How did he know that he was making any sort of a difference at all? And as an example, I brought up Father Mulcahy from MASH, and how he once complained to Hawkeye that a doctor gets to see the results of his work right away, but a priest may never know if what he has done has made any difference at all. And Mike's answer was what I had been telling myself all along, "You just have to have faith that what you're doing is right." "Well, I guess so, but..." then he interrupted, "Here's the street."

Now, I can't remember Bertha's sister's name, and oh, how I wish I could, but there we were knocking at the door. "Are you Bertha's sister?" "Why, yes I am." "Well, Bertha's been very worried about you. She's heard nothing." Recognizing our uniforms the woman invited us in. Overall, her house was mostly intact. It looked nice, and her block had had their power restored, so there was that. And then she told us she didn't even know a storm was coming in, and that she had slept through it in her bedroom, and when she came out the next morning, suddenly she saw her whole neighborhood was a mess. So I said, "Well, Bertha was wondering if you were okay." She said, "Well, I haven't been able to get out. I've got these great neighbors, and they're looking after me, but thanks for checking in on me. You can tell Bertha I'm fine." "Sure, I will." "I mean, it really was thoughtful of you to come all this way." "Sure, it was a privilege."

She had a sunroom which contained an organ. "Do you play?" I asked. "A bit," she said. "Do you?" she asked. "A bit," I said. She invited me to try it out, and as I slid on the bench, without even thinking about it, I just went straight into "Amazing Grace." And while I played, she came over and improvised along with me. This was good. And when I finished, she said, "Here, it's my turn." And then she broke into a soothing, jazzy rendition of a song that struck me right in my doubts. And the song was,

*Unforgettable,
That's what you are;
Unforgettable,
Though near or far.*

And as she played, I turned and looked at Mike, and I'll never forget the huge grin he had on his face. And then while she played, I glanced around the room and there were on the walls photographs of this woman posed with musicians she had known and with whom she had played. I didn't recognize all of them, but over there was Count Basie. And over there, there she was with Duke Ellington and many, many others.

On the way back to the tent site, I said to Mike, "You know, I just can't figure this week out. All these things just happened of themselves. When a need arose, a solution just presented itself. I'll never forget this. Does this sort of thing happen to you a lot?" He said, "Just when I need it to." On Sunday, I spoke at the morning service and used Matthew 25, of course, in

honor of these wonderful volunteers. And then we said our goodbyes.

I don't have a good explanation to account for that whole week. I do know I needed to tell you what happened and tell you how that experience on Saturday, October 10th, calmed a storm of doubts for me. Oh yeah, that other reason I cherish October 10th? It was exactly six years later, Saturday, October 10th, 1998, that Dee and I were married.

Epilogue.

If you find yourself traveling south on US-1 through Homestead, just before it links up with the turnpike, you'll see our field and water tower on the left. The tent and bus are gone, of course. But know this, I turned that red van over to the next guy without a scratch on it.

[Music begins]

All told, Hurricane Andrew was one of only four Category 5 hurricanes that have ever hit the contiguous United States. It took 65 lives and cost just over \$60 billion in today's dollars. I'm recording this on Thursday evening, October 3rd, so you will have better information on this than I do, but as of tonight, Hurricane Helene has taken 200 lives and cost over \$100 billion in damage. Thousands are facing very difficult problems right now, and I don't know where all the solutions will come from, but I do know that wherever we see need, maybe the solution is just to show up and to do whatever we can. And then, just sit back and watch what happens.

Until next time.

[Music ends]