



A PODCAST WITH RUSTY STAHL | S3 EP3

Investing in New Executive Directors, Part 2

WITH
Jane McDonnell and
Irving Washington
Online News Association



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Investing in New Executive Directors, Part II

INTRO [00:00:03] You're listening to the Fund The People Podcast, I'm your host Rusty Stahl. On this show we serve up a healthy nutritious alternative to the nonprofit starvation cycle. If you work as a funder, a non-profit, or intermediary, we'll help you invest in America's nonprofit workforce to drive equity, effectiveness and endurance in our nonprofit and social justice community. So let's get going.

PILOT AD: Folks, Fund The People is cooking up a very exciting new program: The Funding that Works Academy, which will offer online courses that teach our new Talent Investing Framework right from our website. Our initial courses will focus on the fundamentals of talent investing, and there will be versions available for foundation professionals, foundation board members, nonprofit professionals, nonprofit board members and folks working in intermediary organizations, like consultants, educators and membership associations. We want to give our podcast listeners early access to this great new program, so if you fit into any of those broad categories that I just mentioned and you're interested in helping us to pilot the course, please send an email to info@fundthepeople.org and write Pilot in the subject line, you will get special early access to our cutting-edge content and help us make improvements to the course before rolling it out widely. So remember just email me info@fundthepeople.org and write Pilot in the subject line, and we'll get back to you with details. Thanks!

RUSTY: Welcome to the Fund The People podcast, I'm your host Rusty Stahl. I know you have your choice of bike lanes, so thank you for peddling with us.

This is season 3 episode 3. Today we're exploring talent investing principle number four: talent justice is essential. This principle tells us that racism, sexism and classism and other inequities are baked into the assumptions beneath the deficit of investment in the nonprofit workforce, thus the solution to the deficit must advance intersectional racial equity.

In this episode, you'll get a rare glimpse into the inside story of two people, in this case a white woman and a black man who have together gone through the unique crucible that is an executive transition in a nonprofit organization. This is an example of a pair who seem to have done this right. They ran their transition in a thoughtful, proactive, ethical and effective fashion, with respect for one another, their colleagues, their funders and their organization.

We all know that executive transitions are critical inflection points for organizations and too many funders are still not proactively investing in healthy transitions and not supporting the outgoing and incoming executive directors to succeed in these transitions. So we're going to explore these issues today, with a sense of urgency.

This episode is part 2 of our mini-series on supporting new executive directors, as the companion to the previous episode, season 3 episode 2, which was a conversation with Bipasha Ray and Joey Lee from the Open Society Foundations. In the previous episode we discussed OSF's New Executives Fund, a program that supports new executive directors in nonprofits around the world, especially focusing on historic firsts in their organizations. In this episode, we're featuring folks who've gone through that New Executives Fund as participants: Jane McDonnell is former Executive Director of the Online News Association, and she's now an independent consultant. Irving Washington is the current Executive Director of the Online News Association, and he's a longtime association professional in the journalism field. Irving has participated in the Open Society Foundations New Executives Fund.

Before we get started, I want to invite you to subscribe to the show on Apple Podcast or wherever you listen. We'd also love you to sign up for our mailing list, we email folks when new episodes come out and we share other great resources in the field in those emails. So head on over to fundthepeople.org to sign up for our mailing list. On the website you can also find all the podcast episodes with show notes and links. And you can access a plethora of free original content and tools from the Fund The People Toolkit including our Talent Justice materials on investing in intersectional racial equity in the nonprofit workforce.

And now here's my conversation with Jane and Irving.

Welcome to the show Jane and Irving.

IRVING: [00:05:41]
Glad to be here.

JANE: [00:05:42]

Thanks very much for asking me to be on, Rusty, and I'm always very happy to have a longer conversation with this gentleman, Irving Washington.

RUSTY: [00:05:50]

I am thrilled to have you both here. So Jane, how and when did you become the Executive Director of the Online News Association and how did you think about growing the staff team?

JANE: [00:06:02]

I came to ONA in 2008 and I came to it after a long career in journalism and media, both corporate journalism or mainstream journalism and also nonprofit, starting out as a reporter, an editor working for a local state newspaper and then moving to DC and working with Knight Ridder Tribune and leaving there as managing editor and then at the end of that period with Knight Ridder Tribune, moving into the digital spaces and trying to figure out how digital was going to work for media and feeling a little bit of barriers around me about how we would do that or how I could do that.

So I left to start my own company, which was a non-profit funded by foundations doing issues journalism, series that were social issues done by professional reporters with websites, which at the time were not really done that often and then moved from there to working at the Center for Public Integrity as a Communications Officer and then to the Pew Research Center. So, by the time I left Pew I felt like I kind of had been delving into digital and where it was at and where it could possibly be going. So, when the ONA job opened up, it just felt like exactly the perfect job for me at the time.

So it was 2008. The organization started in 1999 and it had been very small, pretty much below the radar, because a lot of people were not at that point thinking that digital journalism was going to go anywhere, and right about that time in 2008 there started to be a recognition that "Wait a minute - something's happening here with digital media" that we just weren't expecting. So taking the job, I knew that it was going to be a list because it was not, we weren't remotely thinking about succession planning, we were just thinking about how do we survive? We had a very low limited budget, there was only myself and a part-time person. I think the first order of business was just to get people to know who I was and what we did and what we did was, which is I think still the underlying mission of ONA and of course Irving can talk about that more, was to help digital journalists with whatever they needed, whether it was training, whether it was trying to find a business model but mostly it was to convene them and let them know they weren't alone.

It was during a time, which now seems to be the norm for journalism but at the time it was pretty traumatic, there were a lot of layoffs as people were transitioning from print to digital, ads were dropping, Craigslist started, all that, historically. So, I think the first thing we wanted to do is convene people and let them know they weren't alone, and that was almost like being a psychiatrist in a way, you know, you just wanted to make people feel seen and from there we

started to build on the training that they needed, the literal tools they needed, which was learning social media, which was learning about how business models would work for digital now that the models have been blown up, and all of that. So growing the team was almost secondary for the first year until I could really explain to funders and to folks who might be potential sponsors for the conference where we were headed and what we actually did.

RUSTY: [00:09:35]

Yeah. It's a good reminder of how much has changed so fast. So you're not the founder and you're not the first person to run the association, but it seems like you did make an intentional effort to transition out. And I was curious, if you could tell us, when you started thinking about that transition, what was the time span between when you started thinking about it and when you actually left, and how did you think about doing that? How did you go about that initial part of the process?

JANE: [00:10:07]

Yeah, I think it was a slow burn kind of realization. Anybody who does conferences or actually even goes to them knows that although they can be exhilarating and they're just when you're finished with them you really feel like you've done something, but at the same time it's really emotionally and physically draining. And I think after eight years of conferences, or that point I guess seven years of conferences, I knew that I probably wasn't going to be able to continue with the level I wanted to continue at.

And I think there's other factors too. I mean, I'd watched a lot of people who didn't retire or didn't move away from the job and into something else in their life, or transitioned to something else until it was too late and they were so burned out, or they had health issues. And I felt as though that was another thing I did not want to do. I wanted to be healthy, to be able to enjoy travel and doing all the things I love to do.

But I think one of the bigger things that happened, at the conference we had keynotes and one of the keynotes we had in 2014 was an excellent panel on Ferguson when the Ferguson shooting happened. And it really, although I'm no stranger I wasn't a stranger at the time to the news and all of the incredible things that were happening in the world about racial issues, it really brought home to me the fact that we were heading into such a different territory and in that this was going to be much more transparent, that people were really talking about it and that there needed to be different systems in place. I don't know that it was that clear in my head at that time, but it certainly was something I started to think about, and I don't think I was the person to do that.

So I think it was a realization that although I had a lot of strengths and a lot of talent and a lot of skills, and I'm not going to claim myself short here, there are lots of things I don't have, and I don't have that empathy and understanding and lived experience. So, I think that was one of the bigger factors for me. And, as I started to think about it, I also thought that I wanted it to be a successful transition without a lot of the bumps along the way that I'd seen in other organizations and I will say this up front, we were very lucky because we were financially stable,

we had a really strong board, the staff was not going anywhere as far as I knew. I think that we had all the elements in place to be able to do a successful transition, which is not the case with a lot of organizations, for better or for worse, that aren't able to do that.

RUSTY: [00:1:18]

You did mention in our preparation call that there were sort of five principles that you and I think the board developed to kind of support that transition. Could you give us the snapshot of those five principles?

JANE: [00:12:33]

Sure, I think the first one, this is going back to sort of the realization after that keynote, was diversity, equity and inclusion. We didn't want it to just be buzzwords that we use. We wanted to really make that a key part of the hiring in whatever way that meant, if that meant a person of color or if it meant lgbtqa or just thinking differently about who should lead the organization into the future. So that was huge.

And one of the reasons we could talk about that so impactfully was because we had a board that they bought into that completely, the leadership was diverse to begin with and the board was very cognizant of the fact that we needed to open up the organization in any way that we can open the doors, that was literally the launcher of the organization and also very collaborative. So that made it easier because I knew that when I started talking about this, I wasn't going to have to shield myself or worry about what was going to happen to me. I could have these conversations and they would get it, they would understand. So that was huge.

The third was messaging because when you start thinking about these things from a communications perspective, everything sort of becomes very clear. We wanted to make sure that we were internally messaging our intentions and the outcomes, the process; externally to funders, shareholders and partners; and then to our members, to the journalists and media world. So when we started working through how that looked, it answered a lot of questions for how that was going to play out.

The fourth was to keep the momentum going within the organization, we wanted it to be business as usual. Even though the transition is a huge thing and it can be very jarring and disruptive, that's not at all what we wanted to see. That was a decision made too, everybody was on board with that.

And then, of course, the hiring process. One of the reasons why I started all this, because I wanted to start early, I wanted it to be a cultivation process. Everybody goes out and looks for a unicorn and I think that's always a mistake. You want to bring on somebody who's promising and talented, who can learn about things and step up into the role. But also give me as an executive director insight into how they learn and also what I'm missing. So listening and understanding that, I don't know everything and that I need to figure out, okay, I've always done it this way, but maybe there's a better way to do it. Surprise, right?

So that was a big part of what looking at the hiring process, like what kind of a person we wanted to have come on, who was collaborating and willing to do that? And I think those were the most important things and I think we were really lucky in that we would pretty much hit all of those, which I know is really unusual and it's an ideal, right? We just happened to be in the right place to be able to do that.

RUSTY: [00:15:25]

Great, thank you for sharing those. So Irving, tell us how you came to the Online News Association. What was your journey, your career beforehand, and then into the organization, and then up to being hired as executive director?

IRVING: [00:15:42]

Happy to talk about that. My running thing that I say when people ask about my career, I succinctly describe it as I've had an entire career in journalism, never in a newsroom and never as a journalist. I did study journalism in school but at the time the path to journalism was linear in my mind where you have to be a reporter, and you worked your way up in a small town, you would go to a larger station and then maybe one day you got into management and the ultimate goal was one of the large newspaper TV stations. That felt very limiting to me even at the age of 18, I'm very jealous now because there's a lot more career options, whether that's audience, social, that people can do. But essentially that made for a very confusing career trajectory of having a passion around something with no job that you like.

But I stuck it out and fortunately through a lot of twists and turns I landed up in journalism associations and nonprofits, which ended up being amazing, which instead of being in one newsroom, I've worked with thousands. So I've worked with television journalists at one association, I worked with black journalists at another association and that led to my intersection with ONA. Where at the time, I wish the story was as simple as: I met Jane, we hit it off and then she hired me immediately, does not go that way exactly.

But at the time before we had even crossed paths, I was at a career inflection point where I felt like my growth at my current organization was stalling, in the category of stepping out on faith I decided that it was time to make a shift even though I did not have any sort of full-time opportunities available, and coincidentally I found about an opportunity to work for ONA as a consultant through the listserv of the organization I was working at full time. That was shared and it was for a consultant role with something that I had experienced in for scholarships, and I stepped out, decided to apply for that, I met Jane, we kicked it off. The cash to this was, it was a consultant role, ONA was small at the time, so they were going through consultants. Jane mentioned it was a smaller staff, so this would mean a significant reduction in pay, no benefits, I'm not an employee. But I decided to, again, meeting Jane, seeing what the organization was about, I said I will take this and then I'll figure the rest out, if I can pick up two or three more projects doing something else, that could work.

Long story short, I took that to my current boss at the time with the organization who I was working with, who was also in the journalism field, and told him what I planned to do and I

always remember it where he said, what is the organization again? And I said ONA, and he, not being really familiar with what that was, he said well is it just consulting? And I said yes and he said, well why don't you just do it both until the conference, which was two months away, and so I was not expecting that.

So for two months I worked full-time and as a consultant for Jane with ONA. That ended up lasting for two years doing that, on both organizations and these are sister organizations, perhaps the funniest thing is because it was scholarship I would have one student talk to me about something for ONA and then they would say oh hey, I saw you on this website for something else, is that you? And I'd say: yeah it's me, let's just switch over and talk about that now.

Until finally, my other running joke is that Jane put a figurative ring on it and said, I want you to work full-time, what do you want to do? And I think what's relevant to the point of this conversation and particularly around, before leadership transition was even a real thing, I think the belief in people where the question literally was, what do you want to do? And at the time I did know, I knew one day I wanted to potentially run an organization and I had no operations experience. I knew nothing about HR or the business side and Jane asked me the question and I said, okay, this is what I want to do and she hired me. Again for that belief, seeing again, I had to have baseline skills, I'm sure Jane didn't go that much on a cliff, but it was the belief that no, on paper you don't have all the skill set, but I work with you long enough and I know you can do it and she hired me full-time and I started as a Director of Operations.

And from there zigzag throughout and I'm sure we'll talk about the transition that Jane mentioned some stuff I did not know was happening in the background, but ultimately, in 2016, when Jane formally announced that she was retiring, I went up for the executive director job and went through the process just like everybody else and became executive director at the start of 2017.

JANE: [00:20:18]

And I just have to say, belatedly, thank you for hanging in there for those two, first two years Irving...

IRVING: [00:20:25]

Well, it ended up being, it was actually a fun two years. And I recommend, I tell people this a lot if you, if you are in the position where you can do this, one of the reasons why I stayed was at the time I made unrealistic demands which I thought would not be met by my full-time employer to say okay, if I do this I need to work from home and this was before the work from home era, I was like I need to work from home, this is how I'd want to work, if this is going to be a reality, I need to work in a certain way that prioritizes, you know, both my self care and be able to do the work. I just knew that was going to be a No, and it was a Yes, and I ended up doing the job so well, that's how it lasted two years and then being probably the most productive and effective with two jobs than I was at one.

RUSTY: [00:21:09]

I mean, it's a real sign of commitment too, that you not only came on as a consultant, you know, but also kept the old job and did the new job so well or parts of the new job as a consultant. I don't know. I mean, I think there's something to trying each other out too about that period. It seems like it gave both of you that opportunity to feel out what it would be like. I've had that experience too as a supervisor of hiring someone, you know, first as an intern and then as a consultant and then as a staff person and it actually worked really, really well, sometimes better than just hiring someone straight up as full-time. So you've kind of talked us right up to you taking the job. Tell us a little bit more about what that was like for you. So, at some point, you heard about the, you know, that Jane was going to leave... Did you hear it from her directly? What happened there? And then, how was that process for you of applying as an existing staff person at a senior level and going through the transition.

IRVING: [00:22:14]

Transitions are always interesting because in retrospect, I felt like we talk about it in a linear path or a very clear path and it's much more zigzag, curvy, not sure, sure. And there's these tiny moments that happen over time. So I would describe those moments as: One, I think it took, I've said this often and Jane knows I said this as well and I try to pay this forward, I think a big part of some transition and a lot of transitions, particularly with underserved groups (I'm a black person) it takes somebody seeing something in you sometimes that you didn't quite see. So in my mind, I knew I would be interested in running an organization one day, the day felt very far away. So if you ask the 2012 Irving, you would be executive director in 2017, I probably would have laughed at your face and said, yeah right.

And a lot of that was built around, and I think this is an industry thing for nonprofits, there's so much weight that comes with being an executive director that's carried from decades and decades of: you have to be a fundraiser, you have to be this, you have to know how to... it favors a certain type of person and I didn't always identify as that person, right? And I think so, part of it is just dismantling what it means to be executive director. Where now when I tell people, you know, the only skill set that I have, that makes you qualified for this, is I know at the end of the day I will figure out whatever the problem is or have people and a team and rely on others to help figure it out. That is the only thing to me that separates somebody from being an executive director or not. If you could have that belief that you can figure it out, whatever it is, you're qualified for this job.

And so part of that was the recognition and Jane and I had various conversations overall, I think they're very, I called them mini-mentor moments throughout the course of the time we worked together. And then more formally, I remember we went out to a lunch and I don't remember all of the exact ways that you phrased it Jane, but it wasn't, this wasn't a direct moment yet, this is still an indirect moment, but the connotation was: okay, now is the time to decide how serious you are about what you want for your future and what you want to do, i.e. now is the time to step up. And at least, this is my interpretation of that call. And this was, this was like a temperature check. I think Jane's "transition plan" could have gone in different directions depending on this

lunch, but essentially this was the moment to say either you're in or you're out. That's obviously when I decided that I was in.

Again, this was indirect, Jane didn't formally say, hey, I'm just, I'm leaving, this is what I'm doing, but it was an understanding that a moment like that was coming, don't know when, don't know where, and I think she had to trust me to not be in her office every day saying like, hey is it time, is it time, is it time? So it takes a great amount of trust and the trust of not letting everyone on the team know, respecting the privacy of the delicacy of that situation. And I can't remember when, I don't remember the timeline when she formally told me this, but I could tell you how I felt when she did formally tell me: it's time and she's ready to not retire, but move on from the role and start the process. I remember thinking, oh wait, no, this is too soon. And in my mind, I had mapped out when that date would be for Jane, keep in mind, we never talked about this, but I kind of mapped that out and whatever day she told me was way too soon in my mind. I was like, wait, it's not.

But that date ended up happening and the board went through the formal process of opening it up and I should clarify, while I was set up as an internal candidate, it was not guaranteed. I did have to work the interview for that position, there were other people that applied for that, and I know for a fact, having talked to the board members later, they were open to another candidate, and if it couldn't have been me and I think when you are an internal candidate, the other thing that people don't think about which I heard later and it resonated with, when you're an internal candidate, your interview actually starts on the day one that the executive director announces they transition. So instead of, you know, a couple of weeks, a couple of months, you're interviewed basically on call the day that you get the news because people whether they are cognizant of or not, you're interviewing for the job and I think that's an extra burden that internal candidates take. But obviously, I was able to manage that process and interview with the board. We also had an inclusive process where the staff got to interview me. So that was also interesting as well too, to have my peers interview me, but ultimately that led me to getting the role and where we are now.

RUSTY: [00:26:17]

It's really interesting how you had this implicit delicate dance where you were interested and she was interested in you stepping up and you kind of pushed to pull each other into the process.

IRVING: [00:26:30]

I don't know if Jane knows this, so to a point where the staff wasn't going anywhere, right around that time when somebody approached, they were trying to poach me for another leadership role (audible face like what!?) Yes, I was being poached at the same time. This was actually during the process...

RUSTY: Breaking news!

IRVING: Breaking news, it actually was an interesting role, I will say Jane, it was an interesting role, and I remember when we got towards the end of the conversations, I said "this is a very

interesting role, but I need to see this through.” Again, not knowing where ONA was going to go, they had not selected me at the time but I said, “I need to see this through, I've been committed to this organization and I want to do, want to see how this plays out,” we'll see it through.

JANE: [00:27:10]

Yeah, and I think all the things that Irving is talking about, every single thing that you're mentioning really plays into how the decision was made, right? We had all this time to see you and to get to know you, and I personally had a really, such a high level of trust in you. I talk about your integrity all the time and that's really the number one thing that just stood out for me. And I think that the board, who obviously was a really important piece of this, and the hiring committee that they put together also had that background. But they really, I don't think they really knew you well until the interview process and then watching how you handled yourself during this whole thing, which was kind of unusual that you would have to sit through and wait, work, be with the team that you are eventually, maybe overseeing or supervising, and how you handled that. And that was a huge, I think it was a huge piece of decision, really.

RUSTY: [00:28:01]

I never thought of it like that, that **the interview starts the day of the announcement for an internal candidate**. That's a really important thing I think for folks who are listening who might wish to be an internal candidate, or might be grooming someone to be or hiring someone who they think might have that potential.

IRVING: [00:29:19]

The other piece that in retrospect being, I do think part of the transition or successful transition and Jane knew this very well. I don't even know if saying the word plan is correct, I think you set up scenarios and you're open to how any of those scenarios play out. So even in the transition, when it became more formal that Jane was leaving and we talked about it, under no circumstance Jane ever said this was your job or, you're determined to get this, I having “being groom” in a way. However, Jane did set it up so that **as we were transitioning over that year and even before, I was looped into more conversations and by the end of when Jane was about to depart almost every conversation, from funders, to different staff members, to community members, organically ended up being: Hi Irving and Jane**. And what I took from that was: a) being able to trust someone with ambiguity of I have no control of the process, I can set it up and build you up but it needs to be if you're an internal candidate being open to the possibility, of if you aren't, which I was. And so the way that that transition I believe was set up was even if I was not the candidate Jane had done so much work in transitioning the community, sponsors, funders and the staff. I would have been, if I could say so myself, an excellent transition person for whoever did come step in the role and I could decide for myself if it's the person that I want to continue to work for or is it time for me to go on? But I think **just even setting up a transition scenario, even though this worked out where I was the successor, this could have equally worked out if I wasn't**.

JANE: [00:29:52]

Yeah, I mean, I think that's a really great point too, and I don't know that I thought about that, as clearly as you're spelling it out there, but I know that you were my choice in my head, right? And I know that I couldn't say that because we needed to go through this process and I needed the board to feel as though it was going to be, and it was, a very fair process. I think part of what you're talking about and you said the word **trust**, but that's really what it is, right? **It's that feeling of I can let go of what I need to let go of at my end and you can take on that extra**, because it was a little bit of extra work for you, I remember when you started getting those emails you were sort of like, what? Why am I, why am I being patched into all this stuff, but I have so much other things to do, but at the same time as soon as I explain to you why that was happening, you were like on it. I think it became like a tool but it was trust on both of our sides.

RUSTY: [00:30:41]

And one thing I noticed as a board member at a nonprofit that had multiple executive transitions that I served on the board through was the idea of, we talked about transferring relationships from one executive director to the next, but I realized relationships can't be transferred like money in bank accounts. It's more about enabling a new relationship to be built between the person who's coming in. So we might be at an introduction or a walking together into those rooms, but that doesn't mean, you can't say now you have to like and trust this new person when you liked and trusted me; or you know I used to ask you for money, now this person is going to and you still need to say yes. So it seems like what you did was you trusted each other enough that it was helpful too, to have both of you in those conversations with stakeholders and donors and kind of enabled the relationships to grow a little more organically versus sort of, at the last minute, trying to transition these relationships.

IRVING: [00:32:00]

I think that underscores something Jane said earlier was when you think about transitions, and I've talked independently this is the first time we're talking together, but even in my observation from parts that I wasn't, I could see the work to get to this it was done well before Jane announced she was about to leave and sort of building that culture there. And one of the things that I have tried to keep and build on, and this is my soapbox just for all industries not just nonprofit, is **we have to start creating a culture of transition where that is normal**. So there's a lot of executive directors right now that are scared to tell their board chairs they're thinking about leaving because they don't know what the repercussions are and meant. So in this situation, Jane was able to move on, she wasn't immediately moving to another job, but for a lot of folks, so even for me I would move on to another job likely whenever it's my time to transition and **the organization has to have a culture where transitions are normal and trust is there to have those open dialogues. And just right now, I don't think a lot of places have that.**

RUSTY: [00:33:01]

Yeah, amen. I love that culture of transition and normalizing it, such an important point, if people don't take anything else away from this episode I think that's a crucial point and maybe we'll dig back into that little bit more if we have time, about how you're building or maintaining the organizational culture now. But I want to just ask Jane. So, you know, for me, when I went through my executive transition leaving Emerging Practitioners and Philanthropy, a lot of

emotions came up, you know, whether it was anger or fear or sadness or happiness, even a load being lifted off my shoulders. All those things at different points I went through and I was curious how that transition was for you, how did you go about sort of extracting yourself from this place that you loved and where you held the central role? I think it's such an important subtle thing that happens in these transitions that can make or break them.

JANE: [00:34:03]

I think extracting is probably the right word whether it's a great experience or a bad experience, right? So, yeah, I guess you can tell from everything we've said so far that I'm a planner, so a lot of the planning was also to protect me, to make sure that when I left I wasn't going to fall apart because ONA was not just a job to me. I know a lot of people say this family, family, we're all family, but I really do feel that way. And a lot of my friends that I still have now are from the organization and from the relationships I had. So when I left I felt an incredible amount of freedom and I felt a real loss. I don't know that I expected it to be as deep a loss as it was.

But I also kind of knew that I needed to do it and that overrode, I think, almost everything. That I needed to look in different areas of my life and start to build those up. And what I wasn't doing was tending to my health, I wasn't really putting the time I needed into, I very much love kayaking and birding and seals. And, you know, all these wonderful things that you never have a chance to do except for the two weeks that you're away on vacation. And I wanted to make that more part of my life. So we moved to Maine and that did become a big part of my life. But it's just like a succession plan. It's a transition, right? You have to transition into a different mindset and I think it's taken me a while to do it.

And then, of course, and I know we might talk about this a little bit later, the whole political scene changed. There was incredible societal upheaval, covid happened and as soon as all that happened, the first thing I felt was guilty and I felt like I needed to get back into the game a bit. So I started consulting again, trying to help nonprofit journalism and then worked more in building leadership with diversity, equity and inclusion. So that sort of became my next mission.

Although, I've learned a lot from everything I did when I left which is to give myself time and space which I need. Otherwise, I'm not really very good for anybody and I think a lot of people are learning that now just because they have to because of the pandemic, right? So yeah, I'd say that anybody who does this, no matter how well you prepare yourself for it, just be prepared for it. If it was a bad experience for you, you're going to be dealing with everything that comes with that and if it was a good experience, you're still going to have some after effects of loss and even a tiny bit of fear about what that means for you.

RUSTY: [00:36:28]

Thank you for sharing what's a vulnerable position to be in in these transitions. So, I wanted to mention that back in season one I interviewed my executive transition coach, Tom Adams. So if folks want to hear more about getting coaching and support for these, for transition management processes in nonprofit, there is that episode, I believe it's episode 6 in season one called "Executive Transitions: Equity and Sustainability".

We've heard about sort of how the transition felt a bit to each of you and what happened in terms of the process. I was curious if you all would talk about how issues of race, gender, generation or other factors have entered into the dynamics of this particular transition that you all went through. We heard a little bit from you Jane in the principles about how important it was to open up the doors of the association and its leadership. So I'm curious Irving how that felt to you along the way.

IRVING: [00:37:44]

The interesting thing about my intersection with ONA actually is that a few years joining the actual consulting staff team of ONA, the organization that I represented at the time which was for black journalists, actually had called ONA out for some lack of diversity within the conference and other areas, and even then before I knew who Jane was or anybody within ONA I remember that I was impressed with how the organization responded because needless to say that was not the first time, **NABJ was the organization**, we've called out various organizations for a number of things and most organizations took a defensive posture or they took a "we hear you, but..." posture. I would say that's how I would describe it.

I think you saw some of this in 2020 with organizations too but we're talking about closer to 2007 around this time. And I remember ONA as an outsider, it didn't take a posture of defensiveness, but it took a posture of listening and not a performative listening, not a listening and hope the moment passed, but a listening of how can we do better and also how can we do better that's not in harm or the people that are critiquing us right now. And I remember being impressed with that at the time. Again, years removed from being with the organization. So when I joined, that is partially one of the reasons why I was excited to work at ONA because in spite of what was happening and obviously improvements that were needed, I really do think it came from a place of we're taking this seriously particularly around diversity and inclusion and it felt good to be a part of that.

In terms of the transition, again, being a black man is very real. I remember I was in a leadership cohort one time and we were talking about how you show up as a leader. We were doing Myers-Briggs and many people in the common room talk about: oh, so, what are we going to talk about race? And then they were: well, that's like a separate conversation. And so we had to remind the trainers at the time: I just can't take off my blackness any day and say, this is a leader that's not being black. So I think **part of the transition for me was being cognizant that I was a black person and leadership, cognizant that I would be the first person of color in this role and then cognizant of the fact that even with all the diversity that we had done, primarily ONA was majority white organization, and so that was all very real in terms the transition, but the support was always there.**

I don't think we shied away from any difficult conversation. Jane and I actually had some pretty conversations. I think Jane didn't know this until much more recently, but because of Jane's vulnerability talking about her family, and her experiences with lgbtq within her family that allowed me to open up. She was the first person that I professionally opened up to coming out

at the time. So we built a probably a more unusual relationship of trust that not necessarily everyone needs to do in order to have a successful transition, but I think the part that is replicable for everyone, despite what relationship you have with anyone that you work with is again, going back to repeating that culture of trust.

And I think you have to have some element of vulnerability in order for this to work because that's how you build trust. And so that was always there, from a transitional standpoint for me, and again going to Jane's foresight, DEI has always been a part of my DEA despite me even being black, like that is just something that I've always been passionate about and I feel like that has propelled us and almost had us ready from a leadership perspective for some of the moments that we are in now that none of us foresaw. Where in 2020 or 2021 a lot of groups are just struggling for what to do and again my soapbox has been, you know, there's people out here that know what to do, you just have to find them and give them autonomy and power to do it. And if you're struggling, it might be time to move on and so I think that was always something that's been in my mind, but again the whole process of the transition and that support is what has been pivotal to be in this moment right now.

RUSTY: [00:42:03]

Thank you for your vulnerability Irving and I think that's a good point that vulnerability kind of sets the table for trust and trust enables diverse people to come together and not fraction, you know, to manage conflict when it arises, if there's trust you can get through that and having that listening stance that it sounds like the organization and Jane had is part of that. Not getting defensive, right? Is a way to build trust institutionally as well as individually.

IRVING: [00:43:37]

There was also another practical piece of this, which I do think is replicable where in thinking of the transition, both Jane and I had a complimentary style where I was proactive in seeking out professional development opportunities, mostly with the cost in mind so that it didn't post too much cost to the organization, but I don't recall Jane ever saying one time "no" if I found an opportunity to do. And then the proactive side on her part, there were opportunities that I did not know about, there was a leadership program within journalism that Jane sought out funding to get me into. So we have this dynamic where even when you think about building up whatever the next pipeline of leadership is, of having someone who's proactive in what they want to do, also having someone who's supportive and then I think the last piece of it is so much of what we do at nonprofit and the world, it's just around connections and networking and so giving people the space. Jane, with opportunities and invitations that she would get, she would pass on to me sometimes. And so again over the course of the year or two years, to your point about relationships, it wasn't new relationships because again, I had been in this pipeline of building my own relationships, so the transition felt very natural.

JANE: [00:43:50]

Yeah, and I'll just add to that too. Especially the specific thing you're talking about, Irving, the training that you did for leadership came up when we were having a board meeting, and this is where I think the board is just so integral to this and making sure that you build a good board

and a culture of this particular kind of trust and understanding and understanding vulnerability and what it means.

I think everyone knew what Irving's journalism background was and there was some hesitation about that. But instead of saying that just leaves him off the list, somebody in the room said we'll just get him the training and everybody said great, let's do that. And I'm not sure if she was present at the time, she might have stepped off as president but Meredith Artly said I know a great program for him and I'll get in touch with the organizers and we'll get him in, and we got a free training for him, it was a scholarship training. So just an example of how that kind of trust can not only help you to select the right person, but also to give that person the tools to do the job successfully.

RUSTY: [00:45:01]

Yeah, can't count people out for those things that can be built up. All right, so started the episode by talking about my conversation with the Open Society Foundations people and the New Executives Fund. So, let's talk about that a little bit. Irving, you participated in that OSF New Executives Fund, can you tell us about that experience? What it offered you and the organization and you know what was valuable or not to you and the organization about that?

IRVING: [00:45:29]

Happy to bring this also full circle to what we just talked about. So part of that extension of sending me out and sort of stepping back invitations and allowing it to me, one of those events I went to allowed me to meet someone from the Open Society, actually two years prior to actually even knowing about the New Executives Fund. So through that relationship I was able to understand more about the New Executives Fund and the fund at the time and I'm sure we'll refer back to the episode so people can watch that, but it supports first time executive directors and I was the first time executive director in 2017 and what is unique about the fund and I was just on a panel conversation last week that said this, is that this is truly when we talk about building leaders, this fund supports the leader in that the grant is for the organization, but it's for whatever vision he or she has as a leader for the organization, and it's even structured so that if you were to leave or you were to be removed, the money goes with it as well from the organization.

And what was critical about that and I think particularly for funders who are committed to causes and movements and organizations, I cannot say enough about capacity support and what that grant did was: one, there's such a mindset of scarcity in the nonprofit space, it actually took me a while to understand, wait, I can do anything that I want with this grant for the organization of any way that I see best. There's such a power dynamic between funders and grantees that it took me a minute just to wrap my brain around, wait, I actually have the majority say in this decision that happens for the organization in something that I believe in. It's such a simple concept but I think the way executive directors sometimes have to contort and construe and fix themselves for either boards or funders, it felt very rare at the time.

And so, once I got over that mental hurdle of, hey, this is an organization and a program that really believes in you and is uplifting you for the work that you can do, through the organization, that's when I think I was able to build confidence in that first year. I think to Jane's point, during that first year you sometimes wonder what the hell did I get myself into, am I really up for this job? And so, having the confidence of a funder backing what you believe your vision, even when you're not clear on your vision... I think that's the other thing too, is that you're told you're supposed to be all these things as an executive director: your vision, your foresight, your strategy and no one ever tells you, you know, some of that you kind of figure out along the way. So I think the New Executives Fund, again with that capacity support and believing in people was pivotal for me in that first year, to one, get out of the scarcity mindset and take some risk and believe in some bolder visions that I had.

RUSTY: [00:48:26]

Fantastic. Thank you, thank you for that. I'm curious too, and this was not in the pre-prepared questions, but one thing that I actually was just tweeting about this today, that Fund the People talks about a lot in our work and the Building Movement Project too recently came out with the report about people of color and women and others who are sort of historic firsts in their organizations or however you want to frame it, as EDs being kind of set up to fail when funders wait and see if the person is going to succeed or build that relationship with them that they find acceptable, or even if, well are they going to come meet with me or not? You know, that sort of what's the, you know, that threshold of is this person acceptable to us and do they build that relationship with us so that we'll renew support or give support. So I was curious about your experience as a first-time ED coming in as the first black person running the association, say what you want to say or don't say what you want to say about the funders. But did you feel any of that kind of wait and see or what did the donors and funders sort of behavior look like and feel like to you?

IRVING: [00:49:48]

Yeah let me uplift two experiences. So my experience and again, thanks to the woman sitting in on this conversation with me, because that transition was so well thought out, was planned, was thoughtful. All of the funders that we work with toward the end it was "Irving and Jane" as a unit and then we transitioned and Jane no longer had an email account that was Irving and the funders have been gracious to kind of pass along those contacts. I will also say that coincidentally the moment that I transitioned, even the funding world particularly in the program officer space of the world that we worked in within journalism, the look of that also shifted so that was becoming more people of color and more women as well too. So there was almost a transition across the board that I think made my experience, I'm going to say painless, but the connections were there already and I did not experience what that Building Movement report highlights.

However, I have connected in so many spaces of non profit from journalism to association to social justice groups and without a doubt I will tell you people don't believe us, believe in us per se. The part that I do experience and I think this is often the experience of ED is you can take somebody, particularly a white man that is my same age, my same background, doing the same

things within the organization that they're doing and in the external world, particularly let's just say stereotypically, let's say generationally right now, in my case people will reach out and they'll want to mentor me on how to be better, and the other man's case, it will be, this is Mark Zuckerberg doing the most innovative creative things, how can happen we put money behind this person to support this brilliant idea that has no plan, right? And so I think that is the more common experience of what people of color and women and other marginalized groups go through, is that the belief in us is very little to none and it is a wait to see to prove and what you have to prove is monumentally greater than what some other people have to prove.

RUSTY: [00:51:48]

Well, thank you for that. And, you know, One thing that is good about this conversation is it does give hope that white people can do a decent job of transitioning and opening up those relationships. **Opening up the doors is not just about putting someone in a seat, but about creating a working environment in which they can succeed, you know, people can succeed and thrive and be trusted and be invested in.** So, yeah, thank you for kind of sharing that broader view of what you see happening in the field. I think **we would definitely put up a link to the Building Movement Project report in the show notes for this episode** and also worth mentioning the **Open Society Foundations report: In Support of People Who Take the Leap.** I think it's what it's called, which goes into that extensively, and hopefully, in the next few minutes, we're going to talk a little bit more about that.

So, Jane. Let's go back over to you, as we've talked about your experience in the transition, we talked about the emotional impact and your sort of emotional management of yourself and what you wanted to do more of when you left. So what are you doing now? You talked about consulting and how have you used that experience with those principles you mentioned earlier in terms of your own transition and exit.

JANE: [00:53:14]

I think I mentioned before, what I was sort of concentrating on focusing on as a consultant and why, it seems to me maybe I haven't talked enough about why, but mostly for the same reasons that I felt I needed to leave ONA within a certain period because I think I had my time, great, and now it's somebody else's time. And what I think, **what I try to do with the work I do is to help people through that period and also to help build up to look ahead and to build up the teams that they need to do that. And also when they're training to think more about opening up their perspectives, about when you're training what needs to be included in that training, as well as who's in the room and doing the training, because that makes a huge difference too.**

And I'll just give you one quick example and this really goes back to illustrate what Irving was talking about before I think, and which I learned from listening. I mean, I don't think I knew this deep inside me, I think I just learned this because I've just listened to people. I was working with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to put together their executive training which is a wonderful terrific training program. And it was pretty much, you know, kind of what you would expect for a training program with a little bit of extra thrown in. And during the middle of it, George Floyd was murdered and pandemic also occurred and it was, everything was just

thrown up into the air and in possibly the best kind of way, because people who are being mentored and trained became much more vulnerable about their issues, and they talked more honestly and freely about what was impacting them in the newsroom every day, as well as what was happening too in they're in their homes, with their families. And the training changed and worked into something totally different, which is exactly what should have happened, which it should have been, now there were more trainers of color that came into the rooms, the content of the training turned towards: how do I deal with this in the newsroom, how do I talk to this person, how do I start to think about different story ideas other than what we have been doing?

And I think that's what I am concentrating on more, but I think that's what more newsrooms and more even funders when you're thinking about funding, need to think about. And I think they're starting to do that because as Irving said, there's more people of color out in the funding world. So that's where I see the most value that I can bring right now and that's, that's what I'm trying to do.

RUSTY: [00:55:42]

So there's been a lot of good nuggets of wisdom about navigating transitions from both of the roles you played in your transition. Is there any other one gem, one piece of advice or lesson learned that we haven't talked about yet that you would like to share with folks who are either, you know, planning an exit or coming in or have recently come into such a role.

IRVING: [00:56:09]

The first thing is so simple. It's coming to my mind that transition in itself feels very complicated and complex and nuanced with the variety of personalities. And I tend to think it's a little bit more art than science and it starts with simply opening up the conversation. I think what can easily happen is it gets analysis paralysis on how to do this correctly and to Jane's point, it starts well before the conversation and building that culture of trust, vulnerability, having difficult conversations, that it felt optional before to have that, but just where the world is going now, I think every organization has to have that. It shouldn't have to be an uncomfortable conversation but it is. But if you already have that culture where you can have this conversation I think whether that's the board or the executive director, it's really just starting it and, you know, maybe bumpy as you figure it out along the way, but I think the part that trips up a lot of people and can be difficult is just the analysis paralysis and not doing anything because you don't know where to start.

JANE: [00:57:20]

Yeah, I think that says a lot of it.

RUSTY: [00:57:25]

Well, what I'd like to do is just invite you to share where people can reach each of you and are there other resources that you want to share. So Irving, how can folks find you and the Online News Association, and are there other resources you'd like to share?

IRVING: [00:58:41]

People can find me anywhere where there's an internet browser and social platform so I'm on every platform as Irving W. Washington. You can catch me on Twitter @IrvWashington3 and also because I have so much time in the world, me and three other friends who are CEOs of nonprofits, we started a project, an organization that's fiscally sponsored under Community Partners called Texts To Table and we have conversations monthly at the intersection of the black experience and leadership. So we have a community forum, people come on our shows and talk about solely race and leadership and what that means in the context of nonprofits and associations, so people can check us out at textstotable.com.

RUSTY: [00:58:28]

Fantastic, will definitely put the link on and now that I know about that I'm definitely going to check it out. Jane, now about you, how can folks find you and your consulting practice?

JANE: [00:58:26]

Free Range Media and we're on the web freerange-media.com. I'm same - internet anywhere you can find me, twitter is [@freerangejane](https://twitter.com/freerangejane). I'm on LinkedIn and if anyone wants to email me directly, I'm happy to talk and honestly, I don't even need to be hired, I'm happy to just give advice if that's helpful to anyone. It's Jane@freerange-media.com is my email.

RUSTY: [00:59:11]

All right, well you heard it here first that listeners to the Fund the People podcast get a free conversation with Jane, which is very valuable. Thank you for that offer and we'll share your email as well on the site. And for folks who are interested in learning more about the Open Society Foundations New Executives Fund you can listen to the episode with Bipasha and Joey and you can also go to opensocietyfoundations.org and search the site for New Executives Fund and we'll put a link to them and the report that I mentioned in the show notes.

So my goodness, this has been such an education for me. It's really terrific to hear the two of you kind of bringing both of your perspectives on this important process of transitioning executive leadership in association to nonprofits and I appreciate so much the time and thought you put into this episode. So thank you very much Jane McDonell and Irving Washington for being here with me.

IRVING: [01:00:16]

Thank you, Rusty.

JANE

Thank you, Rusty.

OUTRO: Thanks for listening to the Fund The People podcast where we help you cook up nutritious and delicious alternatives to the nonprofit starvation cycle by investing in the nonprofit workforce. On behalf of myself, Rusty Stahl, our gracious guests and everyone who makes the show possible we hope you enjoyed the episode. You can find links to the resources that were mentioned, guest bios, show notes, and the audio for this episode by visiting fundthepeople.org

and clicking on Podcast. Thank you for driving change in our communities, our country and the world. Remember to keep your tank full, take care of yourself and take care of one another.