



Repairing the World Beginning at Home

Guided by a lifelong sense of service and empathy, Joan Sherman has dedicated herself to others in unique and meaningful ways. Compelled by that sensibility, when she sees opportunities to serve – she pursues them.

“Personally and professionally, I have found the question ‘what can I do to help?’ irresistible,” said Joan. “Answering that call started here in Poughkeepsie, circled the world with my husband [to countries in Central Europe, Asia and Africa] and brought me back in new and deepened ways since he passed.”

Joan helped establish the Poughkeepsie Head Start program in 1965 with a grant from the Ford Foundation. Four years later, with the program shored up, she returned to school for a Master’s Degree at Sarah Lawrence College to “understand leadership and how it evolves from the personal to the collective, in community.”

After that experience, she returned to Vassar College, her undergraduate alma mater, and worked in roles that required strategy, sensitivity and mediation skills. “My professional life was not about a linear path – rather, a series of fabulously interesting jobs that brought me into connection with people doing their best to improve the world.”

In 1996 Joan and her husband Jonah transitioned their lives to volunteering on international projects. They worked

with several organizations, of which she notes the International Executive Service Corporation was “profoundly life-changing.”

“It was eye-opening to see the state of the world – to see poverty of a different scale, to see families challenged to care for children orphaned by AIDS and more. I still marvel at all we tried to absorb, learn about and understand. We became close to people, and some of those relationships still endure.”

International experiences, enriched local perspective

After Jonah passed in 2008, Joan decided to refocus at home. She picked back up where she started in 1965, with education and children in the city of Poughkeepsie. The next frontier of her focus became clear while working as a Book Buddy at Clinton Elementary School.

She was partnered with a second-grade student, whose parents were incarcerated. “Working with her, I realized that no matter what we did together, she would be at a disadvantage in life. After inquiring with her teacher, I heard more

stories of extraordinary difficulties faced by students separated from parents and loved ones.”

Guided by the Jewish concept of *tikun olam*, ‘to repair the world,’ Joan was again inspired to answer the irresistible question of her life.

At a conservative estimate, one in four students in Poughkeepsie is living that experience. In addition to the immediate emotional response of students missing their family members, Joan is keen to highlight the secondary challenges of broken trust and confidence along with physical symptoms of stress and trauma.

As a fundholder at Community Foundations, she asked if we were aware of any projects or programs addressing the impacts of incarceration. Together, we engaged in a research and discovery process that brought government agencies, officials and organizations to the table.

Out of the expansive narrative of incarceration, equity and economic justice, Joan decided to focus on targeted, tangible

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solutions. The first was to help create a pathway for re-entry to the community for those who are homeless after incarceration or serve their parole behind bars for lack of housing.

In Poughkeepsie, Community Housing Innovations (CHI) was starting to do that same work in conjunction with the Department of Children and Family Services. CHI had a few gaps to begin providing men with temporary, transitional housing at the end of their sentences – and that is where Joan stepped in.

“Men are sitting in jail unable to leave because they lack housing,” said Stacey Gamberg of CHI’s

re-entry home in Poughkeepsie. “We offer a place for them to pivot their lives. Housing and food is just the beginning of what we do. We connect them to a network of agencies and services to develop self-care, employment and technology skills.”

Since its opening in August 2018, the program has helped dozens of men successfully re-integrate into the community. To them, Joan is “their angel, a source of light, and a person who makes them feel worthy” said Gamberg.

Not content to stop there, Joan continues to explore these challenges from different perspectives. Through the Community Foundations, she has met with public defenders, wardens, social workers and other agencies. “We’ve been on a listening tour,” Joan said, “trying to find what has worked and how to replicate those successes.”

To leverage her learning into outcomes, Joan created the Sherman Re-entry Fund at the Foundations. Through distributions from her retirement account, she is strategically supporting the work that matters – while ensuring her ability to continue repairing the world for years to come. 🌱

