



Ep. 23: Joanne Steinback (Wheelock'66), Special Education Teacher & Classroom Innovator

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

As a lifelong educator, **Joanne Steinback (Wheelock'66)** worked at the forefront of the transformation of special education in the American school system. Her career is centered on implementing innovative strategies to effectively engage children with emotional challenges and learning disabilities. Joanne reflects on the lessons she learned, the challenges she faced, and the role BU played in sparking her life's passion.

Podcast Transcript:

- Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations, and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast. Today's guest is retired teacher and lifelong advocate for education innovation, Joanne Steinbeck. Joanne earned her degree in elementary education from BU's Wheelock College of Education and Human Development in 1966. Along with her 25 year career as an educator in the classroom, Joanne is a pioneering partner in the ongoing development of two specialized schools aimed at improving the lives of bright students with emotional challenges and learning disabilities. On this episode of the podcast, Joanne traces the roots of her success back to her time at BU and shares a few of the lessons she's learned as an agent of change in the classroom and beyond. Well, Joanne, thank you so much for carving out time to join us on the Proud to BU podcast. I normally don't start talking about myself, but I have to ask you this question. My sister, when we were kids, her favorite game was to teach school. She had a blackboard set up. Her favorite thing to do was to get a bunch of other kids around and start handing out assignments. I'm curious, were you that child? Were you playing school all the time as a kid?
- Joanne Steinback: Yes. I had a blackboard and chalk and I'd put my sister and brother and a little desk and teach them whatever it was I thought I knew more than they did.
- Jeff Murphy: So there were early signs during your childhood that you might go into a career in education?
- Joanne Steinback: Yes.
- Jeff Murphy: And I believe if I have my facts correct, you were Joanne Shankman during your time at BU, or at least before you got married. And I know from the involvements that you've been involved with different schools through the years, education has been a huge, huge thing for your family, your whole life. Is that right?
- Joanne Steinback: Yes.
- Jeff Murphy: So tell me a little bit, where did you grow up and how were you sort of introduced to the idea of special education?

Joanne Steinback: So I grew up in a small community in the north side of Chicago, I was born in '44, in 1949 my parents were involved with other family members in naming a school that Dr. Bruno Bettelheim was beginning at the University of Chicago for kids with social and emotional disturbances after my grandmother Sonia Shankman and today that school is still in existence. We have 36 kids in residence and 36 kids who are day students. So I think from that moment on, I was very aware of my parent's commitment to a child whose educational opportunities were different and I loved being with kids and as we said earlier, I love teaching my sister and brother whatever it was that I thought I knew more about than they did.

Jeff Murphy: You grew up in Chicago. How did you find attending BU? Were your parents and rest of your family totally okay with you heading over to the east coast for college to become a teacher?

Joanne Steinback: I had gone to a camp in Fryeburg, Maine and one of the camp directors was a professor of Audio Visual at Boston University. And when I first went to college, I went to Elmira College, a small girls school in upstate New York, and they had told me they could provide a special education opportunity for me my junior and senior year. And by mid-sophomore year it was clear that they had no opportunity for me. So I contacted Crescer, and he and I worked out an opportunity for me to go to BU. There were only two schools at that time that had special education. One was Vanderbilt, and I did not know the south, but I knew the east because of having been at camp in Maine. So Dr. Crescer was really the help meet in getting me into BU and getting my career launched at BU.

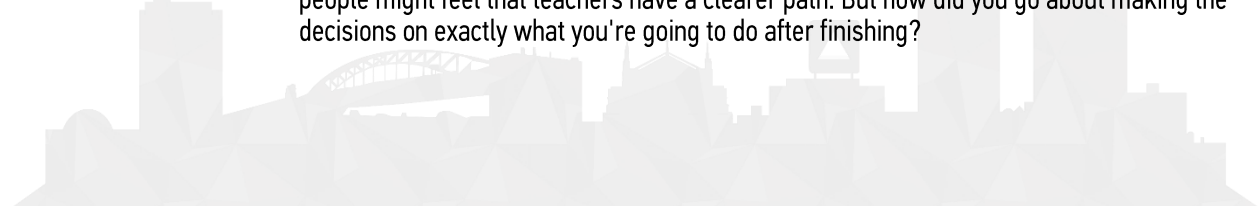
Jeff Murphy: So you're the first guest we've had on the podcast who attended BU in the 60s. I can only imagine it was an incredibly different campus in a different city at that time. I want to talk about your educational experiences, but what was your life like at BU? How long did it take for you to feel at home? Where were you hanging out on campus? Where were you living? Tell me all about it.

Joanne Steinback: You know, I lived with an Orthodox Jewish family in Brookline, so I was not on campus because it was a late admission when I made the transition. We were 28 kids in the Special Education department. We had a classroom in the education building with a one way mirror. So not only did we have an opportunity to observe the children in class with either Dr. Burton Black or Dr. Frank Garfunkel, and then they would critique us afterwards. But then we also had student teaching assignments, one in a regular classroom and then one in a special education classroom. And then we did have to take some classes in the regular School of Education, but predominantly the 28 of us, and I might even be wrong about the number, it might've even been 18 of us, but we were a pretty close knit group during those two years. And it was, from my perspective, it was probably, well, it was a significant part of my life understanding and working with others in the field of special education.

Jeff Murphy: So you mentioned a couple faculty members, I'm guessing there were a bunch of people who had a big impact on you. Would you say that the classroom experience maybe wasn't quite as valuable as the student teaching or when you look back, what really stands out to you as having the most impact on your career?

Joanne Steinback: I think the student teaching. I very lucky in both student teaching assignments to work with teachers who were very gifted and very giving. And that was a terrific breakthrough for me.

Jeff Murphy: How did you decide what to do after finishing your degree? And certainly in some ways people might feel that teachers have a clearer path. But how did you go about making the decisions on exactly what you're going to do after finishing?



Joanne Steinback: I decided, actually I got married, right after I graduated and my then-husband was going to law school at the University of Michigan. So Michigan happened to be the most progressive state at that point in time with special education. So I applied to several schools in the Ann Arbor area, got into a school in Ann Arbor and began teaching. At that point in time, they wanted to start a primary class for kids with, at that point they called them EMH, educable mentally-handicapped. And so I had that classroom and I had kids that were first grade through fourth grade, and the other classroom was fifth grade through eighth grade. So it was a very intimate environment. And the University of Michigan had a special education program. So I was able to work with some of the professors there, have some student teachers come into my classroom, and do some lectures at the University of Michigan. So it was a very unique, special opportunity for the three years that I was on campus in Ann Arbor.

Jeff Murphy: So I'm curious to know those first years out of school in Michigan, you're in your own classroom. Now certainly you had the student teaching experience, but were there lessons learned those first couple of years as a young professional that you maybe never would have expected to have learned as you sort of reflect back on it now?

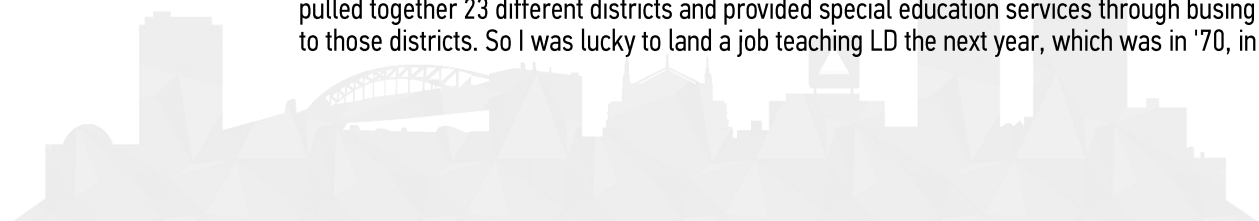
Joanne Steinback: Yes, and I think what was significant for me was the other teacher, who was a seasoned teacher, older than myself and really a help mate.

Jeff Murphy: So tell me more about the unfolding of your career. I know at some point you end up back in Chicago, but I can only imagine that that being a special education teacher, working with kids with unique challenges is incredibly difficult. What kind of things are you doing to sort of keep yourself propped up to sort of celebrate the small wins? How do you maintain a healthy lifestyle in this kind of demanding work?

Joanne Steinback: I think the most significant thing is in those days, though the special education classes were self-contained, they were in regular schools. So there was always interaction with other educators during day and the kids would go into PE with the regular classroom kids and art and recess. So those were significant opportunities. We also, in that particular school, the second year I was there, they'd put on an addition where we had a full kitchen, living room, a greenhouse, and a wood shop. So we had opportunities to expand the learning experiences for these children to prepare them for other opportunities in life, and also to prepare them for living perhaps independently. The families that I worked with were incredibly supportive. For many of them, their children had experienced school failure. So to be in an environment where somebody was trained to work with them and teach them skills, they were so very appreciative. So they were great supporters during those years.

Jeff Murphy: So obviously you've got this family history with the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School. At what point do you get back to Chicago? And I know at some point you sort of made the decision to step out of the classroom and more into kind of board leadership roles. Tell me more about that.

Joanne Steinback: After the three years of being in Michigan, my husband and I separated and I went back to Chicago and taught for one more year, and learning disabilities was just coming on the horizon and I was feeling as though I needed to be with kids who retained the knowledge that they were taught on a daily basis and were able to build on that knowledge. So I went and got my master's in LD and the community I was living in, which was really the community I'd grown up in, there was a special education cooperative where they had pulled together 23 different districts and provided special education services through busing to those districts. So I was lucky to land a job teaching LD the next year, which was in '70, in



the school that I had gone to as a child, and I was in my kindergarten room. So that was quite interesting. So I was able to teach LD then for two years, got remarried, pregnant and continued to work with the special education cooperative while I was raising my children, I guess through until my son younger son was in second grade, because that cooperative included where we lived. So I was able to do some student teaching in special ed classrooms and then I was able to get a job in the community we lived in, teaching kids with learning disabilities, and I continued with that until I retired at age 50.

Jeff Murphy: Wow. So in April for Boston University, we celebrate something called Global Days of Service where we ask our alumni to give back to their communities in whatever way makes sense to them. And we celebrate those BU alumni who've gone on to have incredible impacts in their community. It sounds like that really means a lot to you to have a career where you feel like you've been able to contribute to the greater good. What can you tell me more about that?

Joanne Steinback: When I retired from teaching, I immediately joined the board of the mental health center in our community. And that was significant because I really wasn't sure after teaching for 25 years what life was gonna look like. So getting connected to something community-wise in the mental health field was a significant piece of my continued learning. And then in '89, so prior to retiring, I had joined, we had created a board for the Orthogenic School, which at that point in time was really suffering. I think we had 25 kids in the school. It's reputation had diminished significantly. And there was a child advocacy lawyer and my husband and myself that gathered together a group of educators knowing that we wanted to see this school thrive. And it took quite a period of time. And then in '98, the school was becoming solvent. We had hired a director who really seemed to have the same vision for growth as we did. And we also knew that there was a great need in the Chicago area for schools for learning disabled kids. University of Chicago, cause we were on their campus, asked us to start a school for LD kids because they were finding that their faculty members were moving out to the suburbs where the services were available, but nothing was available in the city. So in 2000, we started Hyde Park Day School, a school for very bright kids with learning disabilities. We had five kids and I was the first teacher, we had a reading specialist and we had a director. And today we have three Hyde Park Day Schools, the same one in Chicago, one in the northern suburbs and one in the western suburbs. So being a part of the board that has overseen both the Orthogenic School, which has grown, as I said to you in the beginning, we have 38 kids in resident and 38 kids from day school. So I feel that being part of growth in both emotionally disturbed population and the learning disabilities population has kept me tuned into special education and my roots. And I will say that I had no contact with BU for multiple years until maybe about six years ago, my husband had to be in Boston and I said to him, you know, I'm going back to BU. That's where everything started for me. And had I not had the opportunities to be in that educational department at the time I was, I would never be where I am today.

Jeff Murphy: That's amazing. I didn't know the whole story about the board basically saving the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School. Can you tell me a little bit more about that process? I mean, it sounds like you really executed a turnaround of this organization and now it's thriving again. When you look back, what did it take to right the ship?

Joanne Steinback: It took the right leadership. And those of us who were on the board who were either educators, lawyers, businessmen, we were not sophisticated enough to understand what kind of leadership was required for the Orthogenic School. So I would say for the probably six, seven years, we had a revolving door of directors. We did not do a good job. And then finally two individuals who were within the school, one was a teacher and the other was in the psychology/social work department, came forth and said to us, "You know, we can run

this school" and they are our saviors. They were the ones who really recognized that they could work with our board and that they had the skill sets to begin to bring the school back to life. And it's during their leadership that we've opened up a day program and grown the school to where it is today.

Jeff Murphy: I'm just thinking that you've been doing this work for so long. If you had a magic wand and could just make a bunch of obstacles go away for some of the students who have some of the emotional challenges, learning disabilities, what are the things that you might do at the school to really just improve their quality of life?

Joanne Steinback: I think, you know, it all begins with money and I think the biggest challenge that we have, especially at the Orthogenic School, is that many, most of our kids are school-funded, which comes from the state, and I don't know if you're aware, but Illinois is probably the lowest state in terms of finances. So working with the state, working with the school districts, enabling children to come to the Orthogenic School is the biggest challenge. It seems that it's a more sophisticated parental population at Hyde Park Day School. Those families know how to get lawyers and have the resources to get a lawyer to get school funding, but our kids with social emotional issues, those families are not as skilled or financially able to access those resources.

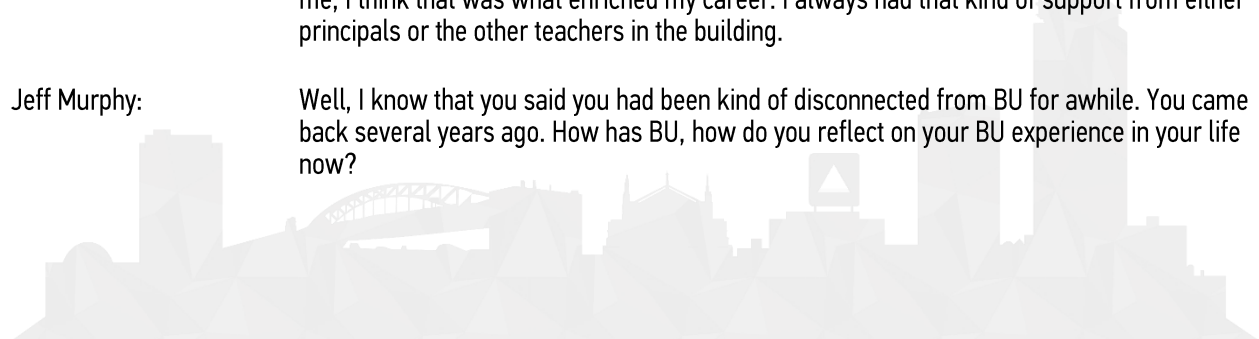
Jeff Murphy: Certainly money plays such a big role in all of this. I also was just wild to see that in 2014, you actually opened a new building for both of the schools that you're on the board of, is that right?

Joanne Steinback: Yes. And that building is being used as a transitional facility so that there are kids who graduate who are going to stay in the Chicago area, either in the workplace, or going on to either a junior college or four year college who still need support. So the Brookwood Center is a condominium that we retrofitted for our students and we have staff that live there. And it's been a slow process to bring kids in. Again, tuition is a big factor, but we, you know, we're working hard on making sure that that happens, and the five kids that are there now are just thriving. I mean, it's been a godsend for them.

Jeff Murphy: So when you look back on your 25 years of classroom teaching, all of the time that you've spent in school leadership on these various boards, when you talk to a young person who's thinking about going into teaching, whether it be the traditional classroom, I'm curious your thoughts about charter schools, but what kind of advice do you have to share with young folks who are interested in teaching careers? And what characteristics do you think will be most important for them to have to be successful?

Joanne Steinback: Hmm, that's such a good question, Jeff. I think the most significant thing is dedication and an environment that is really respectful of the individual as a teacher. And I think for me that was the greatest gift. I was always in schools where not only the other teachers were supportive of the kids in my classroom, but I always had principals who really respected the other child and wanted those children included. So I think a key is in interviewing in a district that it would be also very critical to interview principals and spend some time in the building, and walk the classrooms and get a sense of who the teachers are. Because for me, I think that was what enriched my career. I always had that kind of support from either principals or the other teachers in the building.

Jeff Murphy: Well, I know that you said you had been kind of disconnected from BU for awhile. You came back several years ago. How has BU, how do you reflect on your BU experience in your life now?



Joanne Steinback: You know, had it not been for BU, I wouldn't have had this absolutely rich and rewarding career. It gave me the confidence to be the teacher I wanted to be and the knowledge to be successful.

Jeff Murphy: Well, I hope we'll see you back on campus sometime soon and you know, you talked a lot about dedication and it's clear to me that you've been incredibly dedicated to students your whole life. So Joanne, thanks so much for telling us your story here on the Proud to BU podcast.

Joanne Steinback: Thank you, Jeff.

Jeff Murphy: Again, my thanks to Joanne for sharing her story here on the podcast. If you'd like to learn more about the schools at the center of Joanne's extensive work in special education, be sure to explore both oschool.org and hydeparkday.org. Thanks again for all the great work that you're doing, Joanne.

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