



ESF Campus Conversations: The Podcast

Pilot Episode

Meet President Joanie Mahoney

10/12/21

Joanie Mahoney: I thought leadership was about hiring a great team, supporting that team, and then setting the vision and continuing to raise the bar. My connection to ESF was pretty close as County Executive, I'm hoping to surround myself with a team of people here that's willing—when they see those barriers—to go another step further and knock those barriers down. We're going to focus on faculty in this first season and hear their stories and what brought them to ESF and the kind of work that they're doing here. So tune in and I'm excited to hear, I'm excited about having the opportunity to have these one-on-one conversations with faculty members.

Matt Millea: Should we start with applause or anything exciting? My name is Matt Millea. I'm the Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives here at ESF. I've been with the college for just over four months, and I'm thrilled to be here today with our president, Joanie Mahoney. This is a pilot episode of the Presidential podcast. And rather than having a guest interviewed by Joanie, which will be the normal course of action, we opted to instead interview our president so our audience will know much more about her and where, what brought her to ESF and great ideas she has for the campus moving forward. So, with that, we'll jump right into it. Hello, Joanie.

Joanie Mahoney: Hello. But I think we should be perfectly frank that I'm being the guinea pig to make sure that all the equipment works before we put one of our best and brightest faculty members behind the microphone. So this is a good test run for us. And I'm happy that Tyler Dorholt is here lending his expertise. So, this is going to be fun. I'm looking forward to it. I've known Matt for a long time, but I don't think I've ever been interviewed by you.

Matt Millea: No, and even when I worked for you, we didn't have lengthy interviews, either. So that was that was always good. On my end.

Joanie Mahoney: This is good though, because I think people, particularly because I was involved in local government, people knew a part of me better than you would somebody that came from outside the community into this role. But, you know, the path here and all of that, I don't think people probably are aware of that kind of thing. So, I'll go first and then I'm going to ask faculty members to do the same kind of thing.

Matt Millea: It's exciting and we've already reached out to a number of faculty who are getting ready. And we're going to have a season of six episodes this first semester. But for now, I think you're right, I think you and I go back over a decade and I'm happy to, so happy to be here and working with you. But I know the story and I know where you come from, and I know your philosophy and what drives you. But again, many people on campus probably don't. So this is a great opportunity to kinda revisit those things that I learned over that



decade. So with that, we should really just jump into your longstanding CNY roots.

Joanie Mahoney: I have very deep roots in Central New York. My family's been here for generations. My parents still live in the house that I grew up in, which you can practically see here from the window in Bray. I'm a graduate of Corcoran High School, one of the public high schools in Syracuse. I have my bachelor's degree from Syracuse University, from the School of Management, and I have my law degree from Syracuse University. I did a semester abroad in London when I was in college and—

Matt Millea: I didn't know that.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. So, see, you're learning things about me. But my husband and I have traveled quite a bit with our sons. My husband is a first-generation American. His parents were born and raised in the Netherlands, and they came here on their wedding day. So all of the family that he has in the United States pretty much is here in Central New York. And I am fifth of nine, and all eight of my siblings live here in Onondaga County, which is really a testament to the love that my whole family has for this community.

Matt Millea: And it's unusual, right? Lots of family split up and people moved to the South or the West or—

Joanie Mahoney: My parents have 17 grandkids, 16 of them live here still. Most of them are still in school, but my oldest is the only one who is gone. He lives in New York City, so not too far away.

Matt Millea: And he'll be back.

Joanie Mahoney: He'll be back. He's back on weekends.

Matt Millea: So, when did you go to SU?

Joanie Mahoney: I graduated from Syracuse School of Management in 1987, and then I went straight into the law school and graduated from there in 1990. I went to a large firm right out of law school, Harris Beach, and really liked that, except that I was living in Ithaca. I lived in Ithaca for a year. And in the practice of law, it's really about network and putting your roots down. And I knew that I wanted to be in Syracuse. So, the fall of 1991, the district attorney's office was turning over and the current DA, believe it or not, offered me a job as an assistant DA. I never thought that I would be doing criminal law. But I found in the five years that I was an assistant DA in Onondaga County working for Bill Fitzpatrick, that I really loved the pace, it was pretty good training for politics. After, well, I will say during those five years that I was at the DA's office, I got married and my husband and I had our first two sons. In the public sector, by the time you have two kids in daycare, you're pretty much working just for day care.

Matt Millea: It gets a little pricey.



Joanie Mahoney: So, I said that I was going to take a little bit of a leave of absence, and I imagined that I'd be out months to maybe a year, but I ended up being out 11 years. And during that time, our second two sons—my husband and I have four sons—they were born, and I dipped my toe into politics and I had a part-time job as a Syracuse city counselor during those 11 years. But I did not have a full-time job and I feel like one of the luckiest people because I was really able to do that, and then step right into the job that I had as county executive. So, I think going from stay-at-home mother to county executive is probably unusual.

Matt Millea: Well, you skipped over some exciting stuff though. So, you're at home, you had your experience in the DA's office, but then you didn't apply for a part-time job, you ran for office. What was that like?

Joanie Mahoney: I did, as a matter of fact. So, I had this experience that I was at my 20th high school reunion, and it happened to be at the American Legion in the Valley in Syracuse, which was next door to where I was living at that time. So, after the 20th high school reunion, a lot of folks kinda made their way back to my house and we sat around the kitchen table until late in the evening. And there were a lot of people there that had moved away from Syracuse. And it was really eye-opening for me to hear their experience. And people had asked me because my father was in politics ahead of me whether I was interested, and I really did not think that I was. But that experience of sitting around the table and listening to people who like me grew up in Syracuse, graduated from Corcoran High School but moved away. And their perception about why it was that they moved away, particularly the students of color that I went to high school with. I thought, you know, I really don't want to live in a city where successful people of color feel like they have to go somewhere else in order to have a successful career and raise a family and a community like they wanted to. So that was really a life-changing evening for me.

It was not long after that that I threw my hat in the ring to run for mayor of the City of Syracuse, but I'll back up to the city council. That was actually started out as somebody else's idea. It was 1999 when I first ran for office. My husband and I had two boys and, you know, he is super supportive of whatever, but couldn't really relate. You know, he's an engineer—

Matt Millea: He didn't know where this was going.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. Right! No, I don't think he, in his wildest dreams, thought that I'd be making a full-time career out of politics. I served four years city counselor at-large, and I kind of staked out a position in the middle.

Matt Millea: Oh, so you don't have a district, then.

Joanie Mahoney: Right. I was citywide and, you know, I always said "Just do your homework and vote your conscience." And I must have said that a hundred times during that period of time because people were not able to count on a vote from me based on party politics. That experience of being a city counselor, I highly recommend



it for everybody. I mean, it's not that time consuming. It's a really good way to get involved in your community, the school board, or the city council. When it came time to run for re-election, I had the two younger boys, and so I would have kept that job. But the campaign was not really what I wanted to do. It's all-consuming.

Matt Millea: Particularly a large campaign, the whole city, right?

Joanie Mahoney: And you're out every single night. And you know, it was just that moment in time. It wasn't just busy. I always joke around that my kid would've been fine, but I didn't want to miss out on it. And so, I just said if I could keep the job if people were willing to change the rules and just let me stay without being elected again, I would have stayed. I loved it. I remember the last line when I made my announcement is I cautioned people that I will be back. I don't know if they knew—

Matt Millea: They should have listened!

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah.

Matt Millea: Now, just for one second let's just revisit. You mentioned your father and I saw was it 2019 you and her father were co-marshals of the Saint Patrick's Day parade?

Joanie Mahoney: Correct.

Matt Millea: Very cool. I think that was awesome that you both got to share that together. And he was also an elected official?

Joanie Mahoney: Yes. My father was elected to the City Council in 1977 and he served, I don't know, eight or ten years. And he was also a member of the New York State Assembly. It was always a part-time job for my father. He never had a full-time job in politics. He owned a small business and that's what supported our family and that's what he needed to do to support our family. But he really enjoyed the Civic Engagement. He was, I think also pretty good at it. And when the parade committee came calling to make my father and me co-grand marshals, it is one of the highlights for my whole family. Yeah, our whole family was involved, and it was really special to do that with my father.

Matt Millea: So we're in 2003, you've stepped away from your council chair—

Joanie Mahoney: Yep.

Matt Millea: And then you decide "Why not run for mayor?"

Joanie Mahoney: Yes. In 2005, and it was kind of interesting because I stepped aside and, you know, nuance has no place in politics like, I mean, it, it does, but nobody allows for nuance. And when I left in 2003, I cited my family situation at that moment in time. But when 2005 rolls around, I threw my hat in the ring for mayor and all



of the conversation was “Oh, she said she was leaving for family.” But, you know, it was a real glimpse for me for really what all working women are up against. There are so many people who weigh in on what you're doing on either side at any given time. But everybody's family circumstances are different in every moment in a family is different, and I no longer had infants. In 2005, my youngest was three, so—

Matt Millea: It's very different. It's different. And, I've learned a lot from you about these discussions on how the reactions are very different when a woman approaches a situation than when a person, a white male like myself, approaches it, it's like “Sure, you could run for mayor,” versus coming at you and saying “You said two years ago you're too busy.”

Joanie Mahoney: Exactly! Exactly. But you know, again so I had that conversation with my high school classmates about leaving Central New York because we live in a city that is still pretty segregated. So, you want to jump in, right? But then the reaction that I got for running for mayor and then again for county executive was such a surprise to me as a woman, because I thought at that time that the women's movement had been successful, and that we were, you know, I'm pretty equal footing, but I learned very quickly that is not the case. And that kept kind of spurring me on. I used to joke around I wish people would get the memo on me, because if they don't want me to do something, encourage me.

Matt Millea: Did you have a challenge getting the nomination for the mayoral run? Because a lot of times they have a tough time recruiting even for that role?

Joanie Mahoney: No, there actually was a challenge for the Republican line that year, but I'll tell you, no incumbent mayor in Syracuse has ever lost. And so that was really the bigger hurdle for me. And we came close, but I did not change the narrative that no incumbent has ever lost. Yeah.

Matt Millea: So, you're challenging one-term mayor Matt Driscoll and you have the Republican nomination, and there's a fierce campaign and you come very close to winning, correct?

Joanie Mahoney: I did. It was the closest race that the city had seen for mayor, I think ever. It was very close. I was very disappointed when I woke up the day after election day that it was that close and we had lost. I really felt like I lost it myself. But in hindsight, and this is a message I bring when I get to talk to school groups. It was such a learning experience for me. And I think that trying something and failing is one of the most important things I've ever done in my life. I think that before that, things had gone my way pretty much. And so, you don't really stop and reflect when everything's going swimmingly. But losing that race, and then reflecting on that was a real learning experience for me. So, I tell people, put yourself out there because at the worst, you're going to learn a lot about yourself. And then I would also say that, you know, later on when I looked back, I realized, thank goodness, I didn't win that mayor's race because there were things I was able to do as county executive to help the city in terms changing the sales tax sharing formula, that would not have happened. I think if I had



been mayor and my opponent in the county executive's race had become county executive. There was this real city versus County mentality in those days.

Matt Millea: You would have been on the other side?

Joanie Mahoney: I would've been on the city side of it, but by stepping into the county role and recognizing the value of the city to the whole county, we made some real structural changes that I think literally kept the city out of bankruptcy.

Matt Millea: Then you didn't scurry away and resign from public service?

Joanie Mahoney: No. I knew from a practical standpoint, you make a huge investment to get to that point, and every day that you let go by diminishes that investment in terms of your name ID. I mean, you know, a lot of people contributed to try to help me get that and I felt an obligation to kinda get back on the horse at that point.

Matt Millea: So, in 2007, Nick Pirro announces his retirement after a long, long tenure. Very popular. And then you say—

Joanie Mahoney: That I am interested in being a candidate. And let me tell you that I announced it the same day Nick announced his retirement. There was a wide-open secret that it was coming. I was prepared. I remember that it was my son's 10th birthday. It was in February. And I was like decorating his cake. And I went upstairs in my bedroom and called into the same radio station where Nick had just announced his retirement and said that I'm interested in that. And so, the reason that's important is because I was told very soon after that, that I was too late and that the field was already set. But because it was such an open secret, I think the party politics had already crafted their plan and I was not part of their plan.

Matt Millea: You're really structurally the heir apparent, the name ID's already there, but then the party comes back and says "No."

Joanie Mahoney: But that is because an incumbent has never lost in the city of Syracuse. And they were like "Go ahead and run for that" because they didn't really want to run for that because the odds of winning it were stacked against them. So, it was fine. And they all came out and endorsed me for mayor. And they all thought that I'd make a great mayor. But then when it came time to run for county executive, it was like, oh, no, no, she's not ready for that, but that was one that I should have won. So, I think that that was a lot more desirable for the party.

Matt Millea: And you had a direct conversation with the chairman of the party?

Joanie Mahoney: I did. I said that I was interested in running for County Executive and we had a meeting one-on-one. And if the message had been you're a good candidate, you made a good run, you know, now is maybe not the right time, but we're all behind you and we'll support you for something else. I don't know. I have no



idea. But I think I was open to that conversation, but that's not the conversation I had. The conversation I had was stunning. He just kinda leaned back in his chair and said to me, "You'll never be County Executive. We have all the support lined up against your opponent. We have all that money behind your opponent. I don't know what you're doing, but this is suicide for you politically and you should basically run along." And I could not believe it! And I walked out of that meeting with him and I called my husband and I said, I don't know what else we're doing in our lives, but I am running for county executive.

Matt Millea: And this is such an important part because people on campus, they will know that you were the county executive. They won't know the story, they didn't experience this pivotal moment where if somebody had just treated you differently and treated you with a little bit of respect and said, you know what, Joanie, you're a great candidate and we're thinking of you for Congress, we're thinking of you for this we're thinking of you for that. Your reaction may have been much different, but instead they kinda threw down the gauntlet and did the old you're never going anywhere, kid.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. And you know, it was followed on by this is not a job for a woman with small children. You know, what are you gonna do with your kids while you're at work? That was literally the questions I was getting. So, I do think that experience informs how I was as county executive, but how I am as president here at ESF, like I've lived that experience that a lot of women are going through here on campus. I've also lived the experience of just being really disrespected. So anyhow—

Matt Millea: But it's an important lesson though, because it's part and parcel to your taking chances. But then you run into these walls and these barriers. And that's when you said I'm not putting up with this!

Joanie Mahoney: Exactly.

Matt Millea: I'm not backing down.

Joanie Mahoney: I'm not backing down. And I don't think to that point my life, I don't think I had ever worked harder than I did in that race because I was like, there's just no way that this is okay. And it still goes on today. And I think in some respects, probably even worse today. Like I think the pendulum swung back even from that point. But anyhow, so we were really data-driven. I knew what I needed to get in terms of the number of votes. And then I just went about. I knocked on four thousand doors. If people were supportive, they went into my database and I just counted all summer long until we got to election day. And I said, I need to get to that ten thousandth, this isn't a primary, so very low turnout. And I did, and I thought that I was again, you know, I thought that the margin would be better in my favor, but I ended up winning by 21 votes in a county wide race.

Matt Millea: There was a recount.



Joanie Mahoney: Oh, there were three recounts. It was a couple weeks after election day before they declared me the winner.

Matt Millea: So, no big celebrations—

Joanie Mahoney: A stressful couple of weeks.

Matt Millea: Very stressful! So, you're going through that. But that, again for our audience, is important to reflect on. That's not the end of the story though, because you still have to run in a general election.

Joanie Mahoney: Right. That was in September of 2017, and I had to go into the general. Anyhow, my opponent in that race was the current Assembly Member Bill Magnarelli. And, you know, it's kind of the politics that I wanted to be part of. Bill and his wife Karen were nothing but respectful and kind and professional on the campaign trail. We met almost every single night for some kind of town hall or neighborhood watch group or debate on television. And, you know, it was just a really healthy political discourse that is lacking today.

Matt Millea! So lacking today! And that's another lesson that I've seen from you over the years though, is that you ran against Matt Driscoll, you ran against Bill. And you're really friends with both of them now, you're colleagues, but you also support one another, they're both there anytime you'd need anything. And likewise for you, it's really exciting. So, you go through the general and there's no drama on election night, you win with a clear majority, that must have been fun to actually give an acceptance speech

Joanie Mahoney: Yes!

Matt Millea: You get to celebrate! So you're in on January 1st and it was challenging. You had some fiscal challenges. It was not a—

Joanie Mahoney: Well, the most important thing, and it was the most important thing when I was at the county, and it happens to be the most germane to my role here at ESF—

Matt Millea: Oh, right! Let's jump into the contract.

Joanie Mahoney: Yes. So there had been a multi-year conversation and lawsuits about cleaning up Onondaga Lake, and the county was under a consent order to clean the lake. And the solution that had been endorsed by the Federal Court was to build a series of sewage treatment plants throughout the city. And I was on the City Council and fought hard to prevent the Midland Avenue sewage treatment plant. But the county was successful and that plant was built. And the first week that I was in office, they already had the bids for the second sewage treatment plant, but I literally had a matter of days before those bids were set to expire. So, between the time I was elected and when I took office, I met with a lot of neighborhood advocates. I talked about Aggie Lane a lot. She's this woman who lives in the neighborhood around Midland Avenue and she had all the sewer maps in her house and I went to her house and we roll them out on the



dining room table and we talked about possible alternatives. We invited NRDC, National Resources Defense Council to come to Onondaga County and make a presentation about green infrastructure. It was the first a lot of folks had seen or heard of green infrastructure. And I think there was a lot of cynicism. We're going back now—

Matt Millea: 2008, right?

Joanie Mahoney: The very beginning of 2008 and as soon as they made their “Rooftops to Rivers” presentation, I knew it was like a whole series of light bulbs. It was like, we can do this. This is smart. This is so much more environmentally friendly and more aesthetically pleasing and less expensive and we can get where we need to go with this. So, we jumped in and created “Save the Rain.” That was the name that I came up with your predecessor—

Matt Millea: Jean Smiley. Yes. And the upside-down umbrella. I loved the marketing. Let's set the table here for Onondaga Lake.

Joanie Mahoney: Onondaga Lake had two major problems. One, it was an industrial dump. There were businesses that employed a lot of people that dumped their waste into the lake, including things like mercury

Matt Millea: Often with permits.

Joanie Mahoney: It's shocking. It's amazing how quickly we have learned. So that was one giant problem is that there was a lot of industrial waste in the lake. The second problem was that it was used as an open sewer and I designed, again with permits, when we had heavy rainstorms are a lot of runoff, 50-some times a year, the CSOs—the combined sewer overflows—were designed to open to relieve that pressure and that raw sewage would dump into on Onondaga Creek and make its way to Onondaga Lake without being treated. So the lake was an absolute mess. This is, I think, interesting, that we have a combined sewer like a lot of the northeast cities. So, our storm sewers when you see the rainwater go down the sewer in the side of the road are storm sewers and are sanitary sewers that come from people's homes. They connect underground. And there's capacity for all of that sewage to be treated fully and then that discharge to go into Onondaga Lake. But there's not capacity for a big storm event. All that rain water combined with the sewage overflows the system and that diluted sewage was making its way into the creek. So, the solution before we got to the county was to build these sewage treatment plants along the creek to grab those overflows, kinda hold onto them or treat them and put the treated water back into the creek, but it was not as thorough a cleaning as you would get if it went to the metropolitan sewage treatment plant. It was also really expensive not only to build the plants, but they were huge energy sucks. What is obvious now that you know that system is a different solution would be to keep that storm water out of the system. So when you have a big rain event and it doesn't overflow. And the way you do that is you turn the ground into more of a sponge. And so that's where we got green roofs and porous



pavement and we did a lot of green infrastructure projects to absorb that water and reduce the runoff to limit the overflows that went into the creek.

Matt Millea: It was the first in the nation to have federal permission through the EPA to do that.

Joanie Mahoney: I took that very seriously, that we needed to succeed and we did succeed and we met those higher capture rates ahead of schedule. And we had people clamoring for our green infrastructure projects. Nobody was clamoring for us to build sewage treatment plants in their neighborhoods, but once we switch to green infrastructure, it was really popular with the community. We had faculty and students from ESF helping us. And we did things like put the largest green roof in the Northeast on top of the Oncenter and that worked as a living lab for students here at ESF. And I'll tell you without any hyperbole that I don't think I would've gotten the permission to make the change to green infrastructure was it not endorsed by faculty here at ESF. And then it provided a great opportunity for ESF students along the way, we had ESF students working on a lot of the projects that we did. We, we created this project 50 where we said we're going to do 50 green infrastructure projects in one calendar year. And if you know how government works, that was a big important goal. We exceeded it. I think we did 60-some. It was kind of a natural fit for me at ESF because I had to a large extent, some of the most important things I did in the county I did with support from ESF.

Matt Millea: So 2011, you get 60-plus projects, don't 2012, 60-plus projects. You really start to build some national momentum for green infrastructures movement. And Onondaga County's included Rooftops to Rivers II—

Joanie Mahoney: Which is really the cherry on top is that Rooftops to Rivers report that really showed us that we could use green infrastructure rather than gray. When they updated their report and used Onondaga County as an example of the green infrastructure that you can do to solve this problem, that was just huge for us. I mean, what a great story all the way around.

Matt Millea: And it was exciting to work on. And then in 2013, you hosted a green infrastructure Summit here at ESF. It was exciting because it was a culmination of the decision to change course and really invest heavily in green infrastructure. And then so many cities were excited about what's happening here. We put out an invitation for them to come and see, and many of them did. I think we have 14 cities here: San Francisco, Boston, New York City, Philadelphia.

Joanie Mahoney: Is that when we were named one of the EPA's partners? We had been named one of the partners previous to that and then we used that to launch.

Matt Millea: And EPA was completely on board and they had shut down the government had shut down for weeks and they came anyhow and they reopened that day.



Joanie Mahoney: But I was in San Francisco when they made a presentation to us about their plans for green infrastructure. And we watched a presentation that was all these renderings of projects that they hoped to do. I'll tell you, I was a little sheepish, but you pulled out of your pocket the Save the Rain flash drive and you plugged it in their computer. And the photos of our completed projects looked like after shots because they were renderings but done, you know, it was like here's curb cuts and here's a green roof and here's bioswales. And we had done all of that. And it really was a moment for me where it was like, here's Syracuse, New York, Onondaga County, leading the nation. And I think that a lot of that happened because we showed it could happen. Being the first in doing a good job with it. I think kinda pave the way for everybody else. With porous pavement.

Matt Millea: And the green roof at the Oncenter. So we could still do tours. And if you want to Save the Rain tour, let us know.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, we make the ice for the hockey team out of rainwater that comes off the roof.

Matt Millea: This leads into a bigger issue, I know, for you as an elected official, is there's a difference between managing and leading. Save the Rain is a clear example of why elections matter and without you being elected county executive, Save the Rain would not have happened.

Joanie Mahoney: I felt like I had a moment to really make a difference. As you said, a lot of work goes into getting the job. And what a wasted opportunity if all you do is spend all day like internally managing the operations. I'm a big believer in hiring very talented people and then not micro-managing and let them do the day-to-day management that needs to happen so that you can take on the projects that nobody's done before. I thought leadership was about hiring a great team, supporting that team, and then setting the vision and continuing to raise the bar for that team to try to do better, do different.

Matt Millea: There's so many things to talk about in your 10 years as County Executive and we don't have time to cover them all now. Loop the Lake was moving along and we had talked about what to do because unlike every other lake in New York State, which is almost a 100 percent privately owned; almost every lake in the Finger Lakes is 100% privately owned; where the opposite with Onondaga Lake, which is almost 100% publicly owned.

Joanie Mahoney: That is what I told people. The silver lining to having one of the most polluted lakes in the country is that the government ends up owning all of the shoreline. So yes, once it got cleaned up, we saw that that was a tremendous asset for us. There weren't private homes and we resisted, once it got cleaned, we resisted the pressure to develop that and to sell that property and keep it open to the public as it was public dollars that cleaned it.

Matt Millea: And we had some great discussions with Focus Greater Syracuse and our friend Chuckie Holstein.



Joanie Mahoney: Whose husband who recently died is an ESF grad and is a big supporter of ESF.

Matt Millea: A wonderful family and Chuckie is still a supporter and she's very interested to see what we do with lake. But in the meantime, she had done some surveys. And in those surveys, there had been some discussion of an entertainment complex on the lake. I'll turn it over to you and say where that went.

Joanie Mahoney: So Chuckie and her group FOCUS went out and surveyed the community and said, "What do you want to see on the lake now that the lake is getting cleaned up, what does the public want to see?" Members of the public that took the time to respond to that survey and create that report, gave us a platform to stand on to say this isn't just a Joanie Mahoney idea; this is something the public wants. You know, I remember that we put the first piece of steel in the ground on May 1st for a concert that we were having in August of that year. It's really important to me to get that first concert in because I wasn't sure artists would let us book them for the amphitheater on the idea that we were building one, I needed to show them that it was built and it was opened. And so getting Miranda Lambert here at the end of August to show people this new venue, led to a really successful first and second year of programming for the amphitheater. Live Nation, one of the biggest concert promoters in the country, told us that we have the most beautiful facility. And we did it in record time, and we made sure that the venue was situated so that you could see the sunrise and the sunset. But for the most part, that's all lawn and sound equipment.

Matt Millea: And again, you build that energy and think about your reunion again and like, what if we had an amphitheater? What if there was a \$100 million investment, what if Onondaga Lake was cleaned up, what if we had the Connective Corridor from university hill and downtown. All of these things that have happened over the last decade have really elevated the game or the community.

Joanie Mahoney: I think so and I'm really proud of that. But the one glaring omission that you're missing is that we still to a large extent live in a segregated society here in Onondaga County. I think we made a lot of progress and we did it because we put some policies in place to level the playing field and we hired hundreds of minorities into county jobs, which I always believed was the ticket really out of poverty. You know, it wasn't more and more social programs. I said I never saw anybody come into the Civic Center for one of the social programs that wouldn't rather have had a job. And, you know, I'm proud of the fact that we did change the makeup of the county workforce. In addition to that, we made it so that county dollars that were spent on outside vendors were spent equitably. But that was really just that, you know, the tip of the iceberg and there's still a lot of work to be done in this area. And we see it here at ESF like. We don't have the diverse student body or faculty and staff that I think we can have and that I think would make us a stronger institution. Not only the right thing to do, but I also think it's also going to be a benefit to us.

Matt Millea: And I-81 is an opportunity, but also an example of, of how large the black neighborhoods were impacted by these decisions years and years ago. And I



think we're seeing a lot more open conversation about the impacts of red lining that was that was absolutely occurring and those communities, I saw it yesterday with the mayor announcing is trees initiative. Steve Harris, who we worked with on Save the Rain. When you look at neighborhoods with large canopy cover, in neighborhoods without large canopy cover, it's the formerly redline neighborhoods that don't have the canopy in.

Joanie Mahoney: It's everywhere. It's not just big policies; it's teeny tiny little policies. Like if you wanted a summer job in the county, you had to get the signature of your county legislator on your application in order to be considered. That's a barrier for folks. You know, there were RFPs that went out, requests for proposals, that said, you know, the winning bidder will be somebody who's done this exact thing before. And so it's a built-in barrier that maybe the people that are going through the motions and, you know, looking at the summer job applications or putting out those RFPs, they have good hearts, but I don't think that they always see these barriers that are abundantly clear to minorities. It's not just the big policies, but it's also just the day-to-day. Every time you come up against a barrier, you gotta knock it down. And I feel like we were making progress in that way. I hope that progress is continuing and it's something that I want to do here at ESF. I think there's really valid reasons that we are not diverse. But you have to go past that conversation and say, okay, well, why aren't there students interested in STEM fields? When you say "Our class is predominantly white" is because our applications come from predominately white folks. Okay, well, why is that? And do the extra work to go backwards, make the partnerships with the schools that are turning out minority students and make sure that they're aware of the opportunities in this Environmental Science and Forestry space and it takes work. You can be a person with a really good heart and still be participating in the things that lead to us living in a segregated society. It takes work and I'm hoping to surround myself with a team of people here that's willing when they see those barriers to go another step further and knock those barriers down.

Matt Millea: And we know as a Cabinet that that's the expectation is we're not going to take no for an answer, we're not going to take we tried for an answer, and we're going to we're going to move the needle.

Joanie Mahoney: Yep, that is my hope. And I think that's what the students and faculty here deserve. I tell people all the time, ESF gets the big things right. We have an incredible student body. I mean, the maturity and the focus and the work that they're willing to do to earn a degree from ESF is impressive. And then we have this research that's being done that I think people would be amazed is happening here in Syracuse. But the administration needs the work to build that foundation around the students and faculty. We want the faculty to be focused on teaching and on research. We want the students to be doing their work. It's our job to make sure that we have a diverse student body and a diverse faculty and staff, and that we're in good facilities and that we have enough money to invest in the kinds of things that are going to keep moving us forward. That's the exciting part of this job for me is I can play a role in building that foundation around this really incredible group of people that's here.



Matt Millea: Jim Malatras named you as president in November; our Chancellor. So you've had a few months, but really, your first few months as president were really dominated by COVID.

Joanie Mahoney: Yes, and I appreciate what everybody did to put up with COVID, but I kept saying like, what did we used to talk about before there was COVID because every conversation was dominated by COVID. It's going to be really nice to get past that were not passed yet. I think we're going to be dealing with these surges and breakthrough but eventually when it's in the rear-view mirror, we have a really good team of people to do the kind of work that I'm excited to do here.

Matt Millea: What else would you like to share about? I know you went through a rigorous interview process or that you told we had dozens, hundreds, 17 interviews or something to that effect. It's quite a process, I understand. And you went through that gauntlet and you came out as the selected candidate.

Joanie Mahoney: Well, I'm really grateful to have this job and I am happy that I went through the process I did so that I could earn the respect and support of people here at ESF. It wasn't given to me. I had to run that gauntlet, as you described it. And I don't think that I'm the only or the best possible ever president at ESF. But what I do think is I'm the right person in this moment. I know what ESF needs, and it happens to fit squarely in the experiences that I've had and that I bring here. And I can, I hope, implement some things quickly because I've had to do it before. I know who all the players are. But you know, the other thing is, I hope that people are learning about me, that I do the jobs that I do because I'm trying to do the right thing. And I think it's hard for people to believe when it's like a campaign promise. But when you see my track record and you see that we have done the work, we have taken the slings and arrows from detractors. But if you go back to that "do your homework and vote your conscience" and you sort of apply that in your every day. If you know, you take the time to learn and you know what you need to do, and you roll up your sleeves and you do the work, there's something really satisfying about that. I really want this community to have the benefit of this extraordinary institution that ESF has.

Matt Millea: But I'm certainly excited to see the campus full of, of enthusiastic and energetic. So what would your message to them be as we, as we close out?

Joanie Mahoney: Well, one of the big goals of this podcast is an opportunity to talk to more people on the campus at once. My message is that it took a lot for you to get here. It is a very challenging academic program here at ESF. And you have to prove coming in that you are capable of that. And then you will be tested academically here. And we know from watching the students who have come before you, that you're going to do work here that's really going to matter. And you're going to be able to see the results of that work. You're going to be working with some of the best faculty in the world here at ESF, in this space of Environmental Science and Forestry. And my advice to you is to take advantage of that and to get involved and to meet your fellow students. It's a unique experience at ESF



that everybody's got that same mission and where that's a benefit is in those collaborations. So join clubs and meet your fellow students and go to your faculty office hours and look for opportunities to do internships. We're small enough that I hope that I can meet most of you one-on-one.

Matt Millea: Excellent. It's an exciting time. And again, I'm really, really thrilled to be on your team once again, we have a lot of work ahead. This is a special place and we're very fortunate to have you as a president. And we appreciate your time today and hopefully this walk will energize your audience and get them to tune in for your future episodes where you'll be doing the interviewing.

Joanie Mahoney: So, tune and I'm excited about having the opportunity to have these one-on-one conversations with faculty members.

Matt Millea: Excellent. We look forward to it. Thank you, Joanie.

Joanie Mahoney: Thank you.