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WENDY OXENHORN
NEA Jazz Master (2016)

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[March 24th, PART 1, TRACK 1]

Panken: I am Ted Panken, and I am in the apartment of Wendy Oxenhorn for her interview for the NEA Oral History Project for NEA Jazz Masters, which she was appointed for 2016. She's the Executive Director of the Jazz Foundation of America, and is a blues harmonica player, and many other things that we will get to in the course of this interview. Welcome, Wendy, and thank you for making your place available to us.

Oxenhorn: Sure. It's a great honor.

Panken: There are two broad themes I'd like to discuss during the course of our conversation...

[START-OVER]

Panken: I'm Ted Panken, and I am representing the National Endowment of the Arts for an interview this afternoon, March 24, 2016, with Wendy Oxenhorn, one of the four NEA Jazz Masters for the year 2016. She is the Executive Director of the Jazz Foundation of America and a blues harmonica player, and we are going to speak for the next couple of hours about her personal biography, which is quite rich and fascinating, and also to go into some detail about what the Jazz Foundation of America does, an extraordinary institution whose growth and evolution she is largely responsible for. Thank you for making your apartment available to us.

Oxenhorn: Sure. I even cleaned up.

Panken: I'll take that as a particularly special honor.

Oxenhorn: What's so interesting is that noise you hear in the background is my landlord finally giving us heat. It must be in honor of this celebration!

Panken: I read in the lobby that there's a problem with the electrical coil in the furnace in this building, which is on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but that's all the detail we'll give.

Let's start first with your telling us what the Jazz Foundation of America is.

Oxenhorn: The best way I guess we can describe it is that we've become a family to these great legends who have played to the background of our lives—all our lives. They've been there for our weddings, our breakups, kept us all from committing suicide when things were low, and helped us celebrate when things were good. We like to take care of these people who gave so much and made the world so beautiful. That usually means whatever it takes in the moment, depending... Every crisis is individual. Of course, we get a lot due to people who are aging, and they can't tour any more, they can't play any more sometimes, and they live alone in these rent-controlled apartments, and no one ever made enough money to really save anything for a future time when you never really thought about the next gig not coming. So we tried to create very dignified, beautiful ways to employ people so they can still pay their own rent, and have purpose, and have kids in public schools adore them and run up and ask them for their autographs. Many times it will be the first time a kid hears live music nowadays, which is a pretty scary thought! But most kids are listening on computers, iPods or Youtube. So for them to see a live concert is pretty significant. For it to be jazz or blues is even more wonderful.

Panken: That's one of your many programs. That's the Jazz in the Schools program.

Oxenhorn: The Agnes Varis Jazz & Blues in the Schools program.

Panken: For more than a decade.

Oxenhorn: Yes.

Panken: There are other programs, and we'll talk about those later. But you have been the Executive Director since 2000. For the first part of this conversation, let's talk about how you got there.

Oxenhorn: All right.

Panken: I gather that you were born in Brooklyn.

Oxenhorn: Yes.

Panken: Tell me about your family.

Oxenhorn: Sure. I don't remember much, because we moved, I think, when I was 5 years old. I do remember, though, it was not far from Coney Island, and I remember tricycling on the boardwalk. I remember there not being many trees, and missing that feeling of... I loved anything connected with Nature. There were honeysuckle bushes that grew right alongside our apartment building, and that was my big thrill, to be able to go and pick the honeysuckle, and taste the little honey and sniff it. I remember... I wonder if that's how my parents ended up deciding, "maybe we should get this kid into the country." I don't know. But we moved to little apartments in Westchester, and there my life got much bigger.

Panken: You were just showing us photos of your parents, your grandparents. Can you tell us about your own genealogical bloodline?

Oxenhorn: Sure. We're a good mix. I know we have a big gypsy side to us. I found out Grandfather Oxenhorn was born in Romania. Actually, we think it was even Transylvania. The other grandfather was born in Russia. They left... I think he was 16. I know he almost drowned. He had to escape in a river, and an old man saved his life, because he was drowning. He came to this country, and became a Charleston champion. There's the dancer connect. He was an incredible, self-made man. He ended up with three jobs. He would take my grandmother to the opera and do wonderful things with her. I know they were very poor, but he always would do beautiful things. He was an amazing man. I have very fond memories of him.

Panken: I think you said the other grandfather was a doctor?

Oxenhorn: He had a pharmacy. I never met that grandfather.

Panken: But you knew the grandmother.

Oxenhorn: Yeah. I did. I stole her Parliament cigarettes actually when we would go on family visits. She'd keep them under the mattress. Went in the bathroom, smoke a cigarette. I think I was 10. I would go in after her, because it still smelled of smoke, and no one would suspect me, and I would smoke Parliaments. I'm very sentimental about Parliaments.

Panken: How about your folks? You wound up at 14 going to New York on your own to join the American Ballet School.

Oxenhorn: Yeah, it was the School of American Ballet. It was the New York City Ballet school.

Panken: But I guess like a lot of little girls of your generation, and many other generations...

Oxenhorn: Yes, exactly.

Panken: ...you were involved in dance at an early age.

Oxenhorn: My parents were very cool about that. They knew that all I wanted to do was dance. It was truly the love of my life. In order to do it, you couldn't keep commuting. My mother was driving me in constantly, and that was hard on her, it was hard on my little brother. They had no other life. And what happens, when you get to a certain age in dance, you have to commit and you have to be here. So I had to go to a special school for the arts. I had to make my way here. So I lived with another family, and I started that in the summers. My parents thought I was getting three square meals a day, living at this townhouse for women run by these old Swiss women who were just so rough... Anyway, so I was living with these older women who were running this townhouse. And there was a curfew, the food was terrible... It was terrible. It wasn't in my nature to do this. So I ended up living... I can start over...

I ended up living in the Village [Greenwich Village] with some boys from my ballet class. They were all gay. They had been kicked out of their Midwestern homes because they were gay. And they found...you know, they had wanted to dance. So they came here. What a lot of people did in those days was, they prostituted themselves to be able to get by and have their careers. We're talking teenage boys. They were all really like throwaways. We didn't know it at the time. We didn't think of it at the time. We were just all adventurers. We were the Three Musketeers. It was quite an amazing way to grow up. Because I remember...I think I was 15 or 16...being in the Village with these guys. We were all together.

I really hated that they had to do this, so... At one point I noticed some of them were getting sick. I said, "It's ending here. I'm going to get a job today, and you're off. Now it's my turn." I remember getting a job at some club, I think it was on 9th Street, where they were just having...they had Craig Russell, they had some of these amazing people who were I guess doing the club scene. Bette Midler I think was playing there. They were already famous, I think, and they were making these club appearances. And I would coat-check on Sunday night. I would skim a little bit off the top, and I would come home with $17! No one wanted a Sunday night gig because that wasn't the big night. But I would get $17, and we would all go to Flame Steak that night or the next day...

Panken: On 14th Street?

Oxenhorn: I don't remember where. I think it was 8th Street. I remember that we would all go and get the steak, and you would cut up... You'd get for $8 a steak, a potato and a salad. We would split it in threes. I remember stealing from Jefferson Market; I remember stealing cans of sardines—and that would be pretty much our daily sustenance. I did go back to Jefferson Market, just for the record, and I cleared myself. I spoke to the manager. I said, "Twenty years ago, I was stealing sardines, and that's how we ate, and I want to pay you back." He said, "In twenty years, no one has ever come back." He said, "Give me two bucks and we're even," and I cleared my

shameful past.

Panken: I think I read, researching you on the Internet, you lived in a house that had belonged to Holly Woodlawn, the Warhol "superstar."

Oxenhorn: Yes, we were subletting from her on 10th Street. I think that's when she went to go have her... Oh, no, it must have been well after. But she was the one, wasn't she, who had the sex change operation? The first?

Panken: I'm not sure.

Oxenhorn: But what I missed... Had I just been born a few years earlier, I would have been dangerous. I would have met all these amazing...

Panken: Well, it sounds like you've met a lot of amazing people anyway.

Oxenhorn: I did.

Panken: I want to step back just for a second. Were your parents very culturally active?

Oxenhorn: Oh, they were... My mother...

Panken: were they very proactive about exposing you to culture and...

Oxenhorn: Yes, my mother is... When it comes to the jazz world, she can hear someone come on the radio and she'll know exactly who it is. She was one of Mark Murphy's first fans. She's spectacular that way. But you know, this was a time... I was a very independent kid, and I really knew what I wanted, and they trusted me. They wanted me to have my happiness, so they let me go. Now, looking back, I see...I don't think I would have allowed my kids to do that. I know I wouldn't have.

Panken: I don't know exactly what years we're talking about, but it was a very different time, and the Village was a very different place.

Oxenhorn: Yeah, I came, sadly, at the tail end of that. I missed the glory moments. I missed all the Bob Dylans and the Odettas, and all that live music scene. Most of the people we ended up helping, and a lot of the legends, I never got to hear them in person. Which is painful. But I caught a few.

Panken: So after the Swiss ladies, you're living with these two dancers on 10th Street, and at 17 you have an injury to your knee...

Oxenhorn: Yeah.

Panken: ...and that cut short your dancing aspirations.

Oxenhorn: That killed it.

Panken: How far along were you?

Oxenhorn: I think I was probably a year away from getting into the company. I remember I had this really spectacular moment... In ballet, you don't have people that are very supportive. We had the old Russian teachers who were with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. If they said "hello" to you in the elevator, you'd run home and tell your mother. That was an event. So there was no compliments. There was no emotional support. It was really tough. I remember once it was... I don't remember if it was *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Nutcracker*. I was performing with New York City Ballet, and Balanchine went over to the head of our school, and he pointed at me. I remember that...like, it had changed my life, and I was sure that there were going to be great moments to come. He might have just been saying, "Look at that; her ears are too big." But who knows!

Panken: Was Balanchine like that?
Oxenhorn: I don't know. But at the moment, it really was thrilling. But then right after, I had this injury. It turns out that I just had the wrong knees for ballet, which... The Russians force so much, and it did me in. I was in a wheelchair for a few months, was in a lot of pain, and there was nothing they could do. There was just nothing they could do at that point. I had worn away...

Panken: You'd worn away your cartilage?

Oxenhorn: Yes, the patella, the cartilage. Now they have these prosthetics. In the last few years they've developed these pieces of...parts they can put in now. But they hadn't done that then. The doctor told me that I continued to dance, I would be crippled by the time I was 30. That was devastating. That's when I called up the Suicide Hotline, thinking, "Life is over."

Panken: This is in your published bio. You called, and it was a transformational moment, I guess, in more ways than one. It took you from the depths and brought you kind of on your current path.

Oxenhorn: Well, really what it did, it just played to my natural tendencies, which was to take care of people.

Panken: Tell us about that phone call.

Oxenhorn: The counselor at the end of the line started telling me her troubles, almost immediately. She must have been in a lot of pain. Because her husband left her... She had a 25-year marriage, and her husband left her for a 25-year-old. So my natural instinct is always to help

someone in pain, so I just started saying, “You just gave 25 years of your life to this guy?” I said, “And now you’re going to be upset about it?” I said, “Clearly it wasn’t good enough for you and clearly he didn’t appreciate you. So why would you want to waste any more of your life on him. Let’s go. Next?” I said... I started counseling her, and by the end of the conversation we were laughing, both of us, in our previous miseries. And I started working there three days later, at the suicide hotline.

Panken: If I might ask, how did you reach this point with her where she was confiding in you?

Oxenhorn: People always tell me their problems. I’ve had cab drivers qualify. It just is the way it is. I guess I’m a little friendly.

Panken: It just seems, this is probably a professional, and you’re 17, and she starts telling you...

Oxenhorn: Well, I don’t know. Volunteers in the charitable arena can vary.

Panken: So you’re 17 or maybe 18 by now, and you start working three days a week at the suicide hotline. Tell me about the next few years? Did you go to college?

Oxenhorn: No.

Panken: What direction was your...

Oxenhorn: I missed all that. I actually didn’t go to school... The only grade I completed was ninth grade. I left after the knee injury. I remember, I was a sophomore. I was into school maybe two months in my sophomore year in high school, and I just... When you’ve been training your whole life, hours a day, and you had no childhood, you had no life that way, I think that I just sort of needed to go off the deep end and experience life—and I did.

I remember I woke up in Texas on this beautiful island. I had made some journey... I remember I was hitchhiking from Nantucket to someplace, and the person I’d met on the boat offered me a ride all the way to New Jersey, back to my parents’ house. We started talking, and he invited me to go visit him and his girlfriend. He lived in Texas. I’d never been to Texas. So we ended up on an adventure, and I ended up on this little island by the Mexican border, and when I woke up, I was in love, and I said, “This is how a human is meant to live.” Also, what just had happened was... I mean, are we going to give real history here?

Panken: Yeah.

Oxenhorn: Ok. So after I stopped dancing with the ballet, I really needed to dance, and I... Oh, I missed it terribly. I loved dancing. So I was able to get a gig at this incredible club where they had these wonderful drag queens do these shows. They needed chorus girls. They needed girls. I was on a trapeze. If you saw *Moulin Rouge*, the movie with Nicole Kidman and Ewen

McGregor, there's a moment where she descends on this trapeze—and I had that moment, every night, six nights a week. I was also a mermaid in a fish bowl. It was a crazy existence, and it didn't last long because it wasn't my...it wasn't the life I really wanted to live. But it allowed me to dance and it allowed me to perform, which was very beautiful.

Then I ended up in Texas, mainly because I was also modeling at the time, and I had a terrible experience with one of the photographers, and I saw what a strange business it was, and I just couldn't get far enough away. I realized, "You know what? You are a kid, and you're out on your own too young, and you're going to go and leave it all behind." I ended up on this very deserted little island. I think the population was 50 at the time. I danced on the beach every day. I would bring my little boom-box out there, battery-operated, and play Hendrix and Pink Floyd and everything else that I was into when you're a teenager (and Led Zeppelin), and just dance on the beach, completely alone, with only the seagulls—and it was a very romantic existence for a while.

[END OF FIRST PART]

Panken: We're back with Wendy Oxenhorn. Let's take you from Texas back to New York. Tell us more; tell us what you did.

Oxenhorn: That was short-lived. But I did date, I remember, a drummer from a famous group at the time. And I had already been in music. I had always loved music. When I was a kid, I would take a radio to the playground. I would leave the house at 6:30 in the morning, and I would get on the swings and I would hear Bennie Moten, and the Kansas City Five, and Billie Holiday, and I remember thinking that was my music. I was big into Ray Charles, too. I remember, when I was 10, wanting to be a Raylette more than anything. I just thought that was probably the most glamorous... My parents listened to this music for years. This was their music, and it later became mine. I remember when my mother told me that I couldn't be a Raylette, probably, and I was just like... I never saw color. I never thought of it that way. It was then that I learned that I wasn't black. I really so identified with the music.

Then, later, which is so funny... I'll tell the circular roundabout. But later, I had wanted to join a convent when... Three weeks after I was married, I did get back from Texas...

Panken: Texas, marriage, convent.

Oxenhorn: Yes. I came back from Texas, and three weeks after I got married, I wanted to join a convent, which now, looking back, makes perfect sense. It was the first husband. Oh, we should skip all this. We're going to skip all this. We're going to cut that out. Forget the convent. We can keep the Raylettes.

Panken: Ok. Where should we start?

Ken Kimery: Anywhere you want? Once again, this is for the national record, so you can say whatever you want, and then at some point if you say, "Well, we want to edit this out or we want to have it not for public access," it's...

Oxenhorn: Well, I just heard myself sound too out.

Panken: That doesn't sound too out. The earlier stories sound more out than this stuff. Hitchhiking to Texas at 17.

Oxenhorn: Ok, so let's start when I came back from Texas. So, yes, the Raylettes was a huge disappointment. So we want to come back from Texas. I think that what I was looking for, really, was I had gotten out in the world too young, and I really felt like, I think, I needed to be protected. That's why I got married so young. I'm sure of it.

Panken: May I ask how old you were when you were married?

Oxenhorn: Oh, gosh, I think I was 18 or 19. Maybe 19. I remember after I got married realizing that it was not the answer, that there was a higher calling, and I felt... Actually, I had a very strong spiritual calling at a very young age. And I decided three weeks after I got married that I wanted to go to a convent and pursue that instead. But I did not. They wouldn't take me, as a married woman.

Panken: So then what did you do?

Oxenhorn: Ok. I'm sorry... [GIVES BUSTER, HER DOG, TO HER DAUGHTER]

Panken: You've now reconsidered your decision.

Oxenhorn: Yes. I didn't stay married too long. I had my first child, and I remember wanting to... We were extremely poor. We were living in a place in New Jersey where people didn't even say the name of the town, because then they'd know you didn't have money. You'd just say, "Just over the George Washington Bridge to the left." I remember watching something on television that night... I was a single parent. I had no money. I could never go anywhere. I remember she was really little, I think she was about a year-and-a-half or 2 years old, and we saw this group that had an organization that helped kids in the welfare hotels, and I wanted to help them. I decided that would be something really beautiful to do. And the director was stunning, and that didn't hurt. So I went in to them the next day, and I interviewed with them, and he said, "Really what we need is money."

So I ended up going to a radio show, WNEW, the radio station, and they had their PR man, and I told him all about these kids in welfare hotels that are the children of the homeless, and all the things they don't have, and what they deal with, with addicted parents, and went into the whole. And he said, "Let me think about this." Two weeks later he calls me up and invites

me to meet him somewhere. It was Ron Delsener's office. Ron Delsener looks at me and goes, "All right, kid, so you want to do something for the children of the homeless. How would you like Duran-Duran and Lou Reed to do a concert for you at the Beacon Theater, and you guys get all the proceeds?" I was like, "fundraising is good." That's really when I made the commitment to...

Panken: Just for the record, tell people who will read this who Ron Delsener was.

Oxenhorn: Ron Delsener is.

Panken: Is. But then he really WAS.

Oxenhorn: Yes. Ron Delsener was the concert king. I don't know...was it the Schaefer Festivals...what was he most famous for?

Panken: I can't remember which beer.

Oxenhorn: He had everyone. He would go to David Bowie's house all the time. He knew everyone. He was the concert king. He was like the George Wein... What George Wein is to jazz, Ron Delsener was the rock-and-roll. And there I went, and there was Lou Reed singing "Take A Walk On The Wild Side." And I had just lived it in the Village. This was pretty amazing stuff. I was just in love with this part of the business. I loved the fact that you could make a plea to someone, they would give you money, and then you'd be able to help the people who knew were really suffering. That felt good.

So that's how it started, and then I opened up my own little charity. Because this organization was doing wonderful things for like 400 kids in a big hotel, and the things I wanted to do was not *en masse*. I really wanted to do, and I still believe that it's the small individual things that make a difference. So a partner and I (her name was Carol Ann Ross), we took on this little welfare hotel with 30 kids. It was probably the most rewarding thing I had ever done at that point, beside parenting. It was very profound. It was heartwrenching. You would see little 7-year-olds skipping rope outside of the welfare hotel until 11 o'clock at night because mom was prostituting in the park, and she couldn't take the kid with her, and they don't let you back in the hotel room in a welfare hotel unless you're with your parent. So the kid would just be outside, you know, at 11 at night alone.

So we took these kids on outings. We would form these incredible human chains through the street. We had a couple of volunteers, and after... Unfortunately, I never had a salary for this. But you couldn't not do it anyway. I remember I owed my life to MasterCard at the time. I would order food for the kids. Sometimes their parents wouldn't come home. One family in particular, 4 brothers and sisters, the boy was...the oldest was 11, and they were warming up hotdogs under the hot water faucet. I said, "Jump the turnstile, come on up to 96th Street." (I was living there at the time.) Because of MasterCard, I ordered Chinese food and we all ate pretty

good. I remember a lot of moments like that.

Panken: So by now you've moved from just south of the George Washington Bridge to the upper West Side across the river.

Oxenhorn: Right.

Panken: Where was the welfare hotel that you...

Oxenhorn: It was on 31st Street.

Panken: Where a lot of them were at that time. We're talking about the late '80s now?

Oxenhorn: I think so, yes. Almost 1990.

Panken: Is what you're referring to the organization Children Of Substance?

Oxenhorn: No.

Panken: This is what leads up to that.

Oxenhorn: This leads up to that. Then the welfare hotels...the city cracked down and realized it was all some kind of contracting underground nightmare, and there were payoffs going on all over the place. Because the city was giving these welfare hotel owners $2000 a month per room for people to live without cooking facilities, without your own bathroom. Kids would have to go to the front desk and ask for three...they'd have to ask for toilet paper to use the bathroom. How demeaning. I mean, that was the motivating factor in why I wanted to do this, because I wanted them to see another side of life, that this was not all you are being offered, that "the world is a lot bigger than this and this is not what I want you to expect out of life." So we'd take them to the opera, to the ballet. Peter Martins at New York City Ballet gave us free tickets to *Nutcracker*, and the girls, the ballerinas would meet them before the show, and give them toe-shows. Even the boys would put the toe-shoes on. It was a moving experience.

I remember once asking them what did they want to do. I said, 'I know..." Oh, that's what it is. They came to me and they said, "I know we're always doing this opera stuff and this ballet stuff, but could we do stuff, like, that we really want to do." I was like, "Sure, what would that be?" They wanted to go see, like, *Halloween 4*. So I had to go take them to see...which I am completely unable to see things like that. I'm a true empath. I feel everything I see or hear. I can't watch the news for that reason. I had my feet up on the seat and my eyes closed the whole time, and they thought it was hysterical. We had the best time.

Panken: These things didn't just happen by themselves. They happened because people, probably you, were pitching people to contribute...

Oxenhorn: Oh, sure.

Panken: How would you describe your... I don't want to use the word "style" because that sounds cynical. But how would you approach Peter Martins, or what would say to the guy at WNEW? How would you present your case? People's hearts don't just melt, and they give away things. They have to be convinced.

Oxenhorn: I disagree. I think people are innately good. If you're going to live in this world, how wonderful is it to create, at least in your corner of it, a place where everyone is good? That's what you get when you do this kind of work. Because the people who you are grateful for feel so purposeful and they feel so wonderful, knowing they are making these huge changes... Even, if they are simple ones, they are profound. Then the people you help are so much happier. So you're living in this... It might be semi-artificial, but at least my corner of the world is always pretty beautiful. I think when you do something, and there is good in it, and you're really helping who you say you're helping how can people turn you down? I think it just sounds like the right thing to do. I think it's not that I have any technique or style. I think I just say what is, and the universe gives back. We're all connected.

Panken: Children of Substance, then, was an organization that tended to children whose parents had substance abuse issues.

Oxenhorn: Right. I had to deal with that in my own life with the fathers of one of my children. It became really clear how it can affect a family. One day my daughter came home from school, she was in middle school, and one of the kids had... it was a wonderful alternative school, and they had these open moments. It was very much inner city public school. And two of the kids blurted out... One of them had felt suicidal, and one of them said something happened to her but she didn't want to talk about it. Both said they had a father who drank too much. I just thought, after my experience with this, and Al-Anon meetings for families of people who were going through this, that I would do something for these kids, and start these intimate meetings where, if this was happening, maybe they could see they're not alone, and that's... It was wonderful. That's what happened. We had about 10 girls. I would bring in people who had this life experience, young women who were successful, and you could see had managed to get through it, and they would tell the story of their own upbringing. The girls would relate, and then they would start sharing things that happened. There were things like bulimia, incest, kids worried about parents not surviving because of what was going on. The kids all realized that they were not alone, and in fact, this is happening, and we realized that you're a microcosm, this just all of you in one school—imagine how many other people are going through this. So it was very beautiful, and we were able to do it for a couple of years.

Panken: If I might ask, by this point had you received any formal institutional training in social work or psychology?

Oxenhorn: No.

Panken: All of this is applying...

Oxenhorn: Yes. I did leave out one important moment that really prepared me for the job I have today. That was, after the kids in the welfare hotel, someone approached me about wanting to do concerts for the hungry. They knew of my work with the kids, and we met, and we had the same focus. We really wanted to do something for the homeless. He wanted to have a big rock concert in Times Square and have a canned food drive, and I really felt that was not an answer to an issue. So I said, "We've got to go back to the drawing board and come up with what we can do."

One day he came back to the office, and we started talking, and it turned into *Street News*, which was the newspaper to help homeless people who didn't have a change of clothing, they couldn't always get a bath, but they could start their own business right then and there. Oh, it was wonderful. I remember, we made it so that ten of the papers you'd get free, and then we started doing it where you had to buy the papers back. Because if you're just going to give all these papers free, people would dump them—it wouldn't be a business. So people started a business...

Panken: For the readers, what was *Street News*?

Oxenhorn: *Street News* was a newspaper designed to be sold by the homeless, on the street and in the subways. The panhandling which had been going on in the subways for years was just made illegal by a judge in New York. That was tragic for a lot of people who were only getting by from the coins they were getting on the train. So *Street News* was designed to make this a viable way for someone who is not dressed enough, doesn't smell well enough, and certainly does not have a place or an address to work out of, to be able to have this job, this instant job, right there and then—to be able to sell a paper and start. These guys were starting to do that. They were making enough to get into, like, cheap hotels and buy food for themselves. It was beautiful. It was hard, but...

Panken: What sort of paper was it? What were the contents... A number of rather prominent and visible people were writing for it initially, as I recall.

Oxenhorn: My partner who initially had the main focus to do this was doing the paper himself. He was the one coming up with the content, and I was the one getting the... We had to get advertising to make this happen. I remember going to the *New York Times* president at the time (what a wonderful man), Lance Primus, and he offered to give them bags to carry the papers, caps that said "Street News" and t-shirts so that they looked uniformed and looked, you know...

Panken: Professional.

Oxenhorn: Professional. It was very dignified. He joined the advisory board. But he said,

"Look, I can't make the *New York Times* give it press." I remember we had started it, and two months went by, and nobody knew what it was doing. So I went to the MTA, who now didn't allow them to panhandle on the subway. I said, "Guys, you might not be able to allow them to do that, but I bet you'd want to see them working. And they gave us 3,000 posters on all the trains and the buses, so people would know... It said something like, "make change; don't give change—buy *Street News*." I wish I had one of those today.

So that was great. Guys started making their money. Then an article came out about what happened to these two men who are now not allowed to panhandle, and how they can't get by. So I called the reporter at the *Times*. I think his name was Sam Roberts. One wonderful man. I told him, "I have jobs for your men." That's all he said. We met, and that was the end of it. We got the Metropolitan Section. Then it went to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Herald-Tribune*, and before you knew it, I was interviewing on *Regis and Kathy Lee* and *CBS Nightline*, and invited down to the White House. It was a very remarkable time. It was crazy. 17-hour days.

There were a lot of things I would have loved to do differently. Having the experience I have now, I would have definitely had a warehouse where they came to pick things up. I would have addressed the fact that 95% mental illness and addiction are the causes mostly for homelessness. And I would have had some available AA meetings running. There would have been so many wonderful things that we could have done, but it just didn't work out that way.

Panken: What happened to *Street News*? It went on into the mid-'90s, as I recall.

Oxenhorn: Yes, I think so. I left. There were some inner infrastructural issues, and I left. That's when I moved on to the next... Life always prepares you. It's so interesting and beautiful that every time something terrible happens in life, you think it's the end of the world; always, a few weeks later or a few months later, you see why it had to happen.

Panken: I guess you had developed quite a bit of inner discipline from the dancing experience earlier...

Oxenhorn: Anyone who knew me would never call me disciplined. I think I was just a wild thing. I really think I was a wild thing. Perhaps because I didn't have the structure or the kind of guidance that people have, especially when they go to school, no one told me there were things that I couldn't do, so I didn't really know I couldn't, and I think that I took a lot of liberties that I might not have had I had a better education.

Panken: I'm a little unclear on what happens from Children of Substance to you assuming your position at the Jazz Foundation of America.

Oxenhorn: Oh, I'll fill it in.

Panken: But at a certain point, you start playing harmonica in the New York City subway

system with an older blues musician who had migrated north from the Deep South. There may be other things I don't know, so feel free to...

Oxenhorn: Here's how that happened. Like everything else in life, one door closes, another opens—but like they say, it's hell in the hallway. So I had a little hallway moment between Children of Substance. I was single-parenting. We missed the fact that I now had a second child with a Polish Abstract-Expressionist from Warsaw. That's what gave me a lot of my experience that allowed me to help other people, especially Children of Substance. But we'll skip...we'll keep talking.

So what happened was, I met and fell in love with and had an affair with an incredible Italian singer and composer, who was well-known in his circles, and came to this country to do a big project he was working on in jazz. He would take me to see and hear all his idols. Our life was lived to Abbey Lincoln's *Turtle's Dream* CD. Can't get better than that. This is the CD that played to and enhanced whatever soulmate connection we had. When I finally did meet her, which was so incredible, I did tell her, "All along, I thought I was in love with the Italian, but it was you, Abbey." Anyway, what always happens when you have an affair with an Italian composer, it ends tragically."

Panken: Every time.

Oxenhorn: Which of course. It's like, what was I thinking? So it ended tragically. But before it ended, he was making some pasta in the apartment on Duke Ellington Boulevard here... I do want to preface it by saying that he really did take me to hear all these great musicians, and he was my introduction to jazz. I had been a bluesman all my life, I just didn't know it, but he was my introduction to jazz. One day... He had a harmonica, and among the many things he did, he's a great, great harmonica player. He had it laying there, and it was a harmonica CD playing, and it was Sugar Blue doing "Little Red Rooster. The harmonica happened to be in the key of C. I picked it up, and I just started to fiddle around. He turned around and he goes, "Baby, you got something." I was probably terrible. But I fell in love with this sound. Because I never thought of myself like... You hear the music. You never think you can participate in the music.

And a week later, the tragedy happened. And I didn't call suicide hotlines any more. I put everything into this harmonica and the blues. I would get on the trains at 96th Street, and I would ride between the cars so I wouldn't bother anyone, hold on to the rail with one hand and have my CD player blasting in my head, playing to Muddy Waters, to Little Walter... Oh, "Two Trains Running." I was gone. And I would go from 96th Street to 14th Street, cross over the platform and go back uptown. Cross over, go back downtown. While the kids were in school. #2 and #3 train.

Then at night, I was running a boarding house out of my apartment. We would have a built-in baby-sitter. So I would run to the platform at 103rd Street (this is when I lived over there), and I would play... The acoustics are great in a subway station late at night. And I would play til the cows came home, and practice.

Then one day I was in the trains... I always used to hear this great old bluesman. Ted Williams, his name was at the time. He would always call me. This was when I would have a kid in a stroller, and he'd say, "Come on, blues lady; come on, come sing with us." And I couldn't sing. Hence, the harmonica. I showed him the harmonica one day, and he came over... This is just the most golden moment. It's so bluesman. He slapped his leg, and he said, "We are going to make googobs of money." Hah-hah! Because what he really wanted me for, he didn't even hear me play. I'm sure I was just terrible. But he wanted me to pass the tip bucket. I was a little blonde in a dress.

So that's how that started. That's why I only take solos, because I never learned how to play filler. That's when I'd be getting the money and selling our CDs. That's the other thing I was able to do. I gave him his first real CD. I made it live from the gigs we did in the train stations. We'd produce the CDs and sell them, and I started to make money. I left my little part-time day job trying to support the kids, doing restaurant work and everything else that you do when you're a single parent, and I started playing with the old man. We were making like $200 apiece at rush hour. I was home in time to make dinner for the kids. No babysitters to pay. No late night...no clubs cheating you out of your money, which happens quite a bit.

Panken: We're going to get to that.

Oxenhorn: So there you go. It was my entree into the blues world, and the first time I got to take care of an elderly musician.

Panken: That was your first time with an elderly musician.

Oxenhorn: Yes. To really have that relationship was significant.

Panken: How long did your busker status last?

Oxenhorn: I think it was a little under a year. It was just when I started making money. He found himself... His wife had passed about 15 years before, and I think he just had not had a woman in a long time, and he got this fabulous... I mean, now I think of her, she's completely fabulous. I thought she was going to cut me. But she wouldn't let me play in the band any more. His girlfriend, who was Jamaican, and she was a tough one, and she didn't want a girl in the band. She used to come up in front of our audience and accuse me of being in love with him, and really just give me hell and break up the gig. I mean, we'd have these wonderful audiences, she'd start complaining and saying things loud, and the crowd would dissipate, and there would go our money. Really, what happened was (and I think it's very sweet, looking back) she wanted to sing with the band. And that is appropriate. And she took great care of him. She was wonderful to him.

Panken: Did she wind up singing with the band?

Oxenhorn: You bet. I never saw the huge crowds I used to see with us. But they made their money and he was happy, and I think that's so beautiful. He ended up having quite a career himself. He changed his name. He took his real name. He was a cousin of John Lee Hooker. His name was Floyd Lee. It was probably some of the happiest moments of my life. I remember playing in the summer, and having heat exhaustion. I remember he would put a bag of ice under his bowler hat in the summer when it was so hot. And I remember playing in the winter with gloves with the fingers cut off, and getting frostbite on my fingers.

It was quite an introduction to life in the music world. It was a different way to come in. But it showed me just how hard it is, and the commitment, and how you have to do what you have to do, and get by the way you can. But there was a lot of racism. A lot of things happened. We would play street festivals, and they'd hire a name band, and they'd wheel in a stage on the street for the name band, and they'd make us play, in 95-degree weather, this great old man, in the hot sun, not allow him on to the stage. Things like that still going on. So it taught me quite a bit.

It was after that, that I was really depressed. Now, that, I was seriously depressed. Because now I had found the first thing since ballet that gave me that feeling that life is...there is nothing greater than... For me. I have moments where I get so lost. Like, if the ballet...that is how I can say what it was like to dance and fly through the air and move every part of you... It's the same feeling I get when I play the harmonica. So that had been a thing missing for about 20 years. To get that back was just magnificent. So I was really, really upset when I couldn't play with the band, when he called and told me and said, "I'm sorry, baby, but you got to go." It was the blues!

I was sitting in a café, and a friend of mine came up. She had heard me play in the subway. She said, "You know, I know your charitable background; I know the whole story." She goes: "I just saw an ad for the Jazz Foundation of America, taking care of elderly musicians, and they need someone to run the organization." How's that for preparation in life and crazy coincidences? That universe is so clever.

So sure enough, I went for the interview, and I found out that... They offered me a lovely little salary for a single parent. I actually had turned down another job. I was offered twice as much to take another job. But when I heard this, I couldn't contain myself. I started two weeks early. And when I found out they had $7,000 in their account, which they couldn't have even paid me that nice little salary they mentioned... Which was very small, now that I look back. But they wouldn't have been able to give it to me with the $7,000.

So I just started, and I approached some of my *Street News* donors who I'd had relationships with. This amazing Steve Siegel, allowed us...

Panken: Let's step back for a minute.

Oxenhorn: Sure.

Panken: The year *Street News* started, 1989, is also the year, I believe, the Jazz Foundation of America was started.

Oxenhorn: Isn't that interesting. I had forgotten about that.

Panken: It's very interesting. Let's give the history of the Jazz Foundation of America. You give the history, but I'll just get this started. It was founded in 1989 by a cosmetics executive who had gone into executive searcher by the name of Herbert Storfer. He had a friend from Columbia Business School who was in the retail business named Seymour "Cy" Blank. Dr. Billy Taylor, the great jazz pianist and educator and overall spirit. Phoebe Jacobs and Ann Ruckert. Three of them had been involved in the formation of the Jazz Museum in the 1970s, which then was forced to close in 1977, and a lot of their memorabilia went to the Schomberg Library in Harlem, which was curated by James Briggs Murray, who was the curator of their Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, who was also an advisor, or maybe on the initial Board of the Jazz Foundation of America

Oxenhorn: Yes. He was involved in the first conversation that allowed it to go from the Museum to the Jazz Foundation of America.

Panken: Now, I don't know if we're equipped to discuss how the Jazz Museum turned into the inspiration for...

Oxenhorn: Oh, I can tell you that.

Panken: Tell us, and give us some of the history of how the Jazz Foundation of America reached the point where you became its steward.

Oxenhorn: Well, it's all very beautiful. These were people who just love jazz, and they were all involved with the museum. A few things had happened, and the space was taken away, and they really didn't know what to do. They gave everything to the Schomberg. But then they said, "Why don't we become an organization to keep jazz alive and to archive it, to promote it?" I think for a couple of years, it sort of went along like that. I know they did an event at Town Hall which helped them raise some money.

And then, Jamil Nasser, Vishnu Wood and Jimmy Owens came to them one day and said, "You know, this is great that you want to do all these things. But you have musicians here who are having serious health issues, they can't pay their rent, and there's no one taking care of them." That's how it started.

So Herb Storfer, I understand, would pull out of his pocket when someone... He ran it out of his home. So when someone would come, they'd hear about it, they'd have to go to Herb's

house, and he'd pull it out and say, "Ok, here's a month's rent. You had a heart attack; you're going to be off the road for two months—we'll cover it." Which I think is so fantastic.

Then Dizzy ended up with cancer at Englewood Hospital, and his doctor was the saint, Dr. Frank Forte. He asked him... I wish we could interview Frank right now, because he's so important to what we do, and he tells it so beautifully. He said Dizzy went to him and said, "What you did for me, can you do for musicians?" So Frank loved to do that. He started a pro bono network with a guy named Bob Litwack, who was at Mt. Sinai, and the two of them started to see a couple of musicians.

Then they had the memorial for Dizzy after he died, and Jimmy did something called "100 Trumpets for Dizzy." They did it I think at the Englewood Hospital or right around there. The heads of the hospital at the time got to hear it. One... There was a woman named Kathy (I don't remember her last name; Jimmy Owens would know) who was a publicist for that event, and she ended up making the bridge between the Englewood Hospital people and the Jazz Foundation, and they started to see musicians who were in medical crisis. The head of the hospital would just let them come for free, which is pretty amazing.

Panken: That expanded into a much larger network.

Oxenhorn: Right. If you have a musician in Detroit who is suffering from some serious illness, and he needs a specialist and he doesn't have insurance... What I started doing was, I'd call up. I'd say, "Do your homework; who's the guy in Detroit that you need to see." I'd call him up, and I'd say...I'd usually throw in some famous person's name who said that you were a great doctor, and we're just asking one favor. We'd love you to join our pro bono network of musicians. Would you consider taking on one of these great legendary musicians a year? Even once in a lifetime, but would you start with just one? Generally, they'd say sure. So I'd say, "Good, I've got the guy for you; he'll be in this week." It would just start like that.

Panken: But in the six years between when the program started and your assumption of the Executive Director position, the program had grown and expanded. What is the criteria or cut-off point for a musician to be eligible for this program?

[END OF DISK 2]

[BEGINNING OF DISK 3]

Oxenhorn: So Dr. Forte ended up getting about 20 other specialists to all agree to be able to see a musician who needed them, depending on what their issue was. So that was a very beautiful thing.

Panken: Where did he recruit the doctors from?

Oxenhorn: Just his own network. Mostly from Englewood Hospital. The thing is, there wasn't

really a director at the Jazz Foundation. It was pretty much Herb, Board members... I know Bob Cranshaw and Jimmy Owens were finding people who really needed it, because they were all active musicians on the road. So when they'd hear someone needed it, they would tell Herb, and if it was medical, Herb could let Frank know. They took care of Teri Thornton when she had her cancer. That's huge. They took care of Rudy Walker when he needed his hip replacement—the amazing saint, Dr. David Feldman. He was and still is... I run to him when I have accidents, like with my knees. He's been amazing. He is another doctor besides Dr. Forte... Dr. Forte has seen I'd say 800 to 1000 musicians that he has never turned away. He never turns anyone away, and Dr. Feldman is the same way.

Panken: But at the time you assumed the position, had they never had an Executive Director before? Had it been more ad hoc, or...

Oxenhorn: It had been ad hoc. They did have one person for a short time, but she was really hired as a social worker, and not to raise money. I know no money had been raised. They had started this loft party out of the home of Herb Storfer. He lived in this loft building on 29th and Broadway. They'd had a few of those, where they would have it every year, they would invite...some of the musicians would play and some people would come. That ended up expanding into what we do today, which is...

Panken: The gala concerts?

Oxenhorn: No-no, this is crazy. We take over the old silent movie studios of Universal on 26th Street every year, and we have what we call the Loft Party. It was originally called the Rent Party. That's what I like to call it. We have legend after legend mixed in with unknown gems. Bluesmen from Mississippi playing in the hallways. In these studios, we've had Odetta play there, Little Jimmy Scott... Just beautiful moments. Lou Reed came.

Panken: But in 2000, what other programs was the Jazz Foundation running?

Oxenhorn: Well, we had the medical ability. But it was very... People didn't know. It was very as-needed. If we heard about someone, if they heard about someone... Then again, like I said, people would be referred who knew whoever was involved with the Foundation, and they heard someone needed their rent paid, or someone was sick and needed a doctor. But it was about 35 musicians a year, I think, they were doing themselves.

Panken: So you come in in 2000, and as I recall from reading your bios and press materials online, your office was a cubicle in the Musicians Union building, and within a fairly short time you realized that you were under-funded. Let me ask you this. Did you come up with an overall strategy for what you wanted to do? Was it more by the seat of your pants, reacting to different needs as they arose? How did you start to develop your m.o. for addressing the organization's needs?

Oxenhorn: I think that with everything, when something is needed, you get resourceful and you come up with it. We needed money, I went to one of my original *Street News* donors, Steve Siegel, who has been amazing, and he gave us $10,000. We had only had $7,000 in the bank. You can't help a lot of people with that. At the time, I think we were paying the union only $250 a month in rent, which was great.

So I wouldn't call it strategy. But I remember thinking we've got to get more money than this. I also was really... I joke and say I was just a train-station bluesman, but I really didn't know a lot about jazz. I really knew very little. So I went to learn about it. I rented Jean Bach's *Great Day In Harlem*, figuring, "at least I'll know who everyone is." That's the night I got the idea for *A Great Night In Harlem* to do at the Apollo Theater, and we brought jazz and blues back to the Apollo they told us after 50 years... That concert was amazing.

Panken: That was 2002?

Oxenhorn: 2001, the first one. It was 13 days after 9/11 happened. We didn't know if anyone would even show up. And people needed the music healing, because the place was packed. We had about 100 of the legends show up.

Panken: Didn't another one of your angels give you the go-ahead for that?

Oxenhorn: That's what I wanted to get into. That whole thing came about when I had this idea to do a concert at the Apollo. My Board looked at me like, "Little girl, you're not a concert producer; we're not concert producers—and how much is the Apollo?" It was $15,000 to rent at the time. That's what they said. This was before they got bigger, their recent incarnation.

So I called up one of our new board members, who... I had asked them, "Who do we know who has any money?" and they gave me the name of this guy, Jarrett Lilien, who lived in Herb Storfer's building. Now, Herb Storfer had already moved. He left that building, and this man, Jarrett, bought his apartment. He had been there, and he expanded and bought Herb's apartment. So I said to Jarrett, "Listen, we could make a lot of money; I think we could do well." He goes, "I'll back you." So now, they couldn't say no because we had the money for the Apollo, and we just kept going.

It happened in 9 weeks. I don't know how it happened. I think when you put an idea out there and people get excited... It sort of was like Amway, philanthropy. You get two people and they get two people and they get two people, and before you knew it, we had all these legends coming through. Half the people I never knew. It just happened. I'm watching one after the other. There's Hank Jones. There's Ahmad Jamal. There's Abbey Lincoln. It was pretty spectacular, and all in one night. Unfortunately, the Apollo charged...they're a union house, and there was some kind of media fee to film it. So we were told we couldn't film it; we would have had to pay like $12,000-$13,000. Sadly, we didn't know we could have had an archival video going the whole time. That would have been allowed. But we didn't know. And it was a rush.

We didn't know what we were doing.

I want to say at this point, and introduce the next great person who came into our midst. Not just Jarrett Lilien, who ended up saving the day and then becoming our president, who has been my partner in this for years. But Lauren Roberts, who... When they handed me the keys to this place with the $7,000 in the bank, I was the only employee—that was going to be that. I needed someone. I couldn't do this alone. We were getting to the point where we were starting to see now, from 35 musicians a year, 50 musicians, then it went to 150...
Panken: Is that because people were finding out about the service, or because of demographics, the aging population...

Oxenhorn: They never had someone really making the calls and doing the work.

Panken: So you started very proactively making phone calls and...

Oxenhorn: Well, you'd hear about... Sure. Someone would tell me someone is having a hard time, and then that person would generally know someone, and then they would know someone. We got to all be so close, and it was such a feeling of family and of trust. It was a beautiful thing.

I want to introduce Lauren Roberts to this. She was a 22-year-old Vassar student, who was just graduating. The one man who gave me a harmonica lesson, this great guy, Adam Gussow, was teaching there, and he was now moving to Mississippi, and he said, "I have a student who I think would be great to help you." I met her, fell in love immediately, and the two of us were like 12 hours a day... We would get locked in the building at the union. There were moments where we would get locked in; they'd forget we were in the office—at night. Those were crazy days, but we got a lot done. And she helped me put on the Great Night in Harlem.

Panken: You were learning on the job, as seems to be what you've done all through your life and in your many activities.

Oxenhorn: Well, isn't life really just learning on the job? That's what life is about.

Panken: Well, for you it certainly is.

Oxenhorn: I think everyone. You don't get an instruction manual, you know.

Panken: I guess that's true. But there are a lot of skills. Knowing who to call, and knowing what to ask for is extremely important, as with the archival video that didn't happen that you mentioned. So I'm interested in your learning curve during, let's say, the year between you assumed the position and that first Great Night in Harlem concert.

Oxenhorn: It's so funny, life just... Life happens, and you take it as it comes. I'm sure I made plenty of mistakes, and I had plenty of wonderful people to ask questions. I know Cobi Narita... I

remember my first week on the job. She helped me. She was able to refer some people to me who she knew, because she was one of the... She was Sam Ash's wife...you know, Paul Ash of the Sam Ash Music company, she was his wife. She started International Women For Jazz. She's amazing. She knew of people who were suffering. She could refer people.

Then this wonderful group, it was Rufus Reid and his wonderful wife, and I think Milt and Mona Hinton... They'd had a small organization they raised money for, and it was for another purpose, for jazz, and they ended up giving it to us. That was $40,000, which really helped us, too.

Then when we had the concert, it raised $350,000. So we were good to go. That's when we were able to finally help more musicians, and help them in really significant ways. I'd love to talk about some of those original people who were some of my first cases.

Cecil Payne. I was living right near Smoke, and I ran into Ron Carter, and one night he said to me... I think I was a year into my job. He goes, "There's someone you really have to... You have to check this out for me. I ran into Cecil Payne in the airport, and he couldn't see. He couldn't find his way out of the airport. So I drove him home, two hours, to almost Philadelphia."

Panken: He lived in Camden, I think.

Oxenhorn: That's right. He said, "I'd really love you to check on him. Here's his number." I said, "Of course, Ron." So I checked on Cecil. I called him up, and we started talking. At first he was like, "I don't need any help; I'm doing just fine." So we started talking "Train Station Blues," and I told him about my history playing harmonica in the train stations. That's actually...

By the way, I'm going to segue, because we didn't catch how I got the job. I was the only one who showed up for the job, the Jazz Foundation of America job. I was the only one who showed up. And when it came to the moment... I had a pretty good charitable resume. But when it came to the fact that I used to play harp in the train stations, and that I took care of a great old bluesman, their president stood up, and... It was Leo Korby at the time. He shook my hand, and he said, "Kid, you've got the job." Herb Storfer was there, and Ben Giordano. I just wanted to get that in right away, that I was really the only one—so I got the job by default.

Panken: Thank you. Now back to Cecil Payne.

Oxenhorn: Back to Cecil. So we started talking blues, and I just fell in love with this guy. He was beautiful. Then he started telling me. I said, "Look, your vision is not so great. How are you eating? How are you shopping? How are you cooking?" He really couldn't see. He said, "Oh, I've got that covered. I walk a block to the 7/11, and I have cases Ensure, I pick up some Ensure and some M&Ms." I said, "Cecil, that's what you've been eating? How long have you been doing that?" He said, "A year-and-a-half."

Panken: At this time he was 78 or 79. He was born in 1922.

Oxenhorn: I believe so. He was up there. I got very worried. I said, "Cecil, please, there's this thing called Meals on Wheels." I said, "They deliver food to the house. Please, let me help you." He goes, "I don't need any help." He got very upset. As I said, I made mistakes at first, and I guess I didn't approach it delicately enough. He hung up. And I felt so terrible. Here was this guy I just was loving so much, and we got along beautifully, and then it just ended so abruptly. I was like, "Oh my God, what did you do?" So I called back. He didn't answer. I waited a couple of hours. I called back late at night. I said, "Cecil, I'm just going to tell you right now, I'm not going to be sleeping to night. I really got to know you and I really adore you, and I'm just not going to sleep." So he picked up the phone. (I did it with guilt; never hurts.) He picked up the phone and he goes, "I don't want you to lose sleep; I don't want you to worry about me." We started laughing about something or other. I said, "Listen, I'll tell you what. I'll sleep if you promise me that you'll let these Meals on Wheels people come. Just once. Just try it once. I'll feel so much better. I really want you to eat well, and Ensure is not enough."

So the next day he called up, we got the Meals on Wheels to come, and he called up and he said, "I can't believe it. The nicest woman showed up at my house. This food is great. I forgot greens are green." It was so beautiful, the way he said it. That was it. Me and Cecil were like this. We started pairing him up with some of the younger musicians who were coming up at the time. I know he did Joe and John Farnsworth's group...

Panken: For some years before that, he'd been going to Smoke, or Augie's before that, playing with Eric Alexander and those folks...

Oxenhorn: Yes, but he became reclusive. And it was because he wasn't eating right. His energy level was way down. He couldn't do those things any more, or go anywhere, and as a result he wasn't making any money. So it has this awful effect. It just becomes worse and worse. For anyone out there who might need help, who might be listening to this, the more you allow that to continue, your emotions get affected by your nutrition, your lack of sleep gets affected, your lack of money starts affecting your mood and everything else. We all need to. I didn't do it when my kids were little and I was single-parenting. I didn't reach out for help. But you get these miracle people sometimes who come along and open the door, and you've got to say yes. Sometimes you need to ask for help, because not everyone knows you're hurting, especially if you're quiet about it.

Panken: It's good to have an advocate who knows how to help you ask for help, too, and I think you've learned some techniques over the years that you've discussed.

Oxenhorn: I've got much better at it, yes. And we have a great staff now. I don't do this alone.

Panken: You made a comment in an article I saw online that you use what you call a "Southern"

approach.

Oxenhorn: Well, it really depends. There are some people who... It's not that it's a Southern approach. Everyone always tells me to watch this movie (and I never get to watch it) called *Zelig*, with Woody Allen, where he gets this connection with people, and it's like...

[PAUSE]

I'll go back to people will tell me to watch that movie, *Zelig*, because apparently we have this similar thing. When I connect with someone, I really connect. We share this space, and I can feel them, and it's not like... It becomes intuitive, it becomes psychic, it becomes all sorts of things, and it will be things that I intuitively know. Sometimes, you have some musicians (especially when we were dealing with the musicians after Hurricane Katrina) that I choose to say... It's like this incredible, beautiful openness, and I call it "getting country." You'll be with someone who's just...they're country, and you have to be able to get country. Then, you might have a donor who is extremely intellectual, or a musician, like an avant-garde musician, who is extremely intellectual, and you have to switch that hat, and you relate in a very different way. So that was my Southern approach. It's unconscious. I'm not even aware I'm doing it, and then my kids...

Panken: You described it as using "Mr." or "Miss" or "Sir," and talking to people in a way...

Oxenhorn: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Down in New Orleans it's "Mr. Terrell." You use them by their first name. "Miss Yvonne." It's not like...you just wouldn't call someone "Yvonne." You've got to go where someone is, and do what's respectful to them.

Panken: You segued into another subject I wanted to talk about. In your profession, emergencies and disasters precipitate activity. After September 11th in New York, the after-effects of that percolated into the jazz world in a way that brought you a much larger clientele, and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans significantly expanded JFA's scope just by what you had to do to respond to it properly. Can you talk about those two events and how they impacted the mission of the Jazz Foundation of America?

Oxenhorn: Sure. Obviously, now... We'll talk about it later. The life of a musician is getting harder and harder. All the smaller clubs that used to be around are having the hardest time existing. Believe it or not, 9/11 really hurt the New York music scene in ways that we don't realize, not just the... Of course, the obvious things, that tours were cancelled all over the place. No one was flying. The airports were closed. The whole thing started a whole mess. So people's tours were cancelled for months. You had tons of established musicians whose tours were cancelled who had three kids at home, and now could not pay their rent or their mortgage.

So we went into action on that. I was lucky enough, through... The Music Performance Trust fund gave us $100,000 to have gigs in the schools. I just thought, "Let's replace those gigs with gigs in the schools. Find a school near you, and let's just do it." And we would pay them,

you know, nicely. Then we would help people out. We were paying the mortgages, we were paying the rents. But we had just made the $350,000 at the Apollo, so we were in position where we could. It's amazing how that happened.

Then with Katrina... By the way, that's what I wanted to say. It really hurt the New York scene, because you had all these great older musicians playing in restaurants. They'd play three times a week in a restaurant...

Panken: You mean 9/11, not Katrina.

Oxenhorn: Right. I'll start over. 9/11 affected music in New York in a really harsh way. What happened was, there would be all these great clubs and restaurants that would pay musicians 60 bucks, 75 bucks per musician to perform in their restaurant or their small club. Then, when this happened, nobody had business any more. For about 2 or 3 months, nobody was going out at night. So the musicians all of a sudden had no way to pay their rent any more. They had no place to work any more. Great old musicians who were in their eighties, and this was how they were making their life.

So that was tragic, and then what happened was, music students, some of the music students who had their rent already paid, were coming around and saying, "Hey, we'll take the gig; we'll pass a basket." Or, worse, these great older musicians (we're talking about people who had played with Tito Puente and Machito, but were playing down on St. Marks Place in restaurants) were now offering to pass a basket, because they wanted to come through. We said, "We don't want you to go under; we understand you don't have money now, but you'll pay us again when you do." That didn't happen. Because people got used to not paying. People got used to putting a basket out. There are very few clubs... There are a few clubs that now pay. I know Minton's, Gin Fizz, Smoke... I'm talking about the smaller clubs. I'm sorry if I left anyone out. We're going through this quickly, but I'm just giving examples. It's become a real issue.

So now, you don't have the way... A musician used to be able to go out and sit in in three different places in the course of a night, get 20 bucks, 40 bucks for sitting in, and you'd have your rent by the end of the week. There was Sweet Rhythm/Sweet Basil, all these places...the Psychic Cafe—all these places you could go to. So basically, that's how that went down, and that did affect things for a long time. It's still like that.

Then Katrina, it did the same thing with New Orleans but even worse, because... What would you like to...

Panken: I think it precipitated several responses by the Jazz Foundation, one of which was to launch an instrument donation program that was pretty substantial, and I think also expanding your reach outside of New York, and no longer being a local organization, but one with a broader scope.

Oxenhorn: Well, we actually started becoming national our second year, when I'd hear about musicians who were in other states who needed medical care—trying to get specialists involved, paying their rents. This started happening when I think we were up to maybe 150 musicians a year—we started doing more national in scope.

But then, when Katrina happened, that was different. I'm glad you're reminding me of these things, because to be honest with you, the hours in this work are so ferocious, and it's been 7 days a week for like 15 years. Up until Katrina, it was about 16-17 hours a day. Then the first year of Katrina, I remember having 20-hour days for about a year. The way it went down, we heard, after this happened... All of a sudden there were these organizations popping up that had not existed before, but now they were going to exist to help the musicians. So I really wanted to know who am I going to recommend... People are going to come to us and say, "Which organization do you think I should give my money to?" So I decided I'd better go down and meet face-to-face and see who I really like, because I really know... I've got that street sense, and I know who's doing what they were supposed to be doing.

Panken: Well, you trust your instincts, obviously. They've served you well since you were 14.

Oxenhorn: Not in marriage. But that's ok. That makes life fun and interesting.

So what happened in Louisiana... Only kidding to all my exes.

But in Louisiana... So I went down there, and I landed... My first stop was Lafayette. I met with the woman who started the musicians' clinic. She's great. Bethany Baldwin. She introduced me to about 20 musicians who had congregated there. Some of them had come up... I think I told you before, one man drove up from New Orleans with his 82-year-old mother who had just had a stroke. A tree fell on their car in their getting out after the storm, and he had to walk miles, and he carried his mother. This is a guy who was still young, he was like early sixties, but he wasn't someone in his eighties, and his mother was 82, and he had to carry her. Things like this. This was the group of people that had landed in Lafayette.

There was Eddie Bo, who was hugely instrumental in Dr. John's upbringing. This great saxophonist, Red Tyler. I had been to New Orleans once in my life, and I remember staying... It's so funny how prophetic it was. I remember sitting on a street for 4 hours, watching a blues band on the street, and I passed the hat for them. This was before I ever played harmonica and did anything like that. It was just my instinct to be helpful to them. I forgot about that. But they were incredible. But I had never really heard New Orleans music. They played on the street that night. All the musicians got together, and there was something that happened, and they ended up playing on the street that night—and I had never heard music like this. These guys were on fire. I had never heard a saxophone played like that.

That's when I just said, "Oh my God, what am I doing meeting these other groups?" I happened to bring our checkbook. I started getting apartments for them right away. It just

happened. Then I wrote a check to Bethany so she could start giving... There were brass bands that were playing at the shelter... That's what I said. "Let the brass bands play at the shelters and cheer up these people; let's start employing the musicians." The same technique we used at 9/11, we used here. So I'd given her a check for $5,000, and that would be to help the brass bands start to play. These were all young guys. Each one had 3 to 5 children. Young. I'm talking guys 32 and under, guys 21 years old, who were in the street bands of New Orleans. They obviously had mouths to feed.

There were so many stories. It's actually overwhelming, how many stories there were.

But yes, we got this amazing man, Alan Greenberg, from a place that sold and distributed musical instruments, and he got us Selmer horns. So that night... I know Trombone Shorty and James Andrews got a horn the next day. They FedExed them to me in Lafayette. All the people in the picture... *People* magazine was there doing an article. They happened to call me, because they heard of what happened in Katrina. I met them at some affair, and they called me, and I said, "I'm here now; why don't you send someone." And they did, and we did this beautiful story on all these musicians.

The guys who were in the picture of *People* magazine, each of them have had something really quite amazing happen to them since that photo was taken. One was a young man who was 21. He was part of the Hot Eight Brass Band. Still is. He ended up... Because of Katrina...he was looking for his grandmother. They had taken her from his roof, and they wouldn't take the medical papers into the helicopter. She'd had a heart condition. They couldn't find her for five months. She died shortly after. Didn't have the medication she needed. He found her in a morgue. And he had been bussed to Georgia. If you're bussed to Georgia, you need a car. It's not like there's a subway system. He had very little money. He was with his fiancé and her son, who was 3 at the time. He got a car with the money he had left, to go to work. They were in the car, driving, and the car broke down in the fast lane. The tires blew because they were old. So he went to get a warning cone out of the trunk, and someone was barreling down, not looking, and he was run into, pinned, flipped over, left on the highway. His girlfriend passed out, and he was left on the highway. They found him. He lost both his legs at the age of 21...

When I tell you there were a lot of strange little things like this because people were bussed... I always like to think that if this happened in Westport, Connecticut, you wouldn't find yourself living in downtown Philadelphia, in a dome, in a stadium. I think the Holiday Inn would have let people in. I just think that it might have been very different. To see that still existed was really a wakeup call for me.

The other thing that happened was... So we started the Jazz in The Schools program, and it was really great, because the clubs were closed...

Panken: You started Jazz in the Schools as a response to 9/11, or to...

Oxenhorn: And we expanded to Katrina. Because of course, like what I said—the universe just provides. I've just been lucky.

Panken: Now, what is the Jazz in the Schools program?

Oxenhorn: The Jazz in the Schools program is when we are able to help musicians who are in some sort of crisis, whether they are too old or too ill to gig like they used to, or there has been a disaster, like 9/11, and they couldn't gig. We are able to create this dignified work, where they're bringing jazz to kids in the schools, teaching them something they would not have had before. There are no music school programs any more in the schools. It allows the musician to take home a paycheck and then pay his own rent, instead of just paying everyone's rent when they're hurting. It's a beautiful way to give someone their purpose back in life.

Panken: That program has expanded greatly over the years, I gather.

Oxenhorn: Well, that's because of the person I was just going to talk about, who is someone we've renamed Saint Agnes Varis. This expansion happened because of this incredible woman we met and who we have renamed St. Agnes. It's Agnes Varis who was so wonderful to the Metropolitan Opera and to Jazz at Lincoln Center.

We met Agnes... I invited her to one of our moments... Shortly after Katrina, Dick Parsons, who I also want to shout out to, became our Chairman. I knew he was on too many boards, so I asked him if he could just be our interim Chairman, because someone would obviously want to fill his shoes. It would be a lot easier getting a wonderful Chairman if he was our Chairman first. So he became our interim Chairman, with the idea that he would just do this for a minute—and he's still our Chairman, 11 years later. He's incredible.

So he hosted this event, and Agnes came, and I was telling her what was happening to these musicians who suffered from losing their homes. Pictures of their entire families... You forget, when someone loses their home... You lose your life when there's a flood. Your wedding pictures, your children's pictures, your photo albums, your family albums, your great-grandparents—your history is wiped out. Your original instruments, your original recordings, your original sheet music. I mean, it's beyond anything anyone could have imagined.

So I started telling her this, and she said, "Write me a proposal." Within a week, we had a check for a quarter of a million dollars, and we had the Agnes Varis Jazz in the Schools happening not just in New Orleans, but to all the states these guys were deported to. So it was about 38 states in all. We had musicians in 38 different states.

Panken: What a logistical feat, to implement that program on that scope.

Oxenhorn: It was incredible. Honestly, I don't remember how all the pieces of the puzzle came together. I know the great David Friedman from WWOZ... People were calling into the station

and letting him know they were ok. So he was feeding me where so-and-so was. He was able to get phone numbers. Other musicians were running into other musicians, able to get phone numbers. I remember finally finding Gatemouth Brown. I think he was in Texas. Then we were going to bring him back to New Orleans and he passed. He never made it back, I don't think. All sorts of craziness.

Panken: Wasn't there also an importation of pianos by Yamaha?

Oxenhorn: Yes.

Panken: Fats Domino got a piano.

Oxenhorn: Oh, that's a great story. I think our social worker, Lisa, made this connection with Beethoven Pianos, and they shipped 18 pianos. We had two drivers drive them down to the musicians, and Fats was one of them. When he got his piano, they didn't even get it into the driveway, and he ran out and he started playing "Blueberry Hill" for the drivers.

Panken: There's a photograph on your website of him playing for the truck drivers.

Oxenhorn: Oh, I haven't seen that. I never get to go to the website. I'm too busy. I love it! Oh God, that's so wonderful.

Panken: There's also a Housing Emergency Assistance program. You've discussed the impact of it, but not the specifics.
Oxenhorn: Again, that really... We kind of exploded because of Katrina. There was such a need. We went from 500 musicians a year to 1500. It wasn't just one family would be one case. You'd find someone, they're in a dome somewhere, they need an apartment. Try to rent an apartment when you don't have a pay stub. You worked on Bourbon Street or you were in a brass band on the streets? There were no pay stubs.

Panken: Or a utility bill...

Oxenhorn: Right, your stuff was in drawer back in the flood in New Orleans. So I would have to call up the social workers. At that point, we now had two more social workers that we hired instantly. One I hired on the street in my neighborhood, because she had just become a social worker and she was a mom in my kid's class, and I adored her. I just said, "We need you" and she said yes. She's been with us ten years, Alisa Hafkin.

So if one person needs their apartment, now you have to call up the landlord of the place they just looked at, and you have to explain to him what you are going to do now. Because how can you... You don't want to say that we're giving the first month's rent and security deposit, which we got again from our President, our saint, my partner Jarrett Lilien. He got eTrade; he became President of eTrade, and eTrade gave us $100,000 just for housing. So we had enough to

give a month's rent and a month's security for everyone who needed it. But you don't want to tell that to a landlord, because he's going to figure after the first month he's screwed. We know that they'll be working, because we're going to give them work in the Jazz in the Schools. But there's a lot you don't want to explain.

So I would call up the potential landlord. They'd tell me they found a place, it looks great, "I told the landlord you're my reference." So I'd call up and that's when I'd go into the British accent, and I would say at the time... Bill Cosby had come out for a couple of our concerts. I think this was early on. He was one of the more famous people I knew. And he gave me permission after to do this. But I would call up in a British accent, and...

Panken: Would you do the British accent for us?

Oxenhorn: Let me try to get British again, because now I've been Country. I'd say: "Hello, so-and-so. I'm calling from the offices of Mr. Bill Cosby, and he's very concerned about a musician that you're possibly considering renting your apartments to. Do you know who this man is? He's quite extraordinary. He just came out for the Madison Square Garden concert with Elton John. He's one of the more famous musicians, and Mr. Cosby is terribly worried about him. We want to make sure that he has a place to be. This is a legend."

So then the guy would say, "Oh, I didn't know." I'd say, "Yes, and just to insure that you feel completely confident, Mr. Cosby is going to make a donation to the Jazz Foundation of America, and we are going to pay his first month's rent and security, just so you feel comfortable."

So that's how that went down. Sundays, Saturdays, we were on call all the time. It was a very crazy time. I would love to introduce how this has grown staff-wise and mention some of the people who...

[END OF CD #3]

[BEGINNING OF CD #4]

Panken: We were talking about the expansion of Jazz Foundation of America's scope...

Oxenhorn: Services.

Panken: ...and size and services after Hurricane Katrina, and that led you to discussing the expanded staff, and I think you wanted to discuss the particulars of that staff.

Oxenhorn: Thanks. You're very helpful. You help organize my mind, which is not an easy feat. I do want to say in terms of what's been achieved and how we do what we do: When you live in a state... Quincy Jones is a master at this, and I've learned some things from him. He's been quite

a mentor. But when you live in a state of giving, you're too busy to have to go out and get everything. Things start coming to you. I don't know if it's a spiritual law or what, but anyone who has...and most everyone in this world lives a pretty busy life these days... When you are in that state of giving to whatever it is you are giving to, your energy, your time, things start to come. That's been, like, miraculously true. So that's why I never really worry about the money coming. Because every time the need is here, the money has to come.

When you're sitting across from or you're on the phone with someone... We had a case on this incredible family. He was the Count Basie pianist... And I'm only disclosing a name... I'll either do that when someone has passed and there's no issues, they came out for us already, or I'll do it when it's been in a newspaper because they chose to speak about it. But this man, Terence Conley, was playing Swing 46 and all these places that have the big bands still. There's very few places that have the big band. It's $25 a night you get. You have to supplement your income. He had three children. He started driving a FedEx truck to get by. He was up for a position, I was told, at Jazz at Lincoln Center, and he was going for his interview the next day, but the day before his FedEx truck was struck by a bus, and he was in a coma for about 2½ months. Really it changed him. He had a lot of complications. His wife, instead of going to get a job now that he couldn't be the breadwinner, she left what she was doing and she started home-schooling their three children so she could take care of him. We were fortunate enough to be able to have the money to pay their rent every month, and we were able to do so for 7 years until some of their situation is changing now, hopefully, with court cases and what they should be getting and should have gotten long ago. But in her brilliance, in home-schooling her children, one ended up at NYU with a full scholarship, and is now working at a huge bank, doing a lot better than me... It's the most beautiful story after story. The daughter is now at another top school, and she is becoming a neuroscientist, and all her experience with her father and his journey has prepared her—and she's on full scholarship.

It's just amazing to watch how, like I said, when bad things happen, it causes...the changes it causes in your life. And the journey that you end up getting prepares you and makes you such a better person. All those hard times are always for a reason. I hate saying that, because I think we're all tired of the lessons. You get to a stage in life where, ok, lessons—I'm over that. Let's just do joy for now. That's where I am at this moment of my life. Let's just do joy. So even when these very tough cases come through, it's exploring with someone, it's dealing with finding the journey, finding the joy in the now. "Ok, I see where you're at now; this is unbelievable. But what can we do that will give you joy?"

I'm thinking of one case that just happened recently. This young musician, he's also very young, I'm not even sure he's 50, and he has fourth-stage of an unusual cancer, and he's got a 12-year-old who he has half the time (he's divorced). It's just hard, when you look to find the joy and what would be joyful... What would you like to do with your kid before you go? How can we make that happen? So he wants to take a road trip. Visit museums, visit baseball camps, do fun things with the kid. He's teaching the kid the instrument, they're working on a CD now. So that's the stuff that I want to fund. That's the stuff that I would love to have money for. So that's

why the money is so key, because you're not just dealing with paying someone's rent. Now that he can't tour, he can't do his record sessions, he's getting treatment a million times a week for the last couple of years...

We have several stories like this. This is not one particular musician I'm thinking of. There's many people in this situation.

That's why it's so key for the Jazz Foundation to continue. Because when you get into someone's life, you realize you have a great elder legend dying, and you find out he was not on...one of his kids didn't speak to him because he was always on the road, and he was angry with his dad. To make that happen, and to get them together, and to be able to fly the kid in or to fly the dad out... That's a game-changer. That changes the course of someone's life, because your deepest regrets are always moments of...things that happen like that. So if you can heal that, that's really changing someone's life. Those are the kinds of things that are my favorite ways to help. There's the electric bill, of course; you keep the refrigerator going. There's buying food when someone is hungry. All those basic things. But to go beyond and to have the time... That's why I say I like so much that I feel doing things in a smaller way is greater. Helping fewer people but helping them in such large ways to me is truly helping.

Panken: That's a very eloquent statement, and I almost want to apologize for bringing this back to the mundane. But the Great Day In Harlem is a huge funding source for you, obviously. What are some of the other funding sources? Individual donors?

Oxenhorn: Yes. I call them our saints, which was going to bring me... You always do this. You lead me right to the next moment.

When our saint Agnes... She was just like my mom. She was the person who ended up giving me in advice in life that I never really... I went out so young, I never had that experience. She was quite incredible. She affected me greatly. And she passed, as many people know, a few years ago.

Then we had this other wonderful person come into our life, who I haven't called him a saint yet... I haven't renamed him Saint. I have to think of another word for him, because he's so much fun. That would be...

Panken: But not a saint.

Oxenhorn: He's not a saint. No, he's not a saint. But I have to say it's his humanity that makes him so beautiful. Him and his wife are just amazing people. That would be Mike and Suki Novogratz. He was one of the rock-and-roll stars of Wall Street. He's one of the hedge fund people.

To me, these are the people in the world that I feel the universe sent down. These are the angels in the world. People who give with a heart where they hear a story and they give because

they want to heal the pain. And he has been extraordinary, just amazing. He and his wife Suki have been just incredible.

Panken: It sounds like you have a very proactive Board.

Oxenhorn: It's like every Board. Everyone does what they do. It's always never enough. You have a couple of people who are able to give the money. And we need more of those actually, like in a big way. We need more saints and angels. Also, you get to a place where someone can give, and they can give and give and give, but it can't be only on them. There are other things they do. They have children. They have lives. You need more of these kinds of people.

We just got an anonymous donor is going to make up for... The Agnes Varis Fund is running out, and he is going to make up for that, so I don't have to tell all these older legends that they're not employed any more in the schools. What a gift that is. The Elmo Foundation as well came through for us. But that's the kind of... I think I'm allowed to say Mr. Verner. But I'm not sure. So I'll let you know if we can keep that in or not. But he's another saint.

We need more. Because really, what we need more than anything is to build a players' residence for these older musicians, instead of them going under in these rent-controlled apartments, alone, isolated, depressed, lonely, not having services, and then they can't take care of themselves, and have to go to what, a nursing home? These were the freedom fighters. These guys were playing behind the civil rights movement. These are the people who found a way, when prejudice was at its height...they found a way to be kings and queens, and famous, and loved around the world, and they broke out of that. They're geniuses.

Panken: You made a remark at the last concert at the Apollo that they made a choice for freedom in playing the music that they played, just as it seems, on your own part, you made that choice by playing music in the subways. I guess the notion of freedom can be extrapolated onto a broader political and social level, and on an individual level as well.

Oxenhorn: Well, freedom is what this whole thing is about, and how this whole thing started. Because not having freedom, and what this music was born from... I hesitate to say, because everyone knows, but I also need to say, because you think of what atrocities this music came out of, you have an entire... Danny Glover told me there were 2 million people who were taken from Africa, and 400,000 of them ended up in the United States. When you think of the deaths on ships, the families that were separated, parents, children, grandparents, no one knowing, no one being able to find... We didn't have technology. Think about how you would find a family member when they were separated. I can't even fathom it. It makes my heart way too heavy to even think of it. But when you realize what came out of it, that their response... They could have outnumbered the people who were over them, and, not in violence, but in music... Their response was to create a music to give themselves freedom from this life that they were handed. It's just beyond.

Panken: You're also privately funded. You don't take government assistance.

Oxenhorn: I'll take it if they want to give it. But no, pretty much I believe in private funding. I prefer going to lunch with someone and having them really understand what we do, and one-on-one for an hour spend with them, and then get a check for $25,000 or $10,000, than wait six months and have a full-time staff person writing grant after grant after grant, paperwork and all that... It's actually a full-time job to get some of those other monies. And they're all worth it. They're wonderful. But we never had the staff. We have now 25 or 30 cases a day. So all our staff is up and running, doing whatever we can to make that happen.

Panken: I guess, as you said, every case is different, so each one has to be approached with a different set of dynamics.

Oxenhorn: Sure.

Panken: Is there a big learning curve for your staff. You're dealing nationally, and musicians who are African-Americans from northern cities and from the south, Latino musicians, Caucasian musicians...really with a microcosm of America.

Oxenhorn: We've helped rap musicians. We've helped original rappers, and soul, and rock-and-roll... I just don't advertise it. But you go with your heart.

Panken: So you don't have to be a "jazz musician" to...

Oxenhorn: No. We started with the blues from the moment I took the job. I think... You brought up a good point with the learning curve, and I want to talk about the staff.

The learning curve...it's just experience. First of all, we have real deal social workers. Now I have someone who's there full-time. As of this week, we hired our first full time. Up until then, Alisa has been doing this three days a week, even though she ends up working all the other days just from phone. With her private practice, she'll be calling in and doing the work that we have before us.

We have a case manager, who took over for Joe Petrucelli, who's become our Deputy Executive Director. Joe started out doing our Jazz in the Schools program in New York. Petr Verner was doing it. He continued, and moved down to New Orleans, so we actually have an office in New Orleans, and he oversees all the Jazz in the Schools in New Orleans. There's about 200 musicians who still do that, who earn their living that way. And we have about 120 across the country.

So we have about 320 elders who are able to perform in the schools to about 80,000 kids. For those who really don't have their skill-set up, they'll perform... For instance, Terence Conley, who is coming back from that coma, and now he's finally coming back, he can tell

jokes, he's getting to be himself again through the gift of that incredible family he has... But I say thank God for the Jazz Foundation, because had we not been able to pay his rent, she never would have been at home with him. He had several seizures. He'd have been in a nursing home. They never would have watched him like she would have. I know she saved his life. She was able to educate their children in a way that would not have happened. And look at who these human beings are going to go out into the world and become.

Anyway, back to the social workers. We have now a part-time and a full-time as of this week. That was again the gift of that wonderful saint, that anonymous saint. Then we have Joe Petrucelli, who is helping run the day-to-day. We have, of course, Petr Verner in New Orleans. We have an office manager now, who is able to take care of some of the day-to-day loose ends that have to be tied up—Aja. And we have Will Glass, who took over for Joe, who was so great... He was our Jazz in the Schools man, but he was so great. He's a drummer. And he was so great with these elderly musicians. They loved him so much. He was so overly concerned, and always going to their homes and checking things out. We said, "You're a case-worker; that's really what you are." So he became a case-worker. He goes to homes now. He delivers groceries. He'll visit in hospitals. All the things that we all do.

Daryl Dunbar is our CFO, who... I could never do the books. Numbers... Remember school? Lack of? So I said from the word go, "we have to have someone else always doing the books." So he became our CFO. He was with MGM, and he's incredible. He's brilliant. We now have a whole finance committee of all these corporate guys who are geniuses in business, and they have created a budget for us, and we work off of a budget every month. We have a certain amount we can spend, which is a gift and a curse. It's a gift, because then we know we always have the money, but it's a curse, because there are moments you want to help and your hands are tied. That's why I say anyone else out there who falls into the Saint category, or lots of people who are in the Angel category...

Panken: Why do the Saints become Saints? Is it because they like Jazz?

Oxenhorn: I think it's because they have incredible hearts.

Panken: But there are other places where they might...

Oxenhorn: Half of them love rock-and-roll. They all love blues. Everyone loves the blues. It depends on what jazz you're talking about. If we're talking about Billie Holiday and Chet Baker and Abbey Lincoln, then everyone, hands-down, would melt over that. If you're talking about avant-garde, that could be an acquired taste to someone. But these guys get into everything. We try to make sure all our events give you a taste of everything, and it becomes a smorgasbord of music. We'll put R&B. We'll put Soul. Macy Gray has been incredible; she's come out for us. Al Jarreau wants to come out for us. Elvis Costello has been incredible. Keith Richards came out for us this year! What a thrill.

Panken: "I believe in improvisation," he said.

Oxenhorn: Yes, that's right. So we've been most fortunate. Again, we got someone else, Steve Jordan, the famous drummer for everyone, for Keith Richards, for Diana Krall, for John Mayer, for you-name-it...he's played with them. I think he played with Velvet Underground at one point.

Panken: He's one of Sonny Rollins' drummers of choice, when he can get him.

Oxenhorn: Sonny Rollins. Can you believe that? Sonny Rollins. That was one of his first gigs, he told me. Sonny was his mentor into the jazz world. Oh, Sonny, I can't say enough about him. Him, and Randy Weston and Jimmy Heath, these spiritual... They're spiritual leaders, is what they are. And Danny Glover. I call him Martin Luther, Junior, Jr. He's unbelievable. No one knows this about him. The man is fighting political, social injustice everywhere, every chance he can. It's one of the reasons why he didn't become that...later in life having all the top films, one after the other. He chose to use his celebrity for good, and that's what he's done, and he spends his life doing good. He's amazing. Like Quincy.

So I've been very fortunate to...look at who I get to... They say when you start off playing with someone, the whole deal, and sitting in with a master, it's because it brings you up as a musician. It brings up your musicianship. That's how I probably got a little better, playing with this real deal old man from Mississippi. But the same thing happens in the charitable world. You get brought up by the people you do business with, and that incredible energy is what allows you to get your inspiration from them. It's just a beautiful circle.

That will bring me into my take on spirituality. I know you wanted to ask me a question on how I handle these things, and all this hardship...

Panken: Well, you deal with... Human misery and heartbreak, and the consequences of human foible are part of the daily diet you have to deal with, and you describe yourself as an empath who identifies deeply with whoever you're in contact with. So what's your coping strategy? Or if there's a strategy... How do you cope with the information you have to take in every day?

Oxenhorn: Well, when you're helping people in this kind of situation... Look at that, how interesting—we attracted a siren when we're talking about emergencies and crisis. The beautiful part is that, one, you found out about it, so there's someone who can be there for them. That's beautiful. So they're not in this alone—it's beautiful. Getting to actually affect a change. Like, if we are fortunate enough to come up with good solutions or we have enough money to help a situation, then what a privilege it is to be of service to that person who, chances are, either played on a record that helped save your life when you were depressed and 17 and feeling suicidal, before you called the hot line... It's all so circular.

I have come to this belief that we are all one. This business of alone... Put an extra "l" in there. It's "all-one." I believe that with all my heart. I don't believe there is a separation. I don't

believe in the standard view of a creator or a god that sits over there and watches His creation. I don't see us separate. And by not seeing it separate, by seeing that we are maybe the fingers of this creative force...

I call it the loving consciousness. The reason it's so beautiful is, when you choose to see that, when you choose to see life this way, and creativity, and the creative force and love... It's all love. Everyone is... There's just different forms of love, in different phases. You can't even look at an ex-husband in a bad way—the guy who's not paying your child support. You just see them on these different levels of where they are on their journey.

So the reason I like to see it that way is because it allows me to take these emergencies and these horrendous emotional experiences people are having, or these deeply sad or desperate moments these people are having, and it allows me to remember that we're all really ok. Everything is really all right, and it's going to be all right. For anyone who has ever gone through any trauma, you know that in a little while after somehow you're ok. You're still here, you're still standing, you're functioning, you're living your life—you got through it. And we all get through this stuff. We just need each other to get through it with. That to me really is what the Jazz Foundation is all about. It's having a place and people that will get through this with you.

Getting back to the spiritual: If you do allow yourself the luxury and the beauty of seeing all this, then anything that happens, whether it's something terrible in the world, as we see so much of nowadays... This is to me just an awakening. We're all awakening. We're all young. We're young creative beings. In our process, we're very young. Believe me, we're young. If racism can exist. If all these terrorist groups and all these terrorist politicians that we now have to choose from, if all these people who still allow themselves to hate and can still permit...if the driving force of their message and of their being is a hateful message, then we are very young in our evolution.

So I just look at it in that way and say, "Oh, it's kids." When you see a kid beating up another kid in the schoolyard, you know that at home he's getting beaten. There are things we know now, and there are ways we can look at things with great forgiveness, if we choose to. Because if I don't allow myself to see it that way, I'll end up becoming part of the hate. I'll end up hating. And I don't want to go there. I don't want to be like that. I would rather stay in this little corner where the world is a little more perfect and more loving, and act from there. Because I think you can get a lot more done. And I think it has a much better effect on the world in general if you come from this loving place, and if you have this peaceful attitude, and if you react to these things with love and peace, and if you want to call it prayer... You can send light. You can send...

If you get me started, we'll be here all day. Because there are so many things I wanted to do. I remember when George Bush said we were going into Afghanistan and we were going to start to bomb...I remember thinking: If I could get all these women in children in Afghanistan, in other countries, and we walked into our cities, they couldn't bomb, and this would not have

started. That was my dream. Ok? That's like what kept me up at night. I was so busy with this, and there was so much going on with this, and I just... I didn't do it. I didn't do it quick enough. When I started, it already got to be too late, and the whole thing started. Not that it could have even happened. But to me, these are the kinds of things that I would love, if I could have the chance to do.

There is one thing that I'm actually working on doing now, that has nothing to do with this, and I don't know why I'm talking about it. Am I allowed to talk about it?

Panken: You can talk about anything you want to.

Oxenhorn: I met with this Japanese... The Japanese love jazz, and they were telling me that the U.S. never apologized for Hiroshima, which we know. I know Obama tried this here, and it got very complicated, because of the business aspect and the investments we have, and they were very worried to even bring it up, and things didn't go through. But he told me it had never happened. And he told me that there were some villagers still alive, and I know there are some veterans who are alive... I thought how beautiful would it be, not the politicians, not the government, but the people having a soldier, a U.S. soldier come together with a villager from Hiroshima, and just to have a silent embrace. No apologies, no words, no language barrier, no nothing, just to have this beautiful embrace. Then I started thinking of one of the descendants of slavery with the descendent of a plantation owner. Start having these moments of embrace come through. I'm going to find a way to work on this if I can.

Panken: The Jazz Foundation would seem to be a good vehicle to do that through...

Oxenhorn: Wouldn't it? With music.

Panken: Because jazz is a global phenomenon.

Oxenhorn: Music is the universal language. So this is just me, giving my little hopes and dreams.

Panken: I think that's a good place to wrap.

Ken Kimery: We should talk about the upcoming award, which is presented on April 4th. The project is National Endowment for the Arts, but also the Smithsonian Institution, and this is for the national record. This is your story that will be told.

Oxenhorn: Where is it told? People just can look it up? No one is going to get it, right?

Ken Kimery: No, this is the National Museum of American History and the Archive Center, and online...
Panken: 20 years from now, 30 years from now, 50 years from now, someone who wants to

know something...

Oxenhorn: I'll be so wrinkled!

Panken: You won't have to worry about a good side any more.

Oxenhorn: I'll have to worry about a good surgeon.

Panken: People who want to do some research on you and the Jazz Foundation will be able to access this interview, either the transcribed version, or they'll be able to hear you.

Oxenhorn: Don't you have to have a special library card to get that information? You mean anyone can...

Ken Kimery: No. We're in public trust. This is the nation's museum.

Panken: You're an NEA Jazz Master.

Ken Kimery: You're in the same collection as Abbey Lincoln, and Sonny Rollins, and Quincy Jones.

Oxenhorn: That's deep.

Ken Kimery: Jimmy Heath.

Panken: What's deep about it is that you weren't involved in jazz at all until you took...

Oxenhorn: Until the affair with the Italian composer.

Panken: And then the JFA. I guess that's a good revenge on him.

Oxenhorn: Oh, no revenge. I never have revenge with exes.

Panken: So: Wendy, you'll be receiving your National Endowment of the Arts Jazz Masters Award publicly at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., on April 4, 2016, with Archie Shepp, Pharaoh Sanders, and Gary Burton. I'm wondering if you've thought about what this award means to you, and the implications of the award for your mission, which doesn't seem to be ending any time soon.

Oxenhorn: I think that I was completely fine with all this, and I've been very busy. I haven't had a chance to really absorb it, until your director just said what he said about sharing a category with... Say it again.

Ken Kimery: Well, you're in the archive, in the collections, with Abbey Lincoln, Quincy Jones, Jimmy Heath, with Shirley Horn, with Ella Fitzgerald...

Oxenhorn: Had you said this in the beginning of our interview, I would have been speechless. I wouldn't have been able to think of anything to say. Actually, I didn't know a whole lot about it, because I haven't had much time to attend many of these. I went when some of my favorite legends were inducted.

I really see this as an award for a We thing rather than a Me thing. There are many people, as I've mentioned in this interview, who did this with me, who made all this possible. So for me, it's a win for the Jazz Foundation, that maybe people will learn about it, and maybe we'll get more donors or more attention to the idea of people who are in the music business to take better care of the musicians. I know that Youtube, in fact, and Google, is using a lot of music and advertising, and there's issues about paying the rights to the record companies. But what happened was, I think the record companies were all given...I forget what they call it...golden parachutes, where they give them a certain amount of money to cover everything, and then the artists themselves don't receive any more. So it's quite an issue. Your intellectual property, your music is all you have. So if albums are not selling... Remember when Virgin Records closed down? Oh, what a shock. That was a real sign of the times.

What I didn't get into was our digital device driven life. This is pretty much what is killing live music. People don't go to clubs any more. People don't gather. People are living their lives at home, in their living rooms. I have friends who tell me, "I'm sorry, I can't go out tonight; I'm dating." I said, "Oh, good for you." What they meant was, they're in their living room, on their computer, dating through their computer. What happened to our relationships? That's why so much of the world is going a little off the edge, because we're not in this together any more. There isn't that feeling back in those days that I missed, that I'm so angry I missed, the glorious '60s, where people came together and we were in this together. There was that jumping-off point.

Things just will have to get a little worse before they get better, because we have to get... We're stubborn, and, like I said, young in our evolution, and we are going to have to get hit on the head a few times to remember what's important in life. But it's really all this. It's this stuff. Helping each other. Loving each other. Doing things from... I love that visionary, Jacque Fresco, who designed the Venus Project. He came with self-sustaining cities, where you weren't working your whole life to pay your rent or your mortgage. You weren't working to pay your rent or your mortgage. Cities were these small communal gatherings, were self-sustained. You built the housing together, you had the food together, you created good for the community, and it was helping one another, and when your own community was up and running, you helped other communities to do the same. That to me is the all-time... Like, when we get there, I'll really be happy.

Panken: It's certainly something to work for within... Again, an institution working with a group

of people such as the Jazz Foundation works with is a vehicle with which you can actualize some of those principles.

Oxenhorn: It's wonderful. I know it's a microcosm of the world, and it's a very small effort compared to what needs to be done in this world. But like I say, our little corner of the world is beautiful.

Panken: Small victories are the way it happens.

Oxenhorn: Yes, that's true.

Panken: It's the Obama principle of community organizing. You seem to apply some of those principles to your work with this community.

Oxenhorn: Yes. And the biggest surprise of all was now... I raised both my kids pretty much myself, with of course a wonderful cast of characters coming in and out. But my daughters now are... One is becoming a social worker in one month (she'll be graduating), and the other has decided to become a social worker. So I'm probably going to have to end up... I'll probably have to get married, because they won't be able to support me. [LAUGHS] And certainly this work won't.

I'm only joking, of course. Because if you go along with my spiritual philosophy, you're always going to be ok. And so far, I have never been let down. Something always happens to come through and save the day.

With that note, I guess that's really the work of the Jazz Foundation, which in the eleventh hour, it comes through and it just saves the day. So how lucky are we. And how honored I am, really honored. It stopped my heart for a moment to think about what this means, to get this great award. And I want to say thank you, really, to the National Endowment of the Arts and everyone who I've met through it. Everyone has been incredibly wonderful.

[Transcribed by Ted Panken from a .wma file of the conversation.]