

From "Late Night with Conan" to Rikers Islands

Segment	Who	Copy
Intro	Deb	<p>When the show ended, it was really a huge upheaval. It was sad. It was hard. I said to myself at that time, I'm going to give myself one year without worrying about getting another job. If I do, I do, and if I don't, I don't, but without pressuring myself to just think about what I really, really want to do.</p>
		<p>INTRO MUSIC</p>
Podcast Overview	Andy	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. The stories are in their own words and the words of friends and family that helped them find a new path.</p> <p>I'm your host Andy Levine. We launched the podcast just last week and I'm so pleased to bring our seventh episode. And this story is really incredible.</p> <p>Deborah Shaw was an established costume designer in New York City. For 15 years she worked for "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" creating hundreds of costumes for the program. But when the show moved to Los Angeles, she decided to stay in New York and do something completely different.</p> <p>And her second act took her to Rikers Island, one of the most dangerous prisons in America. But let's start with Deb's first act in the world of costume design.</p> <p>After graduating from Hampshire College, she spent the first part of her career designing costumes mostly for theatre productions.</p>
Late Night with Conan O'Brien	Deb	<p>I found myself specializing in comedy. I enjoyed working with writers, especially funny people, smart and funny people, and I came to be known for designing comedy.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">LATE NIGHT WITH CONAN O'BRIEN THEME SONG MUSIC</p> <p>And as a result of that, at a certain point, I segued into television. And the second part of my career, which was 15 years, I was the designer of "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" on NBC...-it was unlike some other talk shows, I would say it was primarily comedy-driven. And there were a tremendous number of costumes.</p>

	Andy	Any particular costume or situation that was particularly challenging where they wanted you to do something kind of nutty?
	Deb	Well, that was every day. Literally, that was every day. The writers were very young and very idealistic, and many of them have gone on to much other big careers. The way it worked was they would write until the wee hours of the morning and leave messages on my voicemail and say, "Okay, we need 6 turkeys and 7 pilgrims and 14 Indians and this, and we need it by 11:00."
	Andy	11:00 that morning?
	Deb	In the morning. The show was at 5:30 and rehearsal was at 1:30. So then you would get there to the office and you just sort of sink into your chair and think, "How am I ever, ever, ever gonna do this?" and then just go downstairs to the wardrobe room and rally the troops and say, "Okay, this is what we need. Here's a pile of feathers, stick'em on a hat. Here's the..."—You know, it was like that every day.
	Andy	So, from 1993 to 2008, you were the costume designer for Conan O'Brien.
	Deb	Correct
	Andy	And then the show announces it's gonna move to Los Angeles.
Passing on a Move to Los Angeles	Deb	Correct, that's exactly right. And at that point, I...most people who worked with us moved to LA. I didn't want to move to LA. I was 55 at that time. My husband has a big career in the movie business here in New York. We have a house upstate. I have a life here.
	Andy	Deb gave herself a year to figure out her next career move.
Exploring the Criminal Justice System	Deb	I didn't really feel like starting another television show. My job was very stressful and I really just didn't want to jump right back into that stressful life. And during that time, I just thought more and more and more about other stuff. And something that had been in my mind for a long time and how it actually came to be...this is hard to say but I was obsessed with what I see, continue to see, as the failure of the criminal justice system to adequately address the issues that it purports to address and...
	Andy	Is there some personal connector or some reason that you're...

	Deb	No, not personally.
	Andy	Okay
	Deb	I always attribute it to a book that I read, an unbelievable book called "Random Family" by a woman named Adrian Nicole LeBlanc. The book was published in 2003. It's about an extended family, young people predominantly in the Bronx and the struggles that they face, not the least of which is incarceration. Very young people, all different ages. And seeing how people would go to prison, come back out, go back to prison, come back out, go back to prison. This really stuck with me and I just felt like there has to be something I can do to somehow, in small way...help.
	Andy	Okay
	Deb	So, toward the end of that year that I had given myself, I started to put out feelers, and my initial idea was to address literacy. Because I believe that education is the bottom-line. But what I found, much to my shock and surprise, that there was no way for me to volunteer to teach anyone to read on Rikers Island, literally no way. There was no way for me to volunteer.
	Andy	But you combined this interest in prison reform with gardening?
	Deb	That came next.
	Andy	Okay
The Big Garden on Rikers Island	Deb	So when I found myself coming up against a brick wall in regards to literacy, I felt, well, there's...what else is there? What other programs are there? And I read about the horticulture program on the island. There's a book about it called, "Doing Time in the Garden," by a man named James Jiler. I read that book and I thought, "Okay, well, I know how to garden." Maybe I can just volunteer in that and then I'll see where I can go from there." I had to take a class at the New York Botanical Garden in horticultural therapy to be able to visit the garden.
	Andy	This is the garden on Rikers.
	Deb	On Rikers.
	Andy	Okay.

	Deb	So I went. Finally, at last, I visited the garden and I was just blown away. It's really unbelievable. It's a two-acre garden. Rikers is big. It's 400 acres, but two-acre garden is substantial and it's beautiful. And I was really just...
	Andy	Deborah started volunteering every Tuesday and Thursday.
	Deb	So, from 2010 until a little less than a year ago, I was teaching at Rikers. I volunteered, and then relatively quickly the director of that program, Hilda Krus, an unbelievable horticultural therapist, she and I hit it off, and within a few months she asked me to join her as a part-time staff member. And I did. And that was the beginning of it.
	Andy	I had a chance to speak with Hilda Krus by telephone.
	Hilda	Deb is extremely detail-oriented and conscientious, and takes responsibility for whatever she does. So, very early on, even as an intern, I knew that I can rely on Deb 100%, and that she understands the program, and we are on the same page.
	Andy	I asked Deb to paint a picture of a typical day working in the garden on Rikers Island.
	Deb	<p>We would sit down around the table and chat for a few minutes. I'm a sports fan, there would be certain guys that I would talk to about the Knicks or the Yankees, or what did we do last night, or what went on in the jail, or how were they feeling, or what was blooming, what had they noticed since the day before about what was growing in the greenhouse or during the summer, how did the vegetable garden look, were things dry, were things wet.</p> <p>Just normal stuff like you would when you come into an office and then you greet your coworkers and say, "How was your night? What did you have for dinner? What's up? What's on the agenda? How you feel?"</p>
	Andy	What everyone is gonna want to know is, do you feel safe there?
	Deb	Well, that's an interesting question. Everyone asked me that. Never, never, never, never, never did I ever feel unsafe in the big garden. In the big garden, those are the sentenced men and women. We had people of all ages. So the youngest at that time, I think, was 21, but there would be men and women my age. You know, a whole range of ages. So, people with some degree of maturity.

		I felt, particularly with the men, I would say, that those men, almost without exception, would lie down in a puddle for me to walk over. They had our backs in every single way. They would bring us...they would try to bring us coffee. Make sure we had the most comfortable chair. They would bring cookies from their meager commissary accounts. They would do anything for us. They're fantastic people. They're people who have made mistakes in their lives. They're people who have suffered many...through many trials and tribulations, but at heart, almost [inaudible 00:28:41]. Good, good people.
	Andy	So that's in the big garden but...
	Deb	<p>Toward the end of the time that I worked there, things on the island started to change. One of the things that has been a hot button that is being addressed but slowly, is the fact that there are 16-year-olds on the island. And those 16-year-olds tend to not behave in the same way that the older, more mature people do. They have less...often times facing long sentences, often times facing life sentences if they've come from gang violence and such. Nothing to lose, so...and they're very immature, oftentimes.</p> <p>I found it much more difficult for me to win them over. Much less predictable, I guess I would say, and there were some times that I did feel afraid, which ultimately led me to segue to the next part of my career which I am doing now, which is working with formerly incarcerated people. I didn't want to feel afraid and I had never felt afraid, and then there were a couple of times when I did. And the smell of pepper spray and the... It's not a good feeling.</p>
	Andy	At the time that things were getting a bit more difficult on Rikers Island, Deborah was approached by the Fortune Society, an organization focused on helping prisoners with a successful reentry from incarceration. They asked her to start a gardening program at one of their facilities called Castle Gardens aimed at working with individuals recently released from prison. Hilda was sad to see her go.
	Hilda	I miss Deb very much, and I think that I always miss my staff when somebody moves on, because everybody really is very important for the team. But I think what Deb is doing now is almost like a natural development of what has happened on the island, and I think it's wonderful.
Seven Years on Rikers Island	Andy	I found myself especially moved by a story that Deb shared about one detainee that she worked with. We can't share his name because of confidentiality concerns. But this was an 18-year old Hispanic man who was wrongly accused of murder.

	Deb	One of our very, very, very beloved guys, because he's just a great guy, but he was with us. He was on the island detained for seven years for a murder he didn't commit and...
	Andy	Seven years.
	Deb	<p>Seven, from the age of 18 to 25, formative years in anybody's life, by any measure. And he was acquitted. He was acquitted. He didn't do it and he had the fortitude to reject several offers of plea bargains, "Just say you did it," "You'll go upstate for a few years and then come back," "You can leave right now at a certain point. Just sign this piece of paper, say you did it. He didn't take the plea.</p> <p>He was at the bottom of the barrel and he remained committed to maintaining his innocence, and he was acquitted. And I get choked up when I think about it because to be detained on that island from the age of 18 to 25 and then to be sent home with a MetroCard after that time. Literally, I have a picture of him on my iPad of him on the subway the day he was acquitted and we were all just...I mean, he called us and we were just weeping with joy but...</p>
	Andy	After being acquitted, it's, "Here's your MetroCard. We're sorry."
	Deb	See you later.
Deb's Advice on a Second Act	Andy	As I do with every interview, I asked Deb to share her advice to others who might be considering a Second Act.
	Deb	You can't really be struggling. Because you're not gonna go from, or at least for myself, you're not gonna go from one relatively high-paying career to something that hardly pays at all.
	Andy	Okay, so that's number one.
	Deb	<p>But really find something that speaks to you, really find something that...like, with me, this was something that was festering. It was just driving me crazy. It was something that I had been thinking about for a long, long time. Just think about what swirls around in your head that maybe is a little bit like, "What can I do about that thing? How can I help this? What skills do I have that I can share with someone else that might help that problem or this problem?"</p> <p>And then don't take no for an answer. You know, just push into that thing.</p>
	Andy	So there were barriers that you hit along the way?

	Deb	It wasn't a clear path. And as I said, the way I had originally thought about it in terms of literacy or education, it didn't turn out to be that. I didn't start out to... Certainly, I didn't even know anything about horticultural therapy. It wasn't something that was on my radar. And I believe in it so strongly now. I really think it's...it's a powerful tool. But it wasn't like I started out thinking about hort therapy. I started out thinking about prison reform.
	Andy	I'm glad Deborah Shaw didn't take no for an answer. And so are the hundreds of prisoners and detainees that she worked with in the big garden on Rikers Island.
		OUTGOING MUSIC
Thank-You and Show Credits	Andy	<p>It was such an honor to interview Deborah Shaw – as well as Hilda Krus – for today's episode. I so admire these two women for the work they are doing in prison reform and helping incarcerated men and women re-enter society.</p> <p>If you like what you are hearing on the podcast, I hope you'll consider becoming a "Second Act Advocate" and help tell others about this podcast. Just go to our website, www.SecondActStories.org and click on the "Share" button at the top of the page. Once you sign up as a "Second Act Advocate," we'll send you an email every time a new episode is released and ask you to share with your own social media following on Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter.</p> <p>If you are thinking of starting your own second act, we hope these stories will help you find a new path. As Deborah shared, if you've got your heart set on a new career, don't take no for an answer.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. A new Second Act Story" is right around the corner.</p>