

Second Act Stories (www.secondactstories.org)

Episode 24:
Cathy & the Crankshafts:
Opening a Car Repair Shop for the Working Poor
(10/8/2018)

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Cathy Heying	But then it was like the voice of the universe, God, however you choose to name it. It was just like my God swears so...forgive my language but it was just like, "Dumbass. The door is opening. Walk through it. I am opening the door. Walk through it."
	INTRO MUSIC
Andy Levine	<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. I'm your host Andy Levine and I am so excited and honored to share with you this week's story.</p> <p>Last month, I traveled to Minneapolis, Minnesota and I had the chance to visit with Cathy Heying who is the founder of an extraordinary non-profit called The Lift Garage. She is the voice referring to herself as "Dumbass" in the opening quote.</p> <p>Here's a description of the organization's mission: The Lift Garage is a 501c3 nonprofit aimed to move people out of poverty and homelessness by providing low-cost car repair, free pre-purchase car inspections, and honest advice that supports our community on the road to more secure lives.</p> <p>Cathy started The Lift Garage in 2013. And what I love most about her story is the unusual, round-about path to actually launching the organization.</p> <p>For anyone thinking about a second act, it's an inspiring story (and that's exactly the type of story we're always trying to tell here).</p> <p>Let's meet Cathy Heying of The Lift Garage.</p>

Andy	Where did you grow up? Tell me about your education and then just sort of the short elevator story about your background.
Cathy	Sure. So I grew up in a small town in Northeast Iowa, about three hours south of Minneapolis, town of 800 people. And youngest of seven kids. I went to college in Dubuque, Iowa, Loras College. I have my bachelor's in social work with a minor in religious studies. I have a master's degree from Saint Mary's University in Winona, Minnesota in pastoral ministry.
Andy	What drew you to social work?
Cathy	That's a great question. I was always a sensitive kid. My family likes to say that every childhood story ends with, "And then Cathy cried." So I've always had a soft spot for humans, and suffering, and really clear to me early on that I wanted to be a social worker. I'm the youngest of seven and my oldest brother has Down syndrome. And so I grew up in a household in which there was a high expectation of compassion despite our equal love of sarcasm, a high expectation of caring for one another. There is also the value of that in small towns.
Andy	Talk about the pastoral ministry side of this is. Is it connected with any particular religion that you work in?
Cathy	I grew up Roman Catholic and that I went to a Catholic University, which is what my degree is in. So I spent some years doing youth and young adult ministry. And then I spent about nine years working as the director of social justice for a Catholic Church here in Minneapolis. My job, it was an amazing job, was to engage the faith community in working for systemic social change.
Andy	So you're doing this for a number of years. You said nine years as Director of Social Justice?
Cathy	Exactly.
Andy	Take me through to the thinking of auto mechanic school, Lift Garage, sort of how you get to that.
Cathy	So it was during those nine years, the shelter and other things are right on the grounds of the church and the church is located in a neighborhood that has a lot of high needs economically. So people were regularly coming to the church doors looking for financial assistance and often for car repairs. And so often the story was something like, you know, "I work full-time but I work second shift out in one of the distant suburbs. There's no bus that travels in that direction at 11:00 at night when I'm getting off. I need my car to get to work. The brakes went out. If I can't get them fixed, I'm not gonna be able to get to work. I'm going to lose my job and I am going to lose my housing," and etc., etc., etc. It just became so clear to me how interconnected access to reliable transportation is to getting out of poverty or staying out of poverty.

Andy	Was there one particular episode or you were just seeing this played out over and over and over?
Cathy	Over and over again. And we would help when we could but I knew it was never really enough. And so I kept thinking that Minnesota is often joked about as being the land of 10,000 nonprofits, but we didn't really have anything that was a full-time service that allowed people to get access to affordable car repair.
Andy	So Cathy took an unusual step to work on this problem. She enrolled in a two-year program to become an auto mechanic.
Cathy	<p>I thought, "You know, I just can't let go of this idea." I was still paying off grad student school loans and I was sort of done with school, and I was 38. But I just couldn't stop thinking about it. And it eventually became clear to me that I would regret it more if I didn't try something than if I tried something and it didn't work.</p> <p>So yeah, I went and checked out Dunwoody. It's a private tech school here in Minneapolis.</p> <p>I thought, "Well, I'm just gonna go and visit. That doesn't mean I have to go over, no commitments." So this was March of 2008 and I was sort of thinking like I would start in the fall of 2008. And I get plenty of time, just go visit. And then at the end of the tour, the program director said to me, "Well, the program is almost full. So if you're at all serious, I'll need your application by tomorrow..."</p>
Andy	Tell me about the first couple of weeks in that program.
Cathy	<p>That is a true statement. Mostly, I just kept thinking, excuse my French, "What in the hell have I done?" I walk in the classroom and as I said, I was 38 and it's 40 18-year-olds, 2 other young women but everybody was 18.</p> <p>Pretty quickly into the first day, they announced that we're gonna have to partner up with somebody to be our lab partner for the rest of the semester. And we're sort of sitting in this u-shape and I'm at the end, and I can see them all mentally counting. Like you can just watch them. All their eyes are looking like...</p>
Andy	No...not me.
Cathy	Exactly. They're just like, "What? Please don't let me get stuck with the old lady." I mean, I didn't know anything at some point. They were like, "Okay. Everybody line up and face that wall where all the crankshafts are." And I'm like, "I have no idea what a crankshaft is, what it looks like. There's stuff on every wall and any one of them could be a crankshaft to me." I'll just wait and see where everybody else turns. So it's just like that. And so yeah, culturally it was, you know, I'm coming out of this experience of Social Work, and church ministry, and feelings, and let's just talk.

	And they're running automotive school like a boot camp because they're dealing with 18-year-old boys and that's often how they...what they respond to. So I mean they're only calling us by our last names, there's lots of barking and, you know, "Get your safety glasses on." And I'm like, "Can we just talk about how the cars are feeling?"
Andy	Did you ever think about quitting?
Cathy	All the time. All the time. And especially in that first two to three months, I mean. And I cried more than I would care to admit in front of all those 18-year-old boys. It was frustrating. I would be the very first to tell you I'm not a great tech. I have to work really, really hard at it. It does not come naturally to me.
Andy	Dave Duval was Cathy's first instructor at the Dunwoody College of Technology.
Andy	Have you ever seen a student like Cathy before?
Dave Duval	I have never seen a student like Cathy Heying before. No, I have not.
Andy	Tell me about the first time you met her and your reaction, and just tell me about that first meeting.
Dave	<p>We had 20-22 students in there and all of them were young and very rambunctious and just real eager to work on cars, talking about how fast cars were going and what kind of car was their dream car, things of that nature. In walks this lady with longer hair and a little gray to it, not much, but very non-traditional, not what one is used to seeing coming into an automotive class. And I see her across the way and I'm going, "Hmm, well this is gonna be interesting."</p> <p>I really wanted her to succeed because I could tell she was determined and we just hit it off like Forrest Gump would say, like peas and carrots.</p> <p>I mean she put in effort like you wouldn't believe and I love effort from anybody and everybody. And when I see effort, I give 110% back. So, the more questions she asked, the more I answered and the better she did and she just kept on plucking away a little bit at a time and she just never quit. She was like a bull dog. She just worked her tail off.</p>
Andy	It's funny you mentioned the word "quit" because in my interview with Cathy, she shared that she was ready to quit the program a dozen times.
Dave	And she did come to me in that first quarter back then and she said, "I just can't do this," and I said, "I'm not gonna let you quit." I said, "I know it's hard," but I said, "You can stay late. I'll work with you," and that's what we did. She stayed late and I worked with her.

Andy	I asked Cathy what kept her going.
Cathy	Kind of a mix of German stubbornness, a really strong belief that we have to address this problem. And at this moment in time, that nobody else seems to be doing it in a way that I think it needs to be done.
Andy	And of course, there was Dave Duval who wouldn't let her quit.
Cathy	I often think about the old phrase, It's scripture based but we've adapted it in a variety of ways but, you know, "Always be aware because you never know when you are entertaining angels." I walk into Dunwoody on that first day and I see this barking auto instructor who is just, "Ra-Ra-Ra-Ra, you know, knock it off." And I never would have guessed that this guy is gonna be the one that gets me through this. And he did. And when I decided to put a Board of Directors together, he was one of the first people I called and he joined the board of directors in 2012, and has been on the board since.
Andy	Take us through to the start of Lift Garage and how it evolved to what it is today.
Cathy	<p>Sure. So I was working full-time and trying to think about kind of, "Now what?" And so I was like, "I'm not really sure what I need to do next but I'm guessing other people might." So I took out a yellow legal pad and on the left-hand side, I wrote down all the types of people that I thought I should talk to.</p> <p>So lawyers, City Council people, shop owners, people who had started nonprofits, people who raised money for nonprofits, mechanics, you know, on and on and on. Anybody that I thought might have a piece of wisdom or information or insight. And then on the right-hand side of the paper, I went and filled in names of people that I knew fit that description. And I just started taking people out for coffee.</p> <p>And, you know, "I got this degree, I see this need, I wanna try to address this problem in some way. What do you think? So basically from summer of 2010 till fall of 2011 or so, I had a lot of conversations and a lot of coffee.</p> <p>And basically, the beginnings of what's now The Lift Garage started to take shape.</p> <p>And by summer of 2012, we had our 501(c)(3) status with the IRS.</p>
Andy	And that's when Cathy got an important phone call from an acquaintance who had a business working on hybrid cars. The business had run into some problems. And they offered Cathy and her new non-profit a bay to start repairing cars. But it was too early. And Cathy said no.

Cathy	<p>I was just like, "No. Absolutely not. Thank you. There are a thousand and one things that we do not know and we're probably a year and a half out from where we...you know, from opening anything." And so we hung up and holidays go by, and she calls back and says, "No, I really think you should." And I said, "I understand that's what you think and the answer is still no, but thank you. I do appreciate your belief in us," and blah, blah, blah. Another two weeks goes by and she calls again and I thought, "This woman has some nerve."</p> <p>But then it was like the voice of the universe, God, however you choose to name it. It was just like my God swears so...forgive my language but it was just like, "Dumbass. The door is opening. Walk through it. I am opening the door. Walk through it."</p> <p>So we started hustling and so we signed a lease to start renting one bay one day a week.</p>
Andy	Take me through to The Lift Garage today and how does this...how does Lift Garage work?
Cathy	<p>So our model has stayed the same since the beginning, which is we provide low cost car repair for low income folks, and we define low income for our purposes as 150% of federal poverty guideline. That translates to about 18,000 a year or less for a household of 1, about 21,000 a year or less for a household of 2. It depends on family size.</p> <p>One thing that has been true of the Lift since the very beginning is pretty much within two months, we were booked out three months, and that has not changed.</p>
Andy	So give me the contrast. If I took a car to my local mechanic versus if I came here, what would be typically the difference in cost?
Cathy	So market-rate labor, hourly labor rate in the Twin Cities right now is about \$110 an hour average. We charge \$15 an hour for labor. Most shops will mark up the parts anywhere from 50% to 200%. We do not mark up the parts at all. So whatever we pay for the part is what the customer pays. So there's a lot of factors but on average across the board, people end up paying here about a quarter of what they would have paid for the same repair in a traditional shop. So \$25 that they'd have paid \$100 somewhere else for.
Andy	In 2015, CNN told The Lift Garage story to a national audience. And they named Cathy Heying a CNN Hero. And it has led to dozens of phone calls from people wanting to start their own version of The Lift Garage. And Cathy is always ready to help.
Cathy	My ultimate goal is to end poverty wherever that is, and I'm not naive enough to think that The Lift Garage in and of itself is going to solve poverty all aware of all time but it's like when you look it through it through that lens, it's like then why would we not share everything we have learned with everybody who wants to know so that we have a better chance of accomplishing that goal all over the place.

Andy	What's the most rewarding part of your work?
Cathy	There's something very rewarding about you watch a car get towed in, and I work on it or we work on it, and the customer comes and pays us \$100 for the work and drives away in their car. It's very tangible to be able to see the change that you have made very concretely in somebody's life in that way. That's amazing.
Andy	So let me take you in a different direction here for a moment. I wanna see what sort of advice you would give to someone who was considering kind of a path that you went down here in terms of starting their own nonprofit...well, trying to do something positive and starting a nonprofit, that sort of thing. You've done this for five years now. What advice would you give to someone who's thinking about this?
Cathy	It depends on the day. Some days, I'd be like, "Run far away. Don't do it."
Andy	Don't do it.
Cathy	<p>I just like to remind people or tell people that you can change your life in amazing ways that don't necessarily require you starting your own nonprofit. And people are like, "I could never do that. I can't. I can't. I can't." So number one, stop thinking I can't because you can. It may not require...I mean, it might be really different work than the work you're doing now but it might not require a major shift in your skillset or the type of work you do. So you're a lawyer, so great. You can still be a lawyer and go be a lawyer at legal aid, or start by volunteering at a free legal clinic in your neighborhood.</p> <p>Or if there is no free legal clinic in your neighborhood, hey, go to your local community center, or a synagogue, or a church, or something and say, "Hey, mind if I set up a table here once a week and advertise free legal advice for low-income folks from 4:00 to 6:00 every Thursday?" I mean, try it out. You don't have to like drop everything and go do that.</p>
Andy	So sort of test the waters, start small, that sort of thing.
Cathy	Absolutely.
Andy	Unlike deciding to go to auto mechanics school for two years.
Cathy	Exactly.
Andy	You've been very generous with your time. I just wanna look at one aspect of something you've mentioned a couple of times and I'm just interested in the spiritual side of this. So do you feel like this is almost like your vocation the way a priest or a nun would get called to that vocation?

Cathy	<p>Totally. I do. For me, that's where it comes from. That said, I mean, that's hugely important to me. For me, personally, that's what fuels me. I have a belief that we are put on this earth to care for one another, to live in community, to tend to one another.</p> <p>And again, I don't think that anything that I have done is all that remarkable. I've worked hard. I'm not negating that. I've made unusual life choices. All of that is true.</p> <p>At the core of it, I'm doing the one part that I feel like I can do, that I feel like I've been called to do, to help take care of my neighbors. And thank God there are all sorts of people out there who are doing things that help take care of me in different ways. If we start shifting our lens to think about this more of, how do we take care of one another with whatever skills we have, or inclination, or calling, everything would be different.</p>
	<p>OUTGOING MUSIC</p>
Andy	<p>It was such an incredible experience for me to sit down and visit with Cathy Heying and her team at The Lift Garage.</p> <p>Ten years ago, Cathy saw a problem. She watched people spiral into poverty when their cars broke down. And she said, someone should do something about this. And eventually she said "Gee, maybe that somebody is me."</p> <p>You can learn more about the mission of The Lift Garage at www.TheLiftGarage.org. And if their story moves you, don't hesitate to click on the "donate" button on their website and help support them.</p> <p>Got a "Second Act Story" we should profile? Contact me – that's Andy Levine, at SecondActStories@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you.</p> <p>And if you are thinking of starting your own second act, we hope Cathy's story will help you find a new path. As Cathy shared earlier in the podcast, "Stop thinking that you can't, because you can."</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. A new "Second Act Story" is just around the corner.</p>