

Episode #31  
 Can One Woman Fix Foster Care? Meet Judy Cockerton  
 (1/8/2018)

Who	Audio Segment
Judy Cockerton	<p>We have set our child welfare fair system up to fail because we say, "Here, you have the mandate to keep the most vulnerable children and families safe. This is your mandate. You take care of it. We'll give you a little bit of money, not enough to do the job successfully, and then we're gonna turn around and walk away and we won't pay attention until something goes wrong."</p> <p>I began Re-Envisioning Foster Care in America.</p>
	<p>INTRO MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST OVERVIEW</p>
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.</p> <p>In this episode, we're going to meet Judy Cockerton. Judy is, as one person described to me, "a force of nature." Her life changed when she became a foster parent at the age of 48. She and her husband Arthur took on the responsibility of raising two sisters aged five months and 17 months – along with her own two kids who were 12 and 18 at the time.</p> <p>And for the first time she saw how flawed the child welfare system was in her home state of Massachusetts -- and in America.</p> <p>So she created an organization called The Treehouse Foundation. And she worked to build a model community that supports adoptive families.</p> <p>She had a really simple idea. Let's bring together adoptive families and their children with a group of caring elders – mostly retired women in this case. I traveled to Easthampton, Massachusetts and spent a day with Judy Cockerton and the Treehouse Community.</p>
Andy	So, we're doing a quick tour with Judy Cockerton. Judy, your title.
Judy	I am the Founder and Executive Director of the Treehouse Foundation.
Andy	So, we're leaving the community center? Okay. Good deal.
Judy	<p>Yes. So, I'm going to give you a tour of the intergenerational Treehouse Community neighborhood. This first Treehouse Community, we have been open for 12 years. So, for the past 12 years, over 100 Treehouse community members, ages newborn through 91, as of today, have been living in this neighborhood that we built from the ground up. And our mission is to help move children out of the public foster care system into permanent loving families and be surrounded by elders, ages 55 and older, who invest in their hopes, and dreams, and lives, and futures.</p>

Andy	For 30 minutes we walked around the Treehouse community. It's made up of a mix of large 3-5 bedroom townhouses for the adoptive families and smaller cottage apartments for seniors.
Andy	And what was here before?
Judy	This was a hayfield.
Andy	So how do we get from hayfield to intergenerational community? Let's go back a few years to understand Judy's first act.
Judy	<p>I worked with hearing-impaired children. I knew in high school that I wanted to teach hearing-impaired kids. And so, I went to college with that major in mind, chose the college because of its "deaf-ed" program as it was called.</p> <p>I taught kids for 10 years and then I had my own child. I decided that I wanted to have my own specialty toy store and work with children and families in that way. That was wonderful and I did that for almost 17 years in the Greater Boston area.</p>
Andy	Judy's toy store was called "No Kidding."
Judy	So, it was a wonderful store. It was in Brookline, Massachusetts and in Brookline Village, actually, which is just outside of Boston. It was filled to the brim with joy and whimsy and color and light and the best domestic and imported playthings. It was a lovely 17 years full of lots of great memories. I raised my children by birth there in the store and I loved it.
Andy	I want you to describe a dinner you had one night and as described in your bio, your husband gave you a news article and it sort of changed your trajectory.
Judy	<p>So, my husband was a photo editor at the "Boston Herald" and one night, it was in the fall of 1998, he brought home a newspaper article about a little five-month-old baby boy who had been kidnapped from his crib in Worcester, Massachusetts in a foster home. I had no idea that something like that could happen. I had no idea. My kids were 12 and 18 at the time and I asked them to come back to the table. I said, "We need to have a family meeting because I wanna talk about this."</p> <p>We talked about how children and youth living in foster care are our responsibility as a society and that something like this just can't happen and what were we gonna do as a family to help kids living in care?</p>
Andy	Did you know much about the foster care system at that point?
Judy	I knew basically nothing.
Andy	So, you read this story and it moved you?

Judy	<p>Yes, it was a real catalyst for, both, our family to have that discussion, but also for us to decide that the way we were gonna give back as a family was to become a foster family. And so, I called the Department of Children and Families the next day, they sent out a social worker. The following May, I got a call when I was at No Kidding setting up for the day from a wonderful social worker saying, "We have 2 beautiful little sisters, 5 months old and 17 months old. Would you open your home to them?" And we did.</p>
Andy	<p>Judy picked her 12-year-old daughter up from school, headed to Toys R Us and grabbed two shopping carts. They loaded up on diapers, formula, car seats and other baby supplies. The two children arrived later that day and she set into her new role as a foster parent. And it introduced her to the child welfare system.</p>
Judy	<p>So, here I am knowing basically nothing and I wanna help and I have a 5-month old on one hip and a 17-month old on the other, and I'm walking through the doors of our child welfare system for the first time. I'm looking around and I'm really looking for people like me. Like, "Where are the helpers?" And I see lots of amazing social workers running around, trying to do all the right things for the kids, but I don't see anybody else there. And I see foster parents and I see birth parents and I see the children and I see people doing their jobs, but I don't see anyone helping or enhancing or enriching or helping the Department of Children and Families, our child welfare system, be successful, other than being a foster parent or an adoptive parent or a social worker.</p>
Andy	<p>She described the problem to me using the analogy of a badly-designed menu. Imagine a restaurant where there are only two choices for enormous six courses meals – you can be a foster parent or you can be an adoptive parent. Those are your only options.</p>
Judy	<p>I just kept thinking, "Okay. Well, if the child welfare system needs help, and all those people, those millions of Americans are running away and they don't have enough people, dollar, or idea resources, what am I gonna do?"</p> <p>I began Re-Envisioning Foster Care in America.</p> <p>So, I thought, "Okay, the first line item in this new compelling menu has to be some kind of a way to bring kids out of the public foster care system into permanent loving families, supporting those families with respectful collaboration, helping them meet the emerging needs of the kids, and they're gonna need a lot of help."</p> <p>I grew up in an intergenerational family. My mom was one of nine. I was constantly surrounded by aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents who invested in my health and wellbeing. And so, that felt like the right vision.</p>

Andy	<p>One day while the little ones were napping, Judy read an article in People magazine about an intergenerational community called Hope Meadows. It was built on an abandoned air force base in Rantoul, Illinois. And it brought together adoptive families with older adults who wanted to help.</p>
Judy	<p>So, I flew out to Hope Meadows, flew out to Rantoul, Illinois, and I spoke with every parent, every elder, every child living in Hope Meadows, in this community. And it was so right...it felt so right to me. It was just, as I said before, common sense and humanity and people were stepping up to the plate, people were giving freely of their love and their talents and their time and all boats were rising. I just thought, "Yes, please. I'm gonna go back to Massachusetts and this will be the first line item on the menu."</p>
Andy	<p>Now, you'll remember that Judy has been described as a "force of nature." So the first thing she did when she returned to Massachusetts was sit down with Harry Spence who was the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families. And she immediately sold him on the idea. They jointly decided to build the first Treehouse Community in Western Massachusetts where the need was most pronounced.</p> <p>It took four years and about \$15 million in government funding. But in 2006, the first Treehouse Community launched in Easthampton, Massachusetts. The community included the construction of 12 townhouses for the families, 48 cottage apartments -- affordable housing units for those 55 years or older -- and a community center.</p>
Andy	<p>So, the buildings are built, you're taking all these applications, people start to move in. When did you know this was gonna work?</p>
Judy	<p>Well, I never doubted it, seriously, for one second. Because, you know, like, at No Kidding, I was my customer, I'm my customer here as well. I'm a foster-adoptive parent and I'm an elder. And so, I knew what foster-adoptive families wanted and needed. I knew from being a parent by birth and a foster-adoptive parent the kind of range of needs that the kids have and I know what elders enjoy. So, it never occurred to me for one second that it wasn't gonna work.</p>
Andy	<p>And it has worked. Since 2006, over 150 people -- a mix of adoptive parents, their children and elders -- have been living together in the Treehouse Community in Easthampton.</p> <p>I asked Judy if I could interview some of the elders who live in the Treehouse Community. She set me up in a conference room with five of them -- Lynne Knudsen, Marcia Kemp, Mary Steele, Barbara Lockhart and Pam Hanson. Their ages ranged from 57 to 87.</p> <p>Here are some of the things they had to say about living at the Treehouse Community in Easthampton.</p>

Elder #1	When kids come in who are just in from foster care, they come in scared. They have had such trauma that they tend to expect more trauma. And here, we have made this a safe place for them to be and to live. And I think it's the safety aspect not just for the kids, but for all of us. It's a safe place not only physically, but mentally.
Elder #2	When I think of an old folks' home, I think people go there just to die, you know. And when I think of Treehouse, it's about living. It is about regenerating your soul and getting yourself back on because you have all these youth that is bringing more life to you, you know, where instead of you going to just die, you know, this is like lift. This is life. Treehouse is life.
Elder #3	There's a cohesion here. There's a feeling of, "We're all in this together," and we're moving. We're not static, you know. There's something new happening every day here at Treehouse.
Elder #4	Purpose. That's the difference between taking people, older people and putting them on a shelf, and just have them sit there and wait to die. Because here, the most important thing is that everybody really feels necessary and useful. We have purpose. I think all people need purpose and this is what this community does for us.
Andy	One of the most interesting moments of the group interview came when a school bus pulled up outside the community center where we were meeting in. And Lynne Knudson said:
Lynne Knudson	I see out the window our children are coming home from school.
Andy	You said, "I see out the window our children are coming home."
Lynne	Yeah
Andy	You didn't say "the children," you said "our children."
Elder	They're our children.
Andy	You mean all of you really feel that way?
Elder	Oh Yeah.
Elder	We all consider them to be our children.
Andy	That one exchange told me that the Treehouse concept is working.  I asked Judy about her work bringing the Treehouse Foundation to other parts of the country.

Judy	Well, we're working in Northern California, we're working in the Greater Boston area, and we're working with folks in Upstate New York. It's really, one has to just get out and talk about the magic that happens when people come together in this way and one has to talk about helping those children move out of the public foster care system so they're never at risk of aging out. And one has to talk about solving the challenges of older Americans, solving the challenges of vulnerable families, and solving the challenges of at-risk children. And, you know, it's really about educating and inspiring people to think differently.
Andy	And when you put these people altogether, they almost solve each other's problems is what I'm sort of hearing you say.
Judy	Absolutely.
Andy	Okay. I wanna take you in a little different direction here. So, imagine you were giving advice to someone else who is considering a leap off the diving board, sort of like what you did considering...
Judy	Yeah, to build an intergenerational community?
Andy	Well, let's not go that tight. Considering a second act. Considering doing something, you know, leaving a corporate job or stopping becoming a lawyer or, you know, just doing something for the greater good?
Judy	Do it. Do it. Jump, do it. There's no greater feeling than doing what you're meant to be doing at this time. I highly recommend living a life of meaning and purpose.
Andy	You are now 67?
Judy	Yes.
Andy	How much longer do you hope to be doing this?
Judy	Oh, until I can no longer do it. You know, I have no plans to retire. I hope to be re-envisioning foster care until the day I die. Actively re-envisioning, advocating.

<p>Andy</p>	<p>I spent a half-day with Judy Cockerton and the Treehouse Community. It's an inspiring place and I'm so happy that I've been share this experience with all of you.</p> <p>Back in 2002, Judy had an amazingly simple idea. Let's bring together two groups that can help each other – adoptive families and retired seniors. She set out to prove that the intergenerational concept works in a hayfield in Easthampton, Massachusetts. And now she is helping to bring that same success formula to other parts of the United States.</p>
	<p>OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION</p>
<p>Andy</p>	<p>Our special thanks to Judy Cockerton and her entire team at the Treehouse Foundation. They could not have been more accommodating in answering the dozens of questions that I had.</p> <p>There are so many interesting lessons in today's story. But let me distill it down to two things that stuck out to me:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>The importance of persistence in any second act...</b>This is one of Judy's most amazing traits. She convinced the state to invest \$15 million in the project. She found a developer who would build it. She worked with dozens of stakeholders in Easthampton, many who were skeptical of the whole concept. And in four short years, she transformed a hayfield into a caring, intergenerational community.</li> <li>2) <b>The value of a life with purpose...</b> You heard it from Judy in her advice to anyone considering a second act. "I highly recommend living a living of meaning and purpose." And I certainly heard it loud and clear in my interview with five "Treehouse elders" who have so much to give despite their advanced age.</li> </ol> <p>Judy Cockerton is going strong at 67 and completely focused on bringing the Treehouse concept to other parts of America. And I have zero doubt that this "force of nature" will be successful.</p> <p>So that is a wrap on Episode 31 of "Second Act Stories." If you like the podcast, I hope you'll consider becoming a Second Act Advocate and help to spread the word to your own social media network. Who knows? You might inspire someone to begin their own second act.</p> <p>Just go to my website – <a href="http://www.SecondActStories.org">www.SecondActStories.org</a> – and click on the Second Act Advocates button in the upper right hand corner.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>