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The Missoula Senior Center and the COVID 19 Pandemic An Oral History with John Nugent, President of the Board 2020–2021

Interviewed March 14, 2023

Transcribed by Mark Spring

Mark Spring: Once again. I am very glad that you have taken the time to do this. There are several things that, of course, I wanted to know, mainly about just the history as President and how you brought the center through the Covid pandemic with all that was going on. And so, hopefully, that won't be overtaxing you too much. Could we start with just a little background of your history with the center in general?

John Nugent: I grew up in Missoula. graduated from high school here, graduated from Loyola High School. and then I left for college. and I was gone for 50 years and came back to Missoula in 2018 after my wife had died. I decided that I wanted to move back to where I had most of my family, and most of my family was here in Missoula. So, I moved back to Missoula.

JN: So, I moved back in 2018 then and in 2019, and didn't do anything with the Senior Center didn't even know it existed, then in the summer of 2018 or the winter of 2018/19. Then I went down to the farmers market or the winter market they used to have at the senior center and just loved it. So, I started going down there just about every Saturday. I joined it and paid for my membership because I thought it was a great thing. and picked up one of the newsletters at one time and saw that there was a there was no secretary on the board at that time. Mike Sweet was the President at the time, so I inquired with Mike about what it would take to join the board that I had nonprofit experience. I served on a number of boards, and I'd be willing to step in as secretary. and he told me that the way the bylaws were written was that I could not step in a secretary because you had to serve a year on the board before you could be an officer. so, I could not be the secretary. He desperately wanted me to get involved and to run for the board the next time there was a board election and stuff like that; I said, Well. can't you put interim people on the board during the time I'm willing to serve on the board? He said, no, that's not the way the bylaws are written.

JN: So, I said to him, Listen, I'm willing to volunteer as the acting secretary, not be on the board, but attend the board meetings, take the minutes. give them to the board all that kind of stuff, and then, when the board opens up. I submit my name, so I started doing that. I think it was in mid-2019 I became acting secretary. I had no official title or anything. I just act as acted as the acting secretary and took the minutes and stuff like that. So, it then in November, I think it was. There was an election, and I was elected to

the board. but I couldn't be. I couldn't be elected to the Secretary position because, again, I had not served on the board for a year.

JN: So that was kind of my introduction to the center and how I started to get involved with the center.

MS: Well, now, was that correct? I thought you just had to be a member. I didn't know you had to be a member of the board for a year.

JN: Yeah, no. The way the bylaws were written at that time, and maybe they've changed, in order to be an officer, you had to have been on the board for one year.

MS: Okay. they had been changed by the time I got there, to the best of my knowledge. I may have read that wrong, too; otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to be President.

JN: Right. Well, I can tell you that I suspended the bylaws at one point because it was ridiculous.

MS: Okay, Thank you. So now, so you were present when Mike Sweet walked out of the board.

JN: I was at that board meeting. Yes, so I had just been elected to the Board as a board member and was at that December Board meeting when my Mike Sweet through his temper tension and walked out.

MS: Okay. And then, of course, I know that Kathy became interim President at that time.

JN Yes, so there was only one month. It was less than a month. It was like 2 weeks. This was the third week of December. and he walked out. Kathy was Vice president, so she automatically assumed the job of President, and then she went, I think it was, to Chicago for Christmas, and when she was in Chicago for Christmas, she started calling and saying, I can't do this. I don't have the stamina to be president. I don't want to be president. I don't have the skills. I don't want to do this. Somebody else has to take over as president. so, some of the other board members begin saying, John, can you take over? And I said, well, I can't take over because of the bylaws. I can't be president. I haven't been on the board for a year. and so, we went into this big discussion about.

JN: Well, what are the ramifications? If we don't follow the bylaws. and concluded that unless somebody from the membership objected. there were really no ramifications; there were none, you know. We looked at the State laws regarding nonprofit bylaws and all that kind of stuff, and you know, we just felt. you know these are our internal bylaws,

and if we violate them and a member objects, then we will have to do something about it. But if nobody objects. let's just go with it. Let's just try to stabilize the boat here.

JN: So, Kathy came back and called a meeting and said, I can't be President, and we said, well, I would be willing to step in as president. but we're going to be in violation of the bylaws, and the Board said that's fine. So, Kathy stepped down, and the board voted me to become President.

MS: Is that December, or January. That right?

JN: So, I think. Yeah, it was like early January that happened. That's right.

MS: Just to let you know, I did change those bylaws and had a membership vote that the Board can elect its own directors at its first meeting.

JN: Good for you.

MS: So now Covid hit, the first case was reported in January of 20. When did that affect the board or the center?

JN: You know? If I remember correctly, it did not affect us until March. If I remember correctly, there were rumors of it, and there were concerns about it. But it was March before the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic. and it was in March that I think California was the first state to begin to put restrictions and stuff like that, so I think it was either March or April. I know it was spring, but I don't have the exact date, but it was March, March, or April, and we got I got a call from Rob.

JN: I don't know whether you've talked to Mike Sweet about his tenure and some of the trouble he had with the board. But part of the issue that was going on with the board and part of the reason why Mike left was just a different vision as to where the senior center was going. One of the things that had been going on had that Mike was having discussions with MAS, Missoula Aging Services, having a greater role at the senior center. The senior center has a long history of unhealthy relationships with them. And that's putting it lightly.

JN: Mike had, I think it was at the November Board meeting, mentioned that he had asked to put together some kind of an agreement where MAS would manage the center. That he, that we then hire a manager. We should have MAS manage the center, which caused real heckles with some of the board members. And then he had said that even if they didn't manage the center, he had agreed to allow them to put a staff member from MAS at the senior center. And there was quite a bit of discussion as to where you're

going to do that. What offers are you going to make, and all this kind of stuff. And he says. Well, that all will be worked out. We've got plenty of space within the offices and stuff like that.

JN: So, when I came on board, there was this attitude from MAS that they were really calling the shots. I had met with them soon after I became President, and of course, they were upset that Mike had left, so we had a couple of meetings, and I went through the whole thing with their director. I don't remember her name now, but she'd given me a long history of unhealthy relationships and all that kind of stuff. You probably got the same thing.

MS: Oh, yeah.

JN: And but anyway, Rob, who was our liaison with MAS and you know. he just appears and would say, well, we're gonna pull our congregate meal contract. If you don't do this, or if you don't do this, your meal costs are way out of line. You're not falling in with the nutrition guidelines. We're just gonna pull this contract; why don't we? We think this is an unhealthy relationship, and it was all just trying to intimidate, trying to get us to sign some kind of a contract with MAS to manage the center because that's what they wanted. And so, anyway, in March or April, whenever it was all of a sudden, Rob appears, and he comes into my office and says you have to close down. The Health Department has just issued an order that they're restricting in-person meals throughout Missoula and etc., etc. And you're going to have to close down. And I was shocked. I just sat there and looked at him and said. Okay. But if the Health Department is doing this, why are you killing me? We have the contract, and we're going to pull the contract unless you closedown, etc., etc.

JN: And I said, well, Rob, I appreciate the fact that you've come over here and told me. But until I get a direct order from the Health Department, I'm not doing anything, and he says, by the way, you have to close your thrift store, too. and I just said, Rob, when I get a direct order from the Health Department, I will do something. Thanks very much. So, as soon as he left my office, I called the Health Department and said, what's going on? And they said, well, we've just issued an order, and I said, would you fax that order to me? So, they fax the order to me.

MS: And?

JN: You know, I read it, and they, it was basically we couldn't have in-building meals anymore. But if you were like restaurants that had drive-by, and things like that, could still serve me as they just said the drive-by and all that kind of stuff. And so, I said. Why, what? So, I went and gathered my kitchen crew and said so this is the order MAS wants

us to just close down. I don't think we should, and of course, everybody said, Well, what? What would MAS do? Yes, do about these people that are coming here every day for meals, and Rob said, "We'll, we just put them on Meals on Wheels." Well, a number of our people had been on meals, and we also didn't like it, and we had heard that.

MS: So?

JN: I just said. I don't think that that's an option. But I went back to the kitchen, and I said, what would it take for us to get ourselves organized to where we could go out the back door. Just start distributing meals, and the kitchen said we have to go get containers. We don't have any containers that we could put the meals in, but we could do that. That would be pretty simple to do, but we'd have to get some volunteers or staff members or someone to do to take them from the kitchen out to the parking lot and then take the names and all this kind of stuff.

JN: I talked to some of our key volunteers and some of our board members and just said, you know this is what's happened. What do you think? Do you think we can get ourselves organized enough to serve these meals? And this was a Friday if I remember right, it was Friday, and they said, we're not going to let MAS take over. We're not going to let these people go to Meals on Wheels. We don't know how long this is going to be where there's going to be. One week, 2 weeks, 3 weeks. We can go by some containers, and on a short-time basis, we can do this. So, we went out to that store. I think it's called Chefs Store now, whatever that is, and we got my car and went out there and bought all kinds of to go containers. and came back and reconfigured the kitchen as to how we were going to dish them up, and what we were going to do, and started calling volunteers and saying, this is what the order is. This is what we want to do. Can you help? And the next day, we were all set to go.

MS: Let me ask you, who was your lead cook at that time? Was that Willie?

JN: Yes, and MAS was very unhappy with that decision. And so, the next morning, the day that we were going to start, whatever day it was we were going to start. I got a call from the police department, and the police department says we understand that you're going to start drive-through meal pickups. and we're just warning you that if you start to have cars backed up onto Higgins Avenue, we're going to shut you down. We can't allow that; it will be a traffic hazard that's going to shut you down. and that's just not acceptable. And I said, well, we've mapped out the parking lot. We think that we can do it. We can have 2 lines coming in, you know. We don't know what's going to happen. We don't know how many people are going to come, but we're very sensitive to your concerns. Oh, and by the way. who called you and complained. he says, well, we got a call from Missoula Aging Services. And I said, okay, well, that makes a lot of sense.

JN: So, at 11:30, we had a full crew out there, including somebody out at Higgins Avenue making sure there was no backup on Higgins Avenue, and of course, there was a police car waiting to see what was going to happen, but we had arranged the parking lot where they weren't going to pick up their meals except at the back kitchen door. Then they were going to leave through the alleys. And so, I went over to the police car and said that the police officers, there's two of them there, I said. You want to come. Look to see what we have set up, so you know what's going on, and one of the policemen came with me. I showed them how we were doing it, and where the cones were, and we were having two lanes of traffic and stuff like that, and he says, well, I think you've got everything covered. And I said, we will do everything we can to make sure that they don't back up, but if they back up on Higgins Avenue, I don't think it's my problem. I think it's the city's problem, and he says, well, I have to agree with you. I think you've taken all the precautions you can take, so we're just going to sit here and see how things go.

JN: We had no problems that day, with cars backing up onto Higgins Avenue. and so about halfway through, they left, and you know it didn't; it didn't go entirely smoothly. Rob came over from MAS and so gave us his opinion of everything, but we just, you know, kept running more meals out. They would dish up the meals. We'd run them out. take names, and I said, I don't care whether we get the names correct or not these first few times. Let's just get these meals served and get people out of here. So, when it was all over with that day, we all felt that it was a success and that it had worked. and that we could do this for a week or 2 because, of course, we just thought it was going to be a short-time thing, right? So, the kitchen told us that there were a couple of other things we needed to do to adjust to things. We needed to go back out and get a different kind of container for soup because, at that time, we were serving soup. And so, we needed a container for the food and a container for the soup, and we were trying to decide what to do for a bridge. because of the MAS guidelines that we were supposed to serve a beverage, so we went out and bought little bottles of water so that everybody would get a bottle of water. Most people refused the water and said, you know I'm taking this home. I have something at home I can drink. I don't need that. So, we made, you know, we made a couple of adjustments.

MS: Do you have any ballpark figure of how many meals we were serving?

JN: I think that we were about 60 meals inside when they shut us down. I think we're averaging 55 to 60. I think the first day that we did the drive by we had 40 people that came

MS: Okay.

JN: So, it was not. It was not as great, but we still feel that we were providing a service, even if the numbers dropped. We thought that we were providing a service and, I should say, at the same time. I got from the Health Department their rules regarding businesses and what businesses had to do. You know they had to put up a plastic barrier. They had to have the six feet of distancing. You know, all that kind of stuff.

JN: So, I met with the three store volunteers. And we talked about it, and I said, you know we were told we have to close the thrift store. But as I read this dictate from the Health Department, we can readjust things here, and we ought to be able to keep it open. Do you feel safe continuing at the thrift store? And most of the thrift for volunteers said, yes, there was a couple of said No, I if we reopen. I'm not going to volunteer, but most of them said, yes, we can do that. We can do a six-foot kind of barrier. We can do that kind of stuff. The thrift store is really the thing that's keeping us alive right now and the money from the trust, or we can't close the through store. It will be the death of the senior center. So, it was because of some very dedicated volunteers who said, no, we will keep it. Keep the thrift store open that we kept the thrift store open, so we didn't close the thrift store either.

MS: And that was what Pat and Syl said or others?

JN: Yes, they were the 2. They were the real 2 drivers

MS: So, it was that we were able to meet the guidelines there. Now, of course, we know that we were expecting this to be short-term when it appeared that it was going to be for a long duration. What measures did you take? What adjustments did you make?

JN: Well, so I think Once MAS realized that we were not going to close down and about that time, I think that Russ came on. Russ had not been there, and they had. They hired Russ. And you know, I went through the Older Americans Act and the congregate meal portion of it. I was reading it pretty clearly as to what was required, and I said this at one point in one of our meetings. if I read this, Older Americans Act correctly. I think that MAS owes the senior center as a congregate meal site more than what we're receiving, and I would like to have a meeting to discuss that. And that was the first meeting that I think Russ was at, and Russ said. Well. I've never really read that. Let me read that. And he came back to us a little few days later and said, well, I've read it, and I kind of agree that maybe we should be doing a couple of things differently.

JN: So, I think that they saw that when we were not going to stop the meal program that they needed to be a little bit more flexible, also Covid funds that began to flow. So, I think it was. The Department of Health had said, we have this money, that is, in the emergency fund, and we can give this money. To the area agencies on aging to help.

What for a pandemic, whatever you want to do. So, Rob came over a few days later and said, Well. okay. So, you're going to keep this open. You're going to do this. I don't necessarily agree. But if this is what your decision is.

We will not distinguish between somebody who is eligible for the program and somebody who's not. We will pay for every meal coming through here, which was a huge thing.

MS: Yes.

JN: And I think that he said we would pay \$8 a meal because then all we had to do was get a name. We didn't have to go back in and figure out who was on the meal plan and who wasn't on the meal plan?

MS: That was a huge concession.

JN: Yes, it was. And then Rob said. We have talked about it over at MAS, and we have some staff members who aren't doing anything right now. because we've had to close down a number of our programs. And we don't want to lay these people off because again, we think it's going to be a short-term thing. So, would you mind if a couple of our staff members came over every day at noon and they pass out meals? And we said, no, we would absolutely love that. So, we started having a couple of staff members from MAS, and come over at lunch and help us to pass out meals.

MS: Goodness! That was a good olive branch.

JN: Yes, it was. Yes, it was, and we said that the fact that they raised the meals and said that they would pay for anybody who came through and that they would send some from staff members over. We felt that at least communication was changing a little bit, and maybe there was more open communication between us. So, we accepted it readily. Both the staff members and the money.

MS: Yeah, okay? Oh, that's wonderful. So now we know that that transpired on through until, in fact, it reopened up. Once, I was in your position. But there were, you also were instrumental in applying for the other grants that were offered under Covid.

JN: Yeah. So, the first one that came up was the, I think it was the PPP. which was, if you kept your employees on, you could have some of your payroll cost offset. So, we applied for that one. and I think we got \$16,000 if I remember right, for that. That was the maximum we were able to get. and we got that through First Interstate Bank. They were the bank people and one of the people over at First Interstate Bank. I don't remember her name. but she worked very closely with us on that to make sure that we got the

money correctly and crossed t's and dotted our i's for us. What we had to do to ask for. Forgive this after. as we went on, they felt that these were going to be forgivable loans and all this kind of stuff.

JN: So. Yes, we applied for that and got that. And then the Health Department. As this progressed, we got a notice from the Health Department that they had some money available. What they were calling was for infrastructure grants to help modify buildings or whatever to help cope with Covid. and so, I, you know, we had had problems with our HVAC system for some time, and I think I think the top grant was like \$30,000, so I contacted them and said, you know we're the senior center. We're not having any in-house activities right now, but we are; we will as soon as you as soon as the Health Department allows us. But we would love to put a brand-new HVAC system that has a high-powered air exchange system on it. so that when we do come back in that, we will do a better exchange of air. And the Health Department said we love that. But the maximum is 30,000. Do you think you can do it for 30,000? I spoke. I don't know, but I got on the phone and started calling different HVAC systems. and Garden City, who had done some work for us before, came out, and I told him what we wanted and what we had, and they said, well, we don't think we can do it for 30, maybe 32, or whatever. And I said all I have is \$30,000, so they came back a little while later and says, we will do it for the 30,000. Whatever you're going to do, we will do it. So, we went ahead and signed the contract, and they put the new HVAC system on the main part of the building. We weren't able to do it back in that back room by the kitchen, nor were we able to do the kitchen. I was hoping to do all three, but we weren't able to do those.

MS: Okay. Well, we have since taken care of that. Thank goodness. Where? Where was our financial status at that time?

JN: So, you know, when I came on as president. and I looked at the financial books real closely. I realized that the thrift store was the main source of revenue that was keeping us alive in the Meals program. At that point, we were at a loss. We were spending more on food and meals.

JN: That is part of why, Roberta, when I came on, Roberta was there, and Roberta was just a huge spender. and I had a meeting with Roberta and said, Roberta, we can't continue to spend like we're spending. You know we have this inventory that's just out of sight; just because somebody comes in and says, I'm having a sale, doesn't mean we have to buy it. And she finally came to me and said, I just think that I want to go back and work for the Feds. I have ten years. If I can work for the Feds for ten more years, I can get a retirement. And so, she had left, but we were still spending more in the kitchen than we were bringing in, so the thrift store was our main source of revenue, but we

were having a slight profit. We were making money each month, which was one of the reasons why I wanted to just shore up that thrift store so badly.

JN: And you know we had had debates about. Should we reopen on weekends, or should we not? Do you know what should we do? And, of course, Pat and Syl were saying, we can only do so much. And I said, Listen. I'm willing to. I want to keep the thrift store open on Saturday. When I look at things, Saturday is our big day, and so I understand that we have volunteers that don't want to do it on Saturday. I want to do it on Saturday. I will open a thrift store and run the thrift for myself on Saturdays if we have to. And I did that for a number of Saturdays where we opened it because Saturdays were our big day, and it just seemed that once Covid hit, the thrift store just took off. I mean, we had. We had record days that just you know. I don't know what caused that. But we just all of a sudden just had record dates, and so there were many Saturdays where it was just Shirley and I. Shirley would come in and sort clothes in the back. And then, if I needed her, I'd call for her to come up and help me. And then I was just at the cash register, and that was the way we got through the Saturdays, but we had these record-breaking days.

JN: Though financially, we were. you know. I'd say just about breaking even once MAS started giving us \$8 a meal. We were in good shape for the Meals program. Also, the kitchen started turning around, and Will. Well, he was of. He had a very difficult personality. and he brought the cost down. He, you know. I just said we can't do that; we need to bring the cost down. And so, he brought the cost down, so financially, we were. We were doing okay now. We would not have been doing okay had we had a paid manager or a lot of paid staff. But we, you know, had two kitchen staff at that point, a part-time bookkeeper, and I think that was it we had. We only had 3 or 4 people, so we had cut the staff way back so we would not be making money if we had a had a manager, or we're paying for a third store manager or those kinds of things. So, it had been cut way back.

MS: Okay? Well, Elizabeth was helping out a lot there. Wasn't she?

JN: Yes, yes, to Liz again as a volunteer. Elizabeth was there just about every day. I was there every day, I mean. It was a full-time thing for me. I was there every day, and Elizabeth was there every day. Kathy Campbell was there most days. We had a couple of other volunteers that came in just for lunch. That was there every day. Pat had increased her hours in the thrift store, so it increased her hours, and they were all volunteers. So, it was on the backs of the of volunteers that we kept that place afloat.

MS: Okay? Well, now, when did the large bequest come in? Was that during Covid

JN: You wish that it was at the end of my stay, so it could have been. I think it would have been November of my term there; let me just say that. you know, when I came on as President, Kelly. I don't know whether you've run across Kelly or not. Yes, but Kelly had been acting kind of as Mike Sweet's special assistant as what her title name was. and she was basically acting as the manager of the center. Then we also had a thrift store person who was working 20 some hours a week as a manager when Mike Sweet left. They were both very loyal to Mike Sweet, and so they began to say, oh, I don't know whether I want to stay or not, stay or whatever. And so, the thrift store manager and the Board voted to defund that position. And then, when that happened, Kelly just said, I don't want to do this anymore, either. I will continue to do the newsletter. But I'm not. I don't want to do this. I think you're going to. I think you're going to have a different vision than what Mike had for the center. So, she also left. So again, that brought us down to fewer staff people.

JN: So, when Covid hit, we were down on staff people. We were having this big discussion as to; can we afford to hire a manager? We cannot afford to hire a manager. If we don't hire a manager, what are we going to do? And I had committed to the board? I had said to the Board that I would commit my time for one year of kind of being the president of the Board, volunteer, and manager just to get us through that. But that was before I committed to that. I said that I would do that.

MS: And you know that you knew the time it takes to do that. So. Oh, gosh!

JN: You know I was. I was there every day long hours every day, just trying to sort through things and figure things out. Go back through the history. Try to understand what it happened in the past, and you know what happened. We got; I think it was in the summer that a big bequest had been given to us. but we had no idea how big the request was we had I had assumed that it was a couple of \$100,000. I had no idea how big it was. There is also quite a bit of controversy. When I came on about the fact that we had had quite a bit of money with Merrill, I was not with Merrill Lynch but with D. A. Davidson in an endowment fund, and that in order to pay our bills over the last year, we had had to take quite a bit of that money out. and so that money had decreased substantially.

JN: And so, during my time there, we took no money out of Merrill Lynch. I mean D.A. Davidson, but we took no money out of the endowment. I said. We have to pay our bills. But we're not going to take any more money out. and I called D.A. Davidson, and they said, this is supposed to be an endowment fund, and you're taking money out. you know. You just call us every month, we check, and we write a check, and you know all that kind of stuff.

JN: So, we heard that we had been left money in an endowment. Still, we had no idea how much. and it wasn't, I think, until November that we got the final paperwork as to how much we were going to receive. and we were all just floored. Oh, yeah. of the amount. And so, we had a board meeting, and I said I had met Julie, who I had not known at all. and she told us that when she was going to distribute the checks, and she would bring the check. But she wanted to also talk about what our plans were, what our ideas were for it, and stuff like that. And then so, Elizabeth and I met with Julie, and this year before we do the final sum. I just said, Julie, we are breaking even right now. Now. We won't be breaking even if we have to hire a manager and stuff like that. But we're breaking even now, so. my plan is to take this money and put it in the DA Davidson Endowment Fund and not touch it. And I said, as far as I'm concerned. When we start to use this money, it's got to be for capital expenditures. It's got to be for some kind of a program that your mother really loved. or something. and I think that the center has to prove that I think that to the family, so I'm committing to you, Julie, that we will consult with you over that.

JN: And during that conversation, I said, and you can even become a board member if you want to have a say in this, .and she said, well, let me think about that, she said. I don't know whether I'm old enough. I spoke. You only have to be 50, and she says, well, I'm past 50, but she says, but let me think about that. That may appease some of my family member's concerns because some of the family members have heard how you were going through money and how you were taking money out of the endowment. They're just very concerned that you will use this money up quickly. I said. Julie. let me just assure you that as long as I'm here, that's not going to happen. So, we met with her. and then I went to the board and told the board of that conversation that the board agreed that that's what we should do, hey? We're breaking even. We're still in Covid. We don't know what the future is going to be and all this kind of stuff.

JN: So, when I got the check. I went down to DA Davidson and gave them the check. and I think the checks are still there. I mean, you know, I know that they're talking about remodeling the kitchen and maybe using some of that money for that, which I think would be a good use of the money, but I think the money is still there.

MS: It is, you know. In fact, one of the things that I could not get to which I was so relieved that the Board had the foresight to see that and got Steve in there. I just, I you know, I had with school. I was just putting out fires on both ends and knew it, and it was driving me crazy. But I knew Steve's first priority really would be. You know we've got money that's not earmarked for anything in that endowment and needs to put some restrictions on those funds more than anything. So now is the time for that, you know, of course, Julie and I both came on board at the same time. Fortunately, I. You know I

have been a member since 2015, so I had bits and pieces of the history. So at least I wasn't stepping in, just blind. But I was still hands tied in a lot of ways.

JN: Yeah, I stepped in. I stepped in pretty blind, and at the same time, I was very dedicated to it. And you know those TV's that are up there that they do bingo on when they do, Bingo, I don't know whether you they're used for anything else. But we decided that we needed to improve the bingo thing for bingo before Covid came. but we didn't have the money for a capital improvement to put the TV's up and to do all that kind of stuff. So, I did. I donated the money for that; I said I would donate enough money to put those TV's up so we can upgrade our bingo because that was the second source of income was, you know, the main bingo was doing very well. and I had come a few nights and helped out at bingo, just so I would understand what was going on. And I said, you know, I'll pay for those TV's. So, I paid for those TV's and we got those TVs installed and everything.

JN: And then I signed up as a life member, too. I just said, you know. I'm going to join as a life member just to give some money to the center and stuff like that. So, I was. I was doing things like that. So then, that takes us to November, where we're still in the midst of Covid, and of course, we'd gone through the hot summer, and you know, I got a tent, and you know, was using the tent. We open stage things, and then. you know, Covid just continued on, and we began to get real concerned about it. Oh, my God, here comes the winter. And how are we going to do this during the winter? And still, Covid was on, and we were still under the restrictions. So, you know, we just said? But nobody wanted to quit. Everybody thought it was a success. We were having more people coming, you know. We did surveys of the people that were coming to ask them if they were satisfied. If the meals were okay, everybody was satisfied they loved it. Nobody wanted just to stop it. So, we just said, well, we're just going to have to, you know. Get a heater or something, or try to figure something out. So, we were in the midst of that. So, this was November. What was this? This would have been November 2019?

MS: No, this would have been November 2020.

JN: That's right. This would. This would have been November 2020, so November 20, when I was just zooming along. I'm feeling great and doing great, and I went to donate blood. I donated blood every 6 weeks at the blood bank every 60 days, whatever. It was 60 days. And so, in November, I went down to my normal appointment to donate blood, and I donated blood. I was going through the screening process, and the woman who was screening me said. your iron is low. You can't give blood today. And I said, what? And she said, your iron is below our standard. You can't give blood today. And I said, this is crazy, and she said, go home and eat some liver, and come back tomorrow. And

so, I went home, and I bought some liver and ate some liver. and went back down there the next day to give blood, and my iron was lower than the day before.

MS: Oh, God!

JN: And she said. You can't donate blood. In fact. you now can't come here because you failed twice until you see your primary care physician and you get; we get a release from your primary care physician that you can donate blood. This is crazy. So, I called my primary care physician and talked to the nurse, and told the nurse she said. "Why don't you come in tomorrow? And we would do some blood test, and you can see; we'll fit you in." So, I went in the next day and saw the physician and told the physician what the blood bank said, and he said, well, let's just take the blood here. and just see where we are. So, he took some blood and called me back that night and said, this was just before Thanksgiving because I remember this. This was the day before Thanksgiving, and he called me back and he said. I want you to repeat the blood test. On Friday morning, our blood draw center will be open the day after Thanksgiving. I want you to come in, and I want you to draw the blood again. So, I said, okay, and I said, is there anything I could be so concerned about? He says, no, I just want to verify something. So, I said okay.

JN: So, the day after Thanksgiving, I went in, and I had the blood drawn. He called me that afternoon and said, there's something wrong with your blood. I'm going to refer you to a hematologist and I said a hematologist, and he said yes. He said in Missoula, the hematologist came out of the cancer center. We don't have a separate one. We're not big enough for a separate hematologist department. So, they're hematologists on call, and he said, I'm going to make a referral to you, and they will call you and get things set up and says don't worry about it. I think it's just a little. you know you may, we may need to give you some medication or something. And I said okay.

JN: So, I got a call early next week from the cancer center, and they said we have a referral here. We'd like to set you up on December ninth. So, I went down on December ninth and went in, and they drew blood and did all this kind of stuff. and the oncologist/hematologist came in, sat down with me, and went over my history and whatever we were saying. and then she said. Well, I don't know how to tell you this, but I suspect you have a blood cancer. I was just totally blown out of my mind. I had no; I felt great. I was feeling great. I had no, you know, symptoms or anything. And she said the only way that we can verify this is through a bone marrow biopsy which I would like to do this week. And I, you know, I said, well, what are the ramifications of this and all this kind of stuff? And so, we she went over and says, well, I think what you have is multiple myeloma. And she says I will be honest with you. I don't have a lot of experience with multiple myeloma. But we don't see very, very many cases. It's a rare blood cancer, but

she says, let's not go there. Let's, first of all, find out if that's exactly what you have or not.

JN: So, this was that, like, the second week of December? So, they, she said, I will schedule a bone marrow biopsy this week. So, I left, and no sooner than I got home, she called me and said, is there any chance you can come back? I can do a bone marrow biopsy this afternoon, and I said I was on my way. I'm turning my car around. I'm on my way. So, I came back down, and we did the bone marrow biopsy. and the next morning, she called me to say that they confirmed that I had multiple myeloma. At that point, she said again: I don't have much experience with this. I think you need to go to Fred Hutchinson in Seattle. and she says I will start making all the arrangements.

JN: So, I came back; I went into the senior center and called a board meeting. and just inform them that I had been diagnosed and that it was a shock to me that I'm feeling fine. but that they want to send me to Seattle. and I just didn't. I just said, I know that I'm not going to be able to be here every day. I know that we need to think about things long-term. I don't know what the prognosis of this is. I went home, and I did some Googling and all that kind of stuff, and they were talking about a 2-year lifespan and all this kind of stuff. So, I said. I think that it would be wise if we started to look for somebody else to take over, and I will step aside. So that's that was the point at which I guess it was Steve that came in at that point or was it?

MS: He came in; yes, he came in briefly.

JN: Yeah. So anyway, I just said. You know I do everything I can, but I just. I just needed to give up some of these responsibilities, and of course, I was shaken to the core.

MS: Oh, gosh!

JN: So, I mean, it was. It was a real shock. And so, within a very, very short time, I was in Seattle, so I submitted my resignation as Steve came in and took over within a very short time. Then I was in Seattle. So, after that, I had very little to do with the senior center because I was so preoccupied with my health. and you know, at that time, they were talking about a stem cell transplant, which is a major thing, and that would be in Seattle. And you know all this kind of stuff. So, I just said, you know, I'm willing to serve as past President. But I don't know what the implications are. This is, and I don't know what all that kind of stuff was. So immediately, I had a teleconference with one of the doctors in Seattle. He had all of my records, and he looked through everything and to the bone marrow, yeah, the bone marrow, biopsy. And he said, well, you may be feeling well now, but you have a very aggressive cancer. and you're not going to feel well, even within the next month. You're going to see major differences. And again, I was just

shocked by that because, you know, it's just was so fast it came up so fast. So, I've had very little to do with the center since then.

MS: Well, yeah, I guess so. Oh, goodness gracious! Well, the only other thing that I really want to touch on is we also lost John Walker?

JN: Yes. Now John Walker turned out to be my good buddy. And you know, John had a good heart; sometimes, some of the things that he did to fix the place were a little screwy, but I'll never forget the time when we, well, this was when we were looking at putting the new HVAC system on the roof with the Covid funds. And so, I had Garden City up there, and they came back down to me and said, you know, that little unit that you have over the alcove there that has some strange wiring to it. So, I asked John, and John said, well, is it working. And I said, well, yes, it's working, but they said it doesn't meet code, and he says, as long as it's working, that's all I care about.

JN: But I knew that John had had some health problems. It was, I think, it was early. It was either October or November. He had then been put in the hospital for like 5 days; we had not turned the boilers on yet, and we had a cold snap, and so John was at the hospital on his cell phone trying to tell me how to light the furnaces of the three boilers downstairs. I have no idea as to how to do that. So, I was down there playing with gas, as John was on the phone and saying, okay, now you press this button, and then you press that. And I finally said, John, I'm going to call somebody. so, I don't remember who we called, but we called somebody on an emergency basis. They came out, and they looked at the boilers, and they came back up to me and said, whoever has wired these boilers has not done it correctly. And so, next time, I talk to John on the phone. I said to John, this is the situation, and John said if I was there, they would be working. He said they may not meet Code, but they were working, and I said, well, John, I'm going to have them redone to meet Code, but anyway, I liked John. John and I got along fine. I didn't agree with some of the things that he did, but, boy, he was there. He was dedicated, and he was there. He was a great loss in the center when I heard that we had lost him. I thought, you know, for everything that he has done for that center. He's going to be a huge loss.

MS: And it was, you know. Fortunately, we and we're really fortunate, you know, Syl's husband, Tim, has pretty much stepped into that, and he's pretty much the same kind of mechanic. He can make it work, but he pays a little more attention to code.

JN: Yes. yeah. Tim had come out a couple of times when John was getting out of the hospital and stuff to help me with a couple of short things. But he was doing a lot of volunteering over at Home Resource or something like that. So, he said that he couldn't give us a lot of detail at that time.

MS: Well, and then the other, Jane's husband, and I can't remember his name. He did most of the IT hard wiring; is that not right? Was that during your time?

JN: Yes, so he was the one that actually came and did a lot to fix the Bingo board. We had a real problem with the Bingo system, especially with that Bingo board lighting up and stuff like that. And so, he came out and did that for us. He also, we wanted to install a credit card machine in the thrift store so we could take credit cards. Otherwise, we were running up and down the stairs. just using the credit card machine in the office. and he came and did that for us. Yeah, he did some other things like that for us. Yes, he, and again was great. He didn't say much. but he did what he came in for and went to work, and he knew his stuff, and he did his stuff.

MS: Well, John, actually, you have answered all of my questions. One of the things that I wanted to note. During all this time, there was no one, at least, to my knowledge that contracted Covid.

JN: That's right. You're absolutely right.

MS: And that's an achievement itself. So no, I. You know what I stepped into, and it was just based on my hospitality. You know my hotel experience. They thought that I might fit the role. I could see where problems had been resolved and where things had taken what had to be done at the moment. But not only that but with a view to the future, I can't tell you how much I appreciated it because it could have been just a true mess. But I was, personally, I could see exactly what I had adopted mainly from you because even though Steve had stepped in, it was very brief. They had done the co-manager thing, which wasn't very effective, but at least kept the lights on and the meals going out. But no, I, what I adopted, literally was from you, and I just wanted to personally thank you on that. I'm going to stop the recording unless there is something else that you want to add.

JN: Oh, no, I think we've covered it. I mean, if you're going through this and you have some other questions, give me a call or send me an email, and I'll answer them for you, but I think we are pretty well done.