



Storytellers @RPL
Interviewee: Jeff Voigt
Interviewer: Nancy Greene
Recorded on February 21, 2019

NANCY GREENE, Ridgewood Library Director: Hello, my name is Nancy Greene. I'm the Director of the Ridgewood Public Library. Today is Thursday, February 21, 2019, and I'm speaking with Village Councilman Jeff Voigt. We are recording this interview in the Heritage Center of the Ridgewood Public Library. Jeff, welcome! We would like to get some general information first, and then we'll go into your impressions of Ridgewood.

Could we start, could you tell us how you came to live in Ridgewood, and when? How long ago?

JEFF VOIGT, Ridgewood Council Member: Yes, so we moved here from Minneapolis back in 1993, and we lived in a town called Edina, in Minneapolis, and Edina is very much like Ridgewood. And so I was moving here for a business transition to another company, and, interestingly, there were six other couples at the same time that moved from Edina to Ridgewood--so we got to know six couples as we moved here. I think, since then, all of them have left, except for us. But the reason we moved here is, it was exactly like Edina. And it felt like home.

NANCY: And did you want to live closer to New York or something? What brought you here?

JEFF: Well, the other issue was that we wanted to move closer to family. So my wife's family is from Garden City, Long Island. My family's from Rhode Island, and all of our relatives are in the area. So, yeah, it was much easier to spend time with our relatives.

NANCY: Yeah, yeah. How did you pick Ridgewood in particular as the town you wanted to move to?

JEFF: When we moved here and first started looking, Ridgewood at that point was relatively expensive compared to the other towns, but my wife first came to look at homes, and she fell in love with it, and she says, "We'll move here, but we gotta move to Ridgewood." So I, on my own when I moved here myself, started looking at homes,

and we found a home close to Willard School that was reasonably priced, I guess, and we ended up moving there. And we've been there ever since. We've been there for 26 years.

NANCY: Oh, well, we're lucky to have you.

JEFF: Oh, thank you, that's very nice of you to say that.

NANCY: What lines of work have you been involved in, in your employment history?

JEFF: Yes, so I've been involved in the medical device industry for years. I worked in various capacities at the executive level in a number of different medical device companies, and about 16 years ago, went off on my own and started working in the field of reimbursement in healthcare economics. So my major focus has been, over the past few years, the field of healthcare economics. So I do a lot of work with early stage medical technology companies, really evaluating the value of their technology into the marketplace. So we essentially look at "what does it cost" for a technology, and what kind of benefit do you get out of that technology, what kind of outcome. Does it reduce mortality, does it reduce morbidity, does it allow people to have a better quality of life, etc. And so I look at all those things, and we publish on that in the medical literature, and we use that information with payers and providers to get them educated on the technology and its use in the medical marketplace.

And it's an interesting field because I work mainly really with early stage companies--venture capitalists, insurance companies—and it's really educating the insurance companies and many of the providers, whether it's the specialty societies or hospitals, on really the benefit of what a technology can provide for them in its use in patients.

NANCY: And you started this company, right?

JEFF: Yeah, I've been on my own...So it's really interesting—back in 2010 the Affordable Care Act went into place, and one of the focuses—or foci? Focuses or foci, I'm not sure. Well, one of the focuses of the Affordable Care Act was looking at the issue of value, ok? And it's still very prevalent in the United States today, and it's going to continue to be that. The Affordable Care Act, and I don't want to get too much on a tangent, but the Affordable Care Act, when it was first formed, really the first intention of the Affordable Care Act was to get as many people covered with insurance as possible. So Medicaid expanded to a significant extent, which is good, we need to have people covered. I think health care's a right.

The second issue we have to deal with, which is the second part of the Affordable Care Act, which is a little bit more difficult, is trying to figure out how we can contain the cost of adding all those people, ok? And that's where value analysis comes in, whether it's looking at a technology or service or whatever, and that's going to be the main focus, I think, over the next 5 to 10 years in the healthcare marketplace—really kind of making things much more cost effective than they currently are.

NANCY: So you started this business, you're raising your family, and what drew you to run for public office?

JEFF: Oh, interesting...So, the issue is—it's wanting to give back, I think, is really what is most important to me. There have been some organizations, some places in my life, that have just been so good to us, to me, and you feel like—and it's not necessarily an obligation, it's something you want to do—you want to give back to places that have just been good to you, and let them know how much you appreciate what they've done for you. And this is why, one of the reasons I ended up running for public office is, you want to give back.

NANCY: Oh, that's great. Would you be able to share a story about any event that had a great impact on your time in public office?

JEFF: Well, I'm not going to say it's a specific instance—I'm going to say it's more of *collective* instances. And one of the things I found most refreshing, and this is what I think Ridgewood is so good about, is that when I ran for office, there was a group of people who voted for me, and there was a group of people who didn't vote for me, ok? And what's happened over the last couple of years is, I've actually become friendly with the people who didn't vote for me. And one of the reasons that I've tried to become friendly is, I want to understand why they didn't vote for me.

But I've come to find out that they are, in many ways, probably the most receptive, forgiving people you'd want to meet. And that's what makes Ridgewood so nice, is the fact that you've got people who may disagree with you, ok, but they're willing to accept you. Differences of opinion are great. You need to have differences of opinion to come up with a better decision. And, in this instance, I've become friends with people who I never thought I'd be friends with.

NANCY: Really?

JEFF: And they're really, really interesting people. I may disagree with them, but I certainly enjoy sitting down and having a cup of coffee with them and picking their brain about stuff and understanding why they think the way they do, and, hopefully, you can gain an appreciation for the way they think, and, hopefully, it can affect the way you think, too, and that's kind of the way it should be.

NANCY: Well, besides the Village Council, what Ridgewood community organizations or activities have you been active in?

JEFF: So, when you're on the Ridgewood Council, you're active on a couple of committees. One of my best experiences, believe it or not, was with the Board of Trustees on the Library....

NANCY: Yay!

JEFF:which you're a part of. The really good thing about Ridgewood is the volunteerism that people have, and they do it out of their own—just their own good will, in many instances. They want to see this become a better place, and they get themselves involved, and it's a very involved community, which is great.

So, besides the committees that are a part of the Council, I'm also involved with the Knights of Columbus at the church, and so we put on annual events, like the St. Patrick's Day party, which is coming up, which is just a blast. It's really a lot of fun. It's well worth the money. Your daughter's an Irish dancer?

NANCY: Yes.

JEFF: So we have...The Irish dancers come there, they're part of the entertainment. We've got a really good band. We've got bagpipers, all that kind of stuff. It's worth doing. So I'm involved in the Knights of Columbus. I cook occasionally for SHARE...

NANCY: You do?

JEFF: Yeah, once a month I'll cook for SHARE, and the reason I do that is that the people who run SHARE are some of my very good friends, and you want to give back to them. They've been nice to me, and you just do it because you want to.

NANCY: Are you a good cook?

JEFF: I don't know, you've got to ask the people at SHARE! (laughter) I think they finish what they're supposed to eat. Sometimes I leave a little early, I'm not sure what they do with the food afterwards. (more laughter)

NANCY: That's great that you do that.

JEFF: Oh, thank you.

NANCY: Could you tell us a little bit about your family and family history?

JEFF: Yeah, so my immediate family...We have three children, my wife and I have three children, and we moved here again 26 years ago. They all went through the Ridgewood school system, and they're just great kids. They're all adults now, young adults, but I've really just been very impressed by what they're become, ok? They're just good people. And they're fun to be around, and you like having—you know, you go to events with them, and they just brighten your life, which is really nice.

So my Dad---so, my immediate family, besides them—my father just passed away a couple of weeks ago...

NANCY: There was a beautiful remembrance on Facebook...

JEFF: Oh, thank you. Yeah, he was, I think, a good role model...was just a great role model. And you try to aspire to what my Dad did in his life, and he had a very interesting life, a colorful life. You know, he was in World War II, and the things he did after that. And, you know, you emulate, and I try to emulate the things the things he has done in his life. Hopefully, it'll make me half as good a person as he was.

NANCY: And you have brothers and sisters?

JEFF: Yeah, so I have two brothers and I have a sister. One brother works for UBS securities, and I have another brother who works at the Philadelphia Philharmonic. He's a fundraiser there. And my sister, she's been married to her husband for, I don't know, 26 years, 25 years, and they have a nice family. We have a lot of really good relatives. Very generous, we have a very generous family, and it's always fun to be around them.

NANCY: And your wife, Patty—now does she go to work?

JEFF: Well, she worked for a while at Country Curtains downtown, but, unfortunately, it closed. I mean, it's just kind of the way of the internet. A lot of retail stuff has closed, and it's really changed the dynamics of our downtown. And it's become much more of a service-oriented downtown. And that's one of the challenges we have, I think, on the Council, is trying to ensure that what is done downtown remains vibrant, from a downtown standpoint.

NANCY: Right.

JEFF: And it's become more restaurant-centric, which is fine. But, you know, when you have a lot of restaurants, you need a lot of parking. And that's one of the big challenges that the Council has been faced with over the past couple of years, and actually for the past, probably, past 20 years, is the parking.

NANCY: Right. So, that's a change that you've seen in Ridgewood--that it's gone, it's moved away from retail, and it's more in the service industry?

JEFF: When you think about our downtown, and you think about Bergen County, I mean, we have—personally, I think it's a gold mine. When you look at what we have for a downtown, relative to other municipalities in this area, we have a defined downtown, and we have a really good restaurant business—businesses—and, you know, we should probably cater to those more than we have, from a Council standpoint, which means to me that we need more parking.

We're in the process of building a garage. Unfortunately, that garage is only going to replace what has already been lost, from a parking standpoint. And so we need several hundreds more parking places in our downtown. It's a challenge. It's a major challenge to our community, because if we have to build another garage, it's going to be

very expensive. So you're looking at—the garage that we're building right now is \$12,000,000.

NANCY: And how many cars will that hold?

JEFF: About 240 cars, ok, but, again, that just replaces what's been lost. So we haven't gained anything, all right, that's the issue.

NANCY: When you say "been lost," what do you mean?

JEFF: Well, so before the garage was built, there were other places to park those 240 cars. So "Ken Smith," which is now going to become condos, and "Brogan," which is also going to become condos, were the parking places for those 240 cars in the past. So the garage is just going to replace them, those particular places. We need more parking. We need another garage. From a political will standpoint on our Council—and I would support this, to be honest with you—the question is, how you going to pay for it? And right now, we've increased the parking rates in our downtown to pay for that garage.

NANCY: Yes.

JEFF: And if we were to build another garage, the question is, where would that money come from? So the money would either come from increased rates again, which I don't think is going to be palatable, or it's going to come from the taxpayers, which I don't think is going to be palatable, so you're going to have to be very creative in figuring out how to fund and finance another garage. And I think that's going to be one of the challenges that future councils are going to have to be faced with.

NANCY: Is there thinking that the garage will pay for itself in time, with the cost of cars parking there, or that's not realistic?

JEFF: So, the garage is going to pay for some of the cost, ok? The additional costs that will be incurred are going to be raised through the increased parking rates from downtown. So we've taken the parking rates from 50 cents an hour to 75 cents, and they're likely to go up again in the near future, probably a dollar an hour.

And so if you look at those rates compared to the other municipalities in and around this area, comparable towns, it's probably reasonable even to increase it to a dollar an hour, ok? But parking has been relatively inexpensive in the past, and so you are going from a base which is inexpensive to making it more competitive with other places. And it's going to create some skepticism, it's going to create some backlash from our community, as we continue to raise these rates. And they'll likely increase.

NANCY: And, I guess, there will be additional housing developments downtown.

JEFF: So that's another---I think what they've done, the developers, have done a

really nice job in putting together the plans for these developments. And, you know, there have been some blighted spaces in our downtown that are going to be replaced by some very nice multi-family developments. The question is, you know, you're adding another, I don't know, 240 units, I think, to the downtown. It's gonna result in increased traffic, pedestrian traffic most especially, and so that also creates issues around public safety. And so we have to look at how we're going to fix and adjust and modify our traffic patterns and our crossings into many of these streets.

That's another thing we're looking at right now, from a Village Council standpoint, is really looking at, most especially, Franklin Avenue. Franklin Avenue, as it goes from the train station down to Maple Avenue, and Maple Avenue as it goes to East Ridgewood Ave—all of those street lights and crossings need to be upgraded and updated. They're all 60plus years old. They're on county roads—the county should pay for some of this, and I've made that a bone of contention with them, which I'm not terribly happy with, but that's ok. And that's gonna cost us money. Every time you look at one of these intersections, it's probably \$250,000 per intersection. You're looking at four intersections, if not five. That's well over \$1,000,000 that we have to spend to improve those intersections for public safety and for traffic itself, to make it much more palatable for people driving.

NANCY: I know when I go to other towns, for example, up in Maine, if you get near the road and a crosswalk, cars stop way back, like...

JEFF: That doesn't happen here.

NANCY: ...they are so attuned to pedestrians. I don't know how you make that more...

JEFF: So there's an interesting story that came out in the *Bergen Record* actually, about 3 or 4 months ago. We had several pedestrian accidents along the Franklin Avenue corridor, and they were simply because cars don't do that—they don't stop for pedestrians at crosswalks. And four people have been hit, ok, which is not good, and one person was killed at one of the intersections. And so, those are county intersections, and they need to be—we need to work with the county. And I think they realize this now. They need to upgrade these intersections, which again are 60plus years old. It's old technology, it needs to be upgraded.

NANCY: Besides parking and safety downtown, are there other issues that you're very concerned or involved with in town?

JEFF: Well, the other thing has to do with our water supply. We're very lucky, we have our own water supply, we have our own utility, water utility. So some things that are coming up that are going to be expensive for, I think, even people who use the Ridgewood water, is some of the contaminants that have been unfortunately introduced into our water system which need to be filtered out, ok? So there are several contaminants that have gotten on the Department of Environmental Protection's radar,

and so we have to comply with these regulations. They're called PFOA and PFOS, and they're retardants that are used on Teflon, ok? So they make Teflon much more resilient, easier to clean—the problem is that they've leaked into our water system, and they can be carcinogenic at certain levels, all right? So the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has given us guidelines, and those guidelines are very stringent, which is good. The problem is in filtering out those contaminants, it's gonna cost our water utility tens of millions of dollars to filter that stuff off. And the question is, who's going to pay for that? And so, it's either going to go into the increased rates for water usage, or we go after those people who actually introduced those contaminants into our system. And there are some likely candidates, like Dow Chemical is one, that has introduced these contaminants into our water system, and again, we're paying for what they did, ok--filtering that stuff out. And, so, the question is, again, who pays for that—do we or does Dow Chemical? We're in the process of going after them, from a lawsuit standpoint.

NANCY: Where is Dow located?

JEFF: They're all over the world. Actually, I don't think it's Dow, it might even be DuPont. Might be Dow, might be DuPont, but I think, I know it's DuPont.

NANCY: I'm just thinking, like, how close are they, to get their contaminants into Ridgewood water.

JEFF: Well, so the way the contaminants are introduced into our water system, believe it or not, is, these chemicals are found in, as an example, they're found in our Fire Department, ok? The actual foam that they use has these chemicals. So when they do it, and they didn't know this, the Fire Department, it ends up leaking into our water system. The foam goes right into our water table. And again that needs to—I'm certain has been addressed, but, in the past, all that stuff that's happened—it needs to be cleaned out of our system, so... So, it's not necessarily that they have a plant here, from a proximity standpoint. It's the materials that they make, it's the products that they make that leach these chemicals into our system. So, not good.

NANCY: Well, I guess that's a problem with a number of...

JEFF: Oh, it is. Actually, in the state of New Jersey, even in Bergen County, it is going to become a huge issue. It really is. And we're way ahead of the curve on this, to be honest with you. Our water utility does a really nice job. It's one of the pleasures of working with our Village Hall, is some of the people you get to meet. And I gotta say Rich Kalbi—he's great, he's tops. There are some really good people who work there who just do a really, really good job, and do the right thing.

NANCY: That's good. Could you tell us the name of any Ridgewood resident that you've greatly admired and why?

JEFF: Sure. A couple of people come to mind, and I'm fortunate to have them as

friends. One of them is a man named Hans Lehmann. He heads up SHARE, you know, it's low-cost housing for elder people. And Hans has done this out of the goodness of his heart for years. I mean, he puts probably his own money into fixing those homes. There's two of them we have. One on Cottage Place and one on Prospect. And he has really done a wonderful job in caring for people who, in some instances, are less fortunate than him and us. And he does that just out of the goodness of his heart. You know, those kind of people are sometimes few and far between. So Hans is one of my heroes.

Another person I can think of is Ed Houlihan. Ed Houlihan is a walking encyclopedia of foreign affairs, and I love listening to his discussions on foreign affairs. And the stuff he knows is just really, really, really fascinating. And, he's kind of like, he's almost in on the discussion as to what's going on, when you're talking to these different countries, whether it's the U.S. versus Russia, U.S. versus Iran or Iraq or whatever. He's got very keen insights, and it's just really interesting to listen to what he has...And he does this for fun, you know.

NANCY: Yeah.

JEFF: And I just sit there, and I kinda soak all this stuff up, and he tells me to read stuff, and I'll read whatever. They're all really interesting articles about how people think and what's going on in the world, how do we fix this, and what do we do next, all that kind of stuff. He makes you think, and, to have a friend like that, or a person who, you know, who makes you think, is a great asset.

NANCY: And for any of our listeners who don't know, Ed Houlihan is an outstanding volunteer at the Ridgewood Library...

JEFF: Oh, absolutely.

NANCY: He created our foreign policy association world affairs discussion group called "Great Decision"....

JEFF: I love that. I don't go as much as I can, but I had the opportunity to present on health care last year, which was really fun. And they were a very engaged group of people. So it was just kind of fun to talk with them and hear their opinions on what we should be doing from a health-care standpoint. It was great.

NANCY: Well, now he's started a history book discussion group, too...

JEFF: I know he has! Yeah, I'm going next week. He's talking about the Chinese navy next week, at "The Hobbyist," or something. I mean, he invited me, and I'm looking forward to going to that just to hear what he has to say.

NANCY: Anyone else that you want to mention, in particular?

JEFF: Well, Nancy, of course, you.

NANCY: Oh! (laughter from both) There's that laugh. I don't know why that's so funny.

JEFF: I mean it, ok. So you do a really nice job with the library. The library, I gotta tell you, is one of our crown jewels in our town, okay? And I know we need to upgrade it. This is a plug for you guys, and it should be a plug for you guys—you know, the tastes, the way we think, the way we work with each other, and what we do as a community has changed dramatically from what a library used to be. And you guys have been changing with the times, but the library needs an overhaul. It needs an overhaul to really focus in on—it's becoming more of a community center. It really is.

NANCY: Yes.

JEFF: It really is a community center. It's one of the things that attract people to this town is the library, ok, and the people who work at the library, and this needs to happen. And my firm opinion is it needs to occur. We need to upgrade, and we need to get along with what's going on with the times.

I'm just amazed at the number of activities that occur at the library, many of them just community-oriented stuff, and I don't know how you pack all of it in. But it's a really fascinating—just to look at the upcoming events, every month on your website—what's happening at the library—I mean you could spend a whole month here and just learn so many different things.

NANCY: Well, we do more public programming than any other municipal library in New Jersey, and that's because we have such a great staff.

JEFF: And staff, absolutely, you have a great staff, but you also have some great volunteers. I mean, the people who work at the library just out of their own kindness...

NANCY: Yes...

JEFF:kindheartedness is very impressive.

NANCY: Yeah. Well, to wrap things up, I wanted us to take a minute to look ahead. Like, what kind of lifetime goals do you want to work toward at this point?

JEFF: So, you know, I wouldn't say that I'm necessarily at the end of my career. I don't think I'm ever going to quit working, you know. I kinda think I'm too young for that. But from my standpoint, giving back to the community is one of the things I'll hopefully continue to do. And, if and when I leave office, that's something I'll do in our village. There's just a whole bunch of opportunities for that, giving back. There are so many different committees, there's so many different volunteer organizations. There's not a "lack of" to be able to find something to do.

NANCY: Right.

JEFF: And just giving back in that respect is great. You know, one of the things that I wish I saw happen more... You know, our Village Council meetings, I think, over the years have changed, okay, and, I think, have changed for not the best. And it has to do with social media. You know, before social media, people would come to the Council meetings, and there would be differences of opinions at the Council meetings, which are great. You want to hear that, you want to hear what other people are thinking. And what's happened, unfortunately, with our Council meetings is you get one group of people who think one thing, and they come all the time, and you don't get to hear the other side of it. And I think the reason for that is the social media aspect of it. Sometimes people who go to these meetings, they get, they get hammered in social media, and it just becomes a waste of their time to want to go to these things, say something that's totally different, and then the next day it appears in social media, they're getting blasted. And I find that sad, okay, and frankly I think the people who do that, I think, first of all, they're bullies, and, second of all, I think, cowards. And we just can't have that in our town.

NANCY: Yeah.

JEFF: And I wish, and I hope, you know, as things move forward is that we become much kinder to each other, you know, especially in social media, and we allow for differences of opinion, most especially at the Council level.

NANCY: Yeah.

JEFF: Hearing one side of the story all the time, the same side of the story is not good. It's not good for us, it's not good for our community, and, unfortunately, it biases a lot of the way people think and what we do. And my wish, moving forward, is that, you know, there were some way—and Facebook has gotten hammered for this, you know, in the past, as it relates to, you know, Russian meddling in the election. Social media is a good and a bad thing, okay, and I think when Facebook went in to this, they thought, okay, this is going to be for social good, and it really isn't, in some instances. It's used for social ill, and they've come to realize that, okay, and actually it's kind of percolated down to our village, so some of it is social ill. And those kinds of things can't happen and shouldn't happen. Issues are great to talk about on social media, but when it gets personal, I think it's really sad. It's a sad commentary on those people, and sometimes it's a sad commentary on our society. Those kinds of things can't happen, and they shouldn't.

That's kind of my wish, moving forward, is, over the next few years, is that we become much more tolerant of differences of opinion. They're good to have—you know, I may disagree with these people completely, but I certainly want to hear what they have to say. And that has happened less and less in our town, especially at our Council meetings, and I think it has to do almost exclusively with social media and the way it's

used.

NANCY: Do you see any way that we can combat that?

JEFF: Some of it has to happen at the company level, like Facebook. Facebook has to be much more diligent about how they evaluate content that flows through their vehicle. And I think what's happening at the congressional level, even at the government federal level, is starting to push Facebook to do more and more of that, be really careful about what is said.

And that's happening a bit, and hopefully that's a good thing. I'm glad that's happening. It's becoming much more regulated, and it probably should be much more regulated. Not to the detriment of allowing people free speech but to the detriment of when it really hurts other people for no good reason. And it saddens me to see that happen.

NANCY: Yeah...Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add, any causes that are dear to you or anything?

JEFF: No, it's been a very nice conversation. Thank you, Nancy, for taking the time to do this. I really appreciate it, your involvement in this. Thanks for all you do at the Library. You have a really good team of people, and just keep up the good work.

NANCY: Thank you, Jeff, for everything you do, and we still miss you on the Library Board.

JEFF: I miss being there, I gotta tell you. It was a wonderful experience, the two years I had there. Great, great group of people.

NANCY: Thank you, Jeff.