

Lindsey Mathews Padrino on Jane Jacobs

Jane Jacobs was a wife, mother, activist, writer and thinker. She is best known for her book, "The Life and Death of Great Cities," in which she put forth radical principles for what makes a city livable for its people, and for the community work she did to help New York City adhere to the values she put forth in the book. "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."

Jane Jacobs was a remarkable woman not just for the impact she has had on city planners for more than half a century, but also for the journey she took in order to have that impact. She took great joy in everyday life and had a voracious intellectual curiosity. However, she was also someone who carefully defined joy, learning and knowledge for herself – never let societal norms do that for her.

She grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania and came to New York in the middle of the Great Depression without a college education, a job or anyone but her sister. She freelanced and worked as a stenographer, then eventually began to take night courses at Columbia. In reflecting on that time, she remarked: "For the first time I liked school and for the first time I made good marks. This was almost my undoing because after I had garnered, statistically, a certain number of credits I became the property of Barnard College at Columbia, and once I was the property of Barnard I had to take, it seemed, what Barnard wanted me to take, not what I wanted to learn. Fortunately my high-school marks had been so bad that Barnard decided I could not belong to it and I was therefore allowed to continue getting an education.

She married and had several children, living in what is now the West Village. Her curiosities became focused on people, especially what ways of living made them happy and what types of city systems facilitated that livability. Out of that curiosity, as well as her care for her community and interest in defending what she believed made her life and her neighbor's lives good, she created a new way to think about cities. However, it was not one that was aligned with the prevailing wisdom on city planning. At that time, highways for easy mobility and skyscrapers for easy housing were popular – it was the era of "urban renewal." Her obituary in the New York Times perhaps encapsulates her departure from accepted norms best: "At a time when both common and inspired wisdom called for bulldozing slums and opening up city space, Ms. Jacobs's prescription was ever more diversity, density and dynamism — in effect, to crowd people and activities together in a jumping, joyous urban jumble."

She had the courage to share her thoughts on world through her ambitious book, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. It was published just before Robert Moses, the famous New York City 'Big Bob the Builder', decided to build a highway through Lower Manhattan and Jane's own neighborhood. Jacobs mobilized people in her neighborhood around her vision and, in what is often described as a David vs. Goliath moment, successfully created enough political opposition to halt the construction of the highway and save several neighborhoods.

Jacobs had many vocal critics beyond Moses. These included the leading urban planning thinker of the time, who devoted an entire *New Yorker* article to rebuking her philosophy: "Like a construction gang bulldozing a site clean of all habitations, good or bad, she bulldozes out of existence every desirable innovation in urban planning during the last century, and every competing idea, without even a pretense of critical evaluation." In addition to being the ongoing focus of much negative press, she was also arrested at a demonstration that she organized. Through all of it, she kept perspective against these vocal critics, grounded in her values and her philosophy.

Jane Jacobs embodies the lessons of Total Leadership in a unique way: Her career formed organically out of the things in life that fascinated her and the values that motivated her. At a more basic level, her knowledge

and motivation came from the things she did everyday to take care of her family and the her conversations with her husband prompted him to push her to write her book. This extraordinary alignment of her personal values and interests, care for her community, investment in her family, which erupted into a career that almost perfectly encapsulated her other three key life domains, is simply beautiful.

Additionally, Jacobs trusted herself and her instincts. Even without a college degree or professional career in the field, she had the courage to follow her instincts and to share her thoughts. The power of this trust is captured nicely in her book, "Systems of Survival." When one of her characters worries that he is not qualified, the man who has invited the group together says, "Why not us? If more qualified people are up to the same thing, more power to them. But we don't know that, do we?"

As someone who hopes to bring common sense, but transformative solutions to a difficult urban problem – and not compromise my family and self in the midst of it – I find Jane Jacobs story deeply inspiring. She was true to her curiosity, her values, her instincts, her family and her community, willing to put up a fight when she saw a chance to defend them by inspiring thousands of people with her vision. I hope that I can emulate this vision, mobilization and alignment throughout my life.