



Jon Mitchell

Well, my name is Jon Mitchell and I am the mayor of New Bedford. And at this point I have been mayor for almost 12 years and I was just re-elected last month to another four-year term. So I sought the office in 2011 and was elected in 2011 because I have an abiding commitment to my hometown. I was born in the city, we lived in the West End when I was little. We later moved to North Dartmouth right nearby and went to public schools in the area. Went to Dartmouth High School from there and went off to college, went off to Harvard College and ultimately pursued a legal career, first in Washington and then later in Boston. But I ended up back here. I ended up intentionally and ran for mayor after a period of years as a federal prosecutor, again, both in Washington and Boston.

I came back here because I wanted two things. I wanted to really see ... I wanted to offer leadership to New Bedford to see in the hope that we could, with the intention that we could become a more thriving, a sturdier, more vibrant city, one that has better control over its fate, and then secondly for the challenge of it all. So as someone who's looking back at this, say in 100 years, what's the context? For me personally, the context is that my deep roots here on my mother's side, the family, my parents both grew up in the city. My mother in the North End, my father on County Street County in Sycamore, which isn't really ... Just on the edge of the downtown and west end on my father's.

My mother's side of the family, her mother had various jobs over the years at a spinster shop, a seamster shop on Central Avenue. She was ethnically Polish. She died just a few years ago at the age of 98. Her parents had emigrated from Czarist Poland back at the turn of the previous century in 1908. And so that side of the family lives on the Central Avenue or Polish enclave that still has remnants even today. My maternal grandfather was ethnically Irish mostly, some Scottish. And he came from a family that he grew up here in the city. His father was a New Bedford police officer who in 1918, while in the line of duty, contracted the Spanish flu and died days later. And so my grandfather was raised for a while in St. Mary's Home, the former orphanage on Kenton Street. And yeah, his name was Jack Kinney, he's somebody of significance in the city in the sense that he later on had a military career.

He enlisted in the army right out of Holy Family, the National Guard right out of Holy Family. And what was then at the Old Armory on Sycamore Street and what was then an artillery unit that had horse-drawn artillery pieces, 105 millimeter howitzers and ultimately served in the second World War, an artillery battalion 411th heavy field artillery battalion, which supported the 20th armored division, which was deployed to southern Germany sort of late in the war. His unit was one of the ones, one of the many that was credited with the liberation of the Dachau Concentration camp.

So that was, and we talk a lot about him. He was just an interesting person, didn't go to college, kind of blew it, didn't blow it in that sense, but I think there's a lot of potential there. His best friend in the army was a guy named Rogers Morton who invited him to go into business with him. Rogers Morton was from Louisville and was Yale-educated, came from a fairly affluent family. Rogers Morton ultimately became President Nixon's Secretary of Commerce. And so my grandfather always wondered what would have been, but my grandfather was a natively intelligent person and modest about telling people how high his army IQ test scores were and so forth. But he was, apart from that modesty, he was a good man and in some ways an inspiration for me to enlist in the army years later.

So that's my mother's side of the family. My father's side of the family, again, rooted here. My grandmother, whose name is Louisa, my paternal grandmother, was one of 10 kids that was deeply enmeshed here in the fishing industry. Her parents were Bavarian immigrants and despite that very strong ethnic connection and speaking German in the household, five of her brothers went off to World War I to fight the Germans. And yet then they came back and her father insisted, this is one of my favorite stories. Her father insisted that



nevertheless, after seeing heavy trench warfare, one of whom was gravely wounded, one of her brothers was gravely wounded, he still insisted that they speak German at the dinner table of all things.

So their connection to the fishing industry is multifaceted. They ran a store, my grandmother and her sister, and one of her brothers ran a store on the Waterfront called Kruger Brothers. Two of the brothers started after their returned from the First World War and that store remained in family hands up until 2019, a whole 100 years. And its job was to outfit fishing boats on the waterfront. My maternal grandfather was an immigrant from Newfoundland. He was one of 18 children and immigrated here when he was a teenager and married my grandmother in the '30s. They ultimately, he was a fisherman and he came here with a third grade education and was a skilled fisherman. He was lost at sea when my father was 11 and my grandmother was expecting, was eight months pregnant with her sixth son. And so that, for me, that experience has certainly shaped the way that I sort of go about my job.

I'm a passionate defender of the fishing industry and just it informs my outlook on the opportunities that I've had to get an education. My father's side of the family in particular has not had a whole lot in the way of advanced education of the six children of the family, my father was the only one who went to college and became a school teacher. He taught at Old Rochester, in the junior high. My mother was a teacher in the Dharma school system. So I mentioned the family background because I think it offers a window into my motivations in seeking to do something consequential in New Bedford on behalf of the city. I come to the job, I joke that I come to the job without a whole lot of relevant skills.

As I mentioned, I was a federal prosecutor and I prosecuted a number of white, I did all kinds of different cases, white collar and some violent crime cases, some art theft cases. I was the lead prosecutor on the search for Whitey Bulger who was in our time, probably the single most famous fugitive in America and somebody who was an organized crime figure in Boston for many, many years. So I left all that work to come here. And my time in office has been sort of marked by an ascent, I would say, if it had to have ascend a steep learning curve.

But as I've gone to appreciate the job, like any other job, has become easier over time. Like any job would the more you work at it. We have the challenge here in New Bedford. So in circa 2012 up through the present has been that the city is one that back in from the '80s, from the '80s through the '90s lost its manufacturing base. The city lost some 10,000 manufacturing jobs between 1986 and 1996. And that really did deeply change the city. And so like anywhere else, city, this city, neither this city nor any city can thrive if it doesn't have a basis on which to compete in a global economy. And so we have worked really hard to understand what our assets are and to utilize them to their utmost, to exploit them to their utmost so that the city can have an economic engine on which its residents can thrive.

We live in an America, and I often say this, we're living in America right now, which over the last 20 years because of changes in technology and changes in global supply chain, lots of other reasons in which the capital has been flowing inexorably to the major metropolitan areas. We are some 60 miles from the closest major metropolitan area. So we sit on our own bottom and what I've tried to cultivate in my time in office is that we need to stop internalizing sort of the judgments of others. We need to stop, we need to understand where we sit in the world. And we have to understand in particular that our fate is our own.

We have, New Bedford has a number of things going for it. Its geographic location, more specifically its orientation to the water, its history, its culture, the story, it tells so much more and its sense of place. But those things have to be put in play. And so what we've tried to do is understand those advantages. So we've invested heavily in things that the city does well, the arts and culture scene for instance, where New Bedford has considerable assets, the manufacturing, healthcare and so forth. But the biggest emphasis has been on the maritime industries.

Fishing of course, but other and the other in the last several years has involved our efforts to cultivate the establishment and the growth of the offshore wind industry. We were, New Bedford in the last several years has been at the forefront of the development of the offshore wind industry in the United States. And we recognize that our geographic advantages allow us to take advantage of an industry that's been maturing in northern



Europe for the last 30 years in a time when climate change is an important priority for world, but also for the United States. And also here. We recognize that this industry is going to play a part in the overall effort. And so we've been preparing ourselves for offshore wind, primarily as an economic development opportunity, and secondarily as a way of contributing to the work to address climate change.

We've spent a great deal of time working on that, developing infrastructure and workforce programs and promoting the city and developing it. Small business supports and innovation supports and it runs the game and also playing a role in the development of policy at every level of government. And it's working. So we're speaking now, we're in the midst of watching the first major utility scale offshore wind project in the United States deploy from our docks. And we've seen our work has put Vineyard wind, the company that's doing that in a position to make that happen. And our work has led to considerable amount of infrastructure development in the harbor that we should pay dividends for several decades to come. At least that's our intention. And it has put the city in a place where people feel like things are progressing, things are building, and we hope that will generate on its own confidence. So that's a lot more to talk about in our economic development, but we've been, I felt very strongly that work, the work of attracting capital, building economic momentum, having a competitive edge for the city is exactly where we have to be.

The other thing, so the work of being mayor isn't for me just about it isn't about just the tactics, the blocking and tackling of running municipal government every day. It's the strategic shifts that are not only the most interesting part of the job, but the most necessary part of the job that we do now in the way of cultivating investment, making strong long-term decisions, appropriate long-term decisions about the city's health will pay dividends. And so we have our eyes set on the long run. We play the long game in New Bedford and that's the strong cities that succeed over time do that. And that's what we're seeking to do. So anybody who's listening to this 100 years from now, we certainly hope that we made some decisions that are making things better for people. Then the overall strategy is of economic development is part economic competitiveness based on our key assets as part of what we do.

But it's not all of it. We have to make sure that the city has a high quality of life. So we've, over our time here, we've worked very hard to make the city safer. We've seen an over 30% drop in crime in the city. The city used to be an unsafe place. It is no longer an unsafe place because we've understood the causes of crime and have tried to address them directly. The city's school system is much stronger than it used to be, where the city school system had a graduation rate when I got into office, a four-year graduation rate of only 58% and it's now well over 80%. And that's because we've changed the way that we manage the school district.

100 years from now, who knows what public schools will look like, whether there will be school districts. It's hard to know how that shakes out. But as it is right now, that's the way students are educated and we've just tried to make the place cleaner, easier to live in. We've created new parks and public spaces. We built the harbor walk and the cove walk on top of the hurricane barrier. I suspect in 100 years those still will be there. But those are huge recreational assets that people really have embraced. We spent a lot of time protecting the city from the effects of climate change, both through infrastructure, new infrastructure to protect against, among other things, storm surge, but also the, we've cultivated new renewable energy generation capacity so that we're not contributing as much to the sources of climate change. And the city's finances are on much more solid ground. The city's bond rating is much higher now than it used to be. So we've made progress on that front as well.

There are many other services that we deliver to enable people to thrive. That's really the goal to call, that people are thriving here. People will choose to live in New Bedford and we're seeing now that our population is growing, that's all to the good. The third thing I'd just say that part of our strategy is really in redeveloping the city is fostering a love of the place. A sense of place can go a long way if people are motivated, if people love the place, people will be motivated to act in its behalf. And so on that front, celebrating everything that is New Bedford, eschewing false narratives about New Bedford being this place that's on the decline and proving to people that it's not, building confidence in that way is very important. As I noted earlier, I also think that in that front, just celebrating everything that we do. Again, I don't mean to sound repetitive about it, but it's important that we embrace what we have. New Bedford is a distinct place in America, in a place that is worthy of our devotion and



that's what we preach here.

And so celebrating our history, celebrating our connection to one another, setting a tone for political discourse that is constructive and not divisive. All these things are what we do. So we've become a stronger city. There's a lot of room to go. There are vulnerabilities we don't have, I should know, we don't have a large higher presence here, research presence. That's something that I think in the next a hundred years that the city certainly should cultivate. Climate change is obviously, I shouldn't say obvious, I hope it's not so obvious in 100 years, but I suspect it will be. But it is a challenge that I hope we're doing enough about. There's the development of new technologies that we haven't fully wrapped our heads around.

The generative artificial intelligence burst on the scene nationally just about a year ago or so with the emergence of ChatGPT, who knows even where things will be in 10 years, never mind in a hundred years with respect to the way that mankind relates to the machines that it has created. I don't know, I couldn't even begin to venture to guess. And this is sort of underscore how it's very hard to predict the future. It's probably even getting harder to do now with the advent of such a potentially revolutionary technology. So it's anybody's guess, I can't venture. There is reason in 2023, it's probably worth noting to be excited as well as deeply fearful of its potential excited because it's becoming plainer, what facets of what problems it might solve ranging from disease to healthcare, to traffic safety, to economic efficiency, growth, all those things. But on the other hand, it is artificial intelligence for a while has been the subject of science fiction doomsday stories, and the doomsday stories of science fiction. And it's hard to rule out some of those fictional possibilities as becoming real at some point.

We live in a time where there's a great deal of distrust that we'd have for many years lived in a society, an American society where people are increasingly acting alone or increasingly isolated. We just got out of an era of a pandemic, the likes of which the city, the modern world, the developed world has not seen since 1918. And that has, it appears to have exacerbated not only feelings of isolation, but also has thrown gasoline on civic, on the erosion. And mixing metaphors now, has exacerbated the problem with civic discourse in America, for sure.

There is good reason in 2023, especially as we look into 2024, which historians may look back on as a watershed year in the United States, just given the way that elections are shaping up and such, that our democracy is eroding. And so we hear, and this is something I preach here in New Bedford, at least we can have a say over what goes on within the four corners of our city, and maybe we can set an example for others that might help make a difference. And that's the work we're in right now. So I'll stop there.