



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 188 – The Impact of Building Bridges with Nancy Napier
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[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson: Welcome to [The Athena Wellness Podcast](#), the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

[00:00:30] Kathy: Today's episode is brought to you by The Athena Wellness Academy, your resource for wholehearted living.

The Academy's featured offering is an online course called, *From 'Type A' to 'Type Be,' How to Mindfully Descend the Corporate Ladder and Invite What's Next*. This course is perfect for you if you're contemplating or navigating a professional transition, and it's available as a self study or with a small cohort of students facilitated by me, Kathy Robinson.

To learn more, I invite you to go to AthenaWellnessAcademy.teachable.com or click on the link in the show notes.

[00:01:21] Kathy: Hello and welcome. Thanks so much for joining me.



We talk a lot about transformation on this podcast. And many of our guests, and your host, have made big life transitions to get to a new place of learning and engagement.

But what I love about today's conversation is our guest followed her curiosity to pursue her passions while working in academia. Throughout her storied career, she's explored themes like innovation, creativity, and emerging economies, weaving it all into a unique career tapestry with a keen focus on building relationships. It is quite a masterclass.

I'm joined today by Nancy Napier, Distinguished Professor Emerita at Boise State University, whose achievements throughout her 35-year career are voluminous. Nancy describes herself as an academic entrepreneur. And I just love that. As you listen to the episode, you'll find it's the perfect title.

Here's what we cover:

- How Nancy's unique career unfolded;
- Nancy's work in Vietnam, which includes a book, a film, and executive MBA residencies;
- How to spark fresh organizational thinking through cross-pollination;
- The importance of blending structure with creativity; and
- How to make a-ha moments happen.

You can learn more about Nancy at nancyknapier.com and I'll put a link to her website in the show notes where you'll find her film and books. I'll also link up the books, film, and email addresses that Nancy mentions.



And now onto the show. This is an amazing and inspiring conversation and I hope you enjoy it.

[00:03:21] Kathy: Nancy, welcome to *The Athena Wellness Podcast*. Thank you so much for being here today.

[00:03:25] Nancy Napier: I'm delighted to be with you. Thank you for asking.

[00:03:29] Kathy: So please share a bit about who you are and what you do.

[00:03:33] Nancy: You know, that's a great question. And I think of myself, actually, in nouns and adjectives.

So the simplest noun explanation is that I've been a professor, I've been a researcher, and I've been a writer, but mostly of non-fiction for probably 30-some years, so academic books and journal articles and that sort of thing. And then I moved into shorter blogs and newspaper columns and pieces that are more accessible to leaders and managers and just general readers. And more recently, I'm calling myself a "fiction writer in training." I'm making a big shift for me that I didn't realize would be as difficult as it is. It's pretty challenging. I haven't published any fiction yet, but I'm learning a lot, and it's keeping my brain moving in new directions. So those would be the nouns.

Then there are adjectives that I've used with a lot of the leaders I've worked with over the years and I'd like to hope that I fit into those. Two big ones are being an aggressive learner, so constantly looking at things and saying, "What can I learn from this?" And tied to that is being relentlessly curious. There's so much in the



world that is interesting that we can learn about, and often it's the small things that, in my case, small serendipitous moments that turn into something, for me, that's really important that I can learn from.

[00:05:02] Kathy: What I love about your professional background is, and you used the word curiosity. You followed your curiosity. So it wasn't the usual academic life that you've led. You've incorporated all kinds of things, innovation, creativity, emerging economies. Can you speak to how all of that unfolded? How did that start?

[00:05:23] Nancy: I listened for questions from other people a lot. And I figured this out after I had done it over the years. Looking back, was it Steve Jobs that said you connect the dots looking backwards? It made sense when I look back on my career that what I had done was listen to students, leaders, other people for questions that came up, and then take advantage of opportunities.

So let me give you some examples. Early on, I created and taught in an international business program at Boise State University. And I had a student, a woman student, who came to me one day and she said, "One of the other professors told me I'll never be able to do any work in international business because I'm female." And I said, "Well, I've done it, and if I can do it, anybody can."

So that led to a research project for, I don't know, four or five, six years with a colleague where we looked at professional women working abroad. We started with Japan, we looked at China and Germany and Mexico and Vietnam. We



learned that women actually have advantages. Up to that point, only one researcher had ever examined expatriates who were women.

So we got into it as well and realized there are actually some interesting advantages. For example, in Japan, we met a woman who was the top person in one of the US-- one of the top Fortune 500 companies working in Japan. She was number two, black woman from the south US.

She said the white guys in Japan, when a taxi doesn't pick them up, they're horrified. She said, "I've been discriminated against my whole life. This is Japan. Every foreigner is discriminated against. I'm used to it." And so we thought-- and other women made the same comment. "I've already gone through this, it's nothing new, I can handle it." So that's how the women working abroad project got going.

Then a chance email came up to do a three-week training session in Vietnam in 1994, I think that was. And I got over there, I hit it off with the project manager, who was in the process of helping Vietnamese instructors at a university. And business people learn western business practices, because by then Russia had fallen, that was their main trading partner, they had to learn how to do business with the rest of the world. That three weeks, she and I hit it off. That led to a one-year project and then eventually to this nine-year capacity building project funded by Sweden and USAID to help start Vietnam's first international standard business school.

So again, a chance email, followed it up. I was at a university that's very entrepreneurial. If I went to Ohio State or worked with the University of Washington,



they probably would not have allowed me to do that because it was too far outside the traditional track. That was another kind of serendipitous thing.

After that project, I never wanted to go back to Vietnam, was too tired, too long to commute to do research. I went back three years later, of course...

[00:08:35] Kathy: [laughs]

[00:08:37] Nancy: But in the process I said, "What can I do? What research can I do that's closer to home?" Again, I started looking at different areas. And I stumbled onto creativity. I was seeing all kinds of little dots about how the US in innovation and creativity and research was flatlined and other countries were just zooming, China, parts of Europe.

And I went to one of my very smart CEO friends, brilliant guy. He said, "Oh, Nancy." I said, "Here are the four data points I'm seeing. What's going on?" He said, "It's like being fish in water. We have always been innovative and creative, and we're not changing, the rest of the world is changing." That led to creativity research, but not for individuals, there's tons on that, musicians and mathematicians, but on organizations.

And one summer I said, "What are the most different organizations I can find?" And this software CEO said, "Come study us." I knew the head of the Shakespeare Theater group here, which has gotten lots of kudos nationally. Then I stumbled onto our football program at Boise State. So I had three organizations that were as different as I could imagine and I realized that organizationally they actually



approached creativity in many ways that were somewhat similar. That surprised me.

So then I went very deliberately and looked for other organizations that were really different. So a healthcare organization, our county jail, a dance organization, a marketing firm, an educational organization. And I eventually found-- sort of backed into it. And realized that all of these organizations were highly creative and high performers in their fields however measured.

So for the Shakespeare Festival, it was having the Yale Drama School write a case study on them. *New York Times* talked about some work they were doing in Cleveland. For the football team, they got lots of notoriety at a big game, I think 2007, against Oklahoma, the Fiesta Bowl, made them very famous, and creativity was a part of it.

So that group then developed, first as three organizations. At one point, the football coach said, "You go and talk to the CEOs in these other places. Can we just all meet?" I thought, "What a great idea."

So that's how "the gang" got going of these high-performing, highly creative organizations, all based in a super remote location. Boise, Idaho is five hours from the next largest city, Salt Lake City, nine hours to Seattle. So they have had to find ways to learn to be creative on their own. They can't walk across the street in Silicon Valley or go to another tech company. And so they have had to do it basically on their own. And then as leaders, they've connected.



The final thing, final example, I guess, again, about 15 years ago, some professors here, a dean or someone, said, "We need to have an executive Masters in Business program." We already had an MBA, and they said, "You have to put that together and do it."

We had a group of five or six very diverse professors and we started looking around at programs across the world, basically, to see what they looked like. We said, "We are Boise State University. Nobody knows about us, nobody cares about us. We have no name, we have nothing-- no competitive advantage." Other universities, like the University of Washington, was drawing people to their program.

So we really had to use the creativity approaches that I had been learning about for ourselves. And we realized that what we have here is, because we're so small, we have incredible access to organizations of all types here. And because we had no building, we had no appropriate setting for executives, we held classes initially in those companies, like Hewlett-Packard and Micron, which is a large chip manufacturer here, and Simplot, which they make all of the McDonald's french fries, pretty much.

So we could meet in these organizations, we could draw speakers, teachers from them. So that local network, which was actually quite strong and global because of the companies, that became a competitive advantage for us. We had to create one where nothing existed. The program was just rated number 15 in the country by Fortune Magazine this past year, so something's working.



In all those cases, I guess what I'd say, I call myself an "academic entrepreneur." I love starting programs. Once they get going, somebody else is better to keep them going, maintain them, grow them.

But the idea of being able to see gaps-- There was no research on women working abroad. There was nobody working in Vietnam, no university, really, to help start up a business school. The idea of the gang bringing diverse organizations together is not profound, but nobody had done it. As a result of that first group, I think eventually we had seven or eight gang groups, different names, different kinds of people, but all were diverse organizations.

And then the executive MBA, the way we structured it, the way we sold it, now we're seeing in other parts of the country, a few places that are doing similar things. That, I think, has been a strength.

Once a research area gets to be big in mainstream, I can't compete, so I'm out. As far as the startup part, I'm better at that and I've been lucky enough to fall into situations where there's been a need.

[00:14:35] Kathy: I love that term, academic entrepreneur, because as you were speaking, I'm making notes, and I'm, like, "Gee, what you were doing in academia is what I had to learn how to do when I started my own business." You're listening for what the problems are and then you're trying to create solutions. When you're starting your own business, there's not a big budget, there's no big name, there's no name recognition whatsoever. You have been doing that in that setting, but I think what's so compelling is that it's not expected, right?



[00:15:05] Nancy: Right.

[00:15:06] Kathy: That's what makes it such an amazing story. And it was just from following your own curiosity that got you there.

[00:15:13] Nancy: I was at a conference in Japan many, many years ago, got in the elevator with another professor who I love him to death. I don't know him well, but when we see each other at these conferences, we have nice conversations, but nothing deep.

We got in the elevator and he said, "So what are you working on now?" And I don't remember what it was, but somehow that elevator ride, 30 seconds, we got off into this idea of, "Oh, you're starting new things at your university and you have to fight to have them happen, and you have to find the resources, and you have to get people behind you?" That's when that whole notion of an academic entrepreneur came up.

We didn't have a term for it, but we did write an article. At the professor level, how can you be an academic entrepreneur, at the program level, the dean level, the senior academic leader level? To have that entrepreneurial mindset, which you've got, to say, "Oh, there's somebody who's able to identify gaps, identify interesting things to do that may be the first of their kind." Then they have to be able to sell it, get the resources to do it, eventually be the champion for it, and as you know, it's lonely, very lonely, and very hard.



I think once you establish yourself after doing some of these things, then when I go to our dean or someone saying, "I'm thinking about this," they listen. [chuckles] It's hard-fought, but I think worth doing.

And especially in the world of academia, we need more people that are willing to try different things and take risks. As I said, I knew I would never be the world's expert on employee turnover. I don't think I'd be interested in it for 30 years. I'm just too eclectic.

[00:17:05] Kathy: It's funny, you mentioned this thinking at different levels of the organization. When I was in corporate, we had a very forward-thinking CEO and he was trying to get the organization to, in his words, "Think like an owner." And some people are buying into this, but it's people who have that way of thinking. Everybody else, it's just, "Well, what does that even mean to think like an owner?"

But it was your curiosity that was really the fuel. So if you try to institutionalize something, you really have to connect with that person's *why*. And it's only that you went through it multiple times that you had the clarity to be able to say what you're doing and then what the outcome was, what the output could be as a result of that. I think that's how you get people on board over time, right?

[00:17:52] Nancy: I was very lucky, have been very lucky here, to have one other colleague who thinks... we are just like this. Yet, I'm the one who's kind of way off in the blue sky. And he'll say, "Okay, let's pull it down. Let's think it through." But he's the supporter. He also thinks big thoughts. So I've had somebody along the way - that's been good.



The other thing I realized very early on, I gave a talk to a bunch of PhD students a few times about looking back over my career and some of this is what came up - I'm an academic entrepreneur.

I need to do projects that I call the eye-to-eye level. You are doing that right now. You are a good interviewer, you're looking people in the eye and asking questions. You're getting information from a single person. That to me is much more interesting to find people's stories than to look at a data set of numbers. I can do that, but I didn't find it as interesting.

So the ability to ask questions, listen to what people are saying and what they're not saying, make those dot connections, which you're doing right now. You're seeing things in what I'm saying that make sense to you in a way I hadn't thought about it. I think that is a skill-- I don't mean to make it sound super special, but I don't see a whole lot of people wanting to do it or actually doing it.

So to me, the eye-to-eye level-- I did university administration, and I realized how much I missed teaching, and that's the eye-to-eye level to me. I could see the impact on a daily basis as opposed to putting together a program from up above and making sure all the numbers work and it's financially viable and all that.

I'd rather be in the thick of it and learning how we can make it better on the ground. And that's fine with me. I've never been a big-status type of person. I'd rather do something fun like these projects, and if they take us to helping improve the organization or make people's lives better in a different way, that's much more interesting to me.



[00:20:08] Kathy: That leads me beautifully to the next topic - this one-on-one storytelling. You were the executive and are the executive producer of a really beautifully crafted film.

[00:20:19] Nancy: Thank you.

[00:20:20] Kathy: It's called *From Me to We* and offers glimpses into some of the current-day challenges, as told through the eyes of several generations of folks in Vietnam. Could you share a bit about how that came to be and what you are hoping the viewers get from the experience?

[00:20:38] Nancy: I'd be happy to. Let me give you a little bit of background. I mentioned that I was involved in managing our university's work in Vietnam for many years, eight and a half million dollars, a big project, to help start up this business school. I tell people it was a start-up.

We did everything from help people learn how to teach, put materials together, how do you become an interactive teacher versus standing at the board and just writing things. So teaching methods, teaching content, how to do research, how to fundraise, how to set up financial systems, IT systems, all of that as a new venture start-up, basically, in Vietnam.

Exhilarating, exhausting, but incredibly stimulating. Those people, we trained 80-some over the course of three different deliveries of our masters of business, included professors, who are now teaching at universities, and business people. Maybe a third of them were business people who are leaders in the country with



their own firms or they work for government agencies or universities. These are leaders themselves.

So that was sitting there. And I've known them forever. And I continue to do some research with them. I used to teach at that university. Now, we take our executive MBAs over every year for a week. We always invite a history professor to come and talk to that group before we go. He's an expert in Vietnam, one of the best teachers in our university. I've known him for years.

One year he came, and then before he started talking, he said, "Nancy, no one's really written about or studied this certain period in Vietnam." After the American War for about 15 years, '75 to '90, there was a period of terrible famine. Vietnam was still fighting two other wars, and so the resources had to go to the soldiers, so people didn't have enough to eat, and so on.

He said, "Also, there's just not much on people from the north, written about people from the north," and I thought, "Okay." So you go to Amazon, look up Vietnam. There are 50,000 books about Vietnam, the war, but a lot of them are about the war, soldiers, GI experiences, refugee experiences, and it's all about people from the southern part of the country.

Well the north won, took over, and it was not pretty how things played out, but there was really nothing about the north. And I thought, "These are people I know. I've known them for 20 years." I've never, because I'm pretty private, never asked them about their lives when they were kids during the war and afterwards. Lots of my friends would, but I just didn't. And I thought, maybe I should.



That led to-- I teamed up with a woman. She was one of the first employees of Hewlett-Packard in Vietnam, did our MBA program and then started our own company. So we did profiles of, I think I interviewed 30-some people. We chose 17 of those and put them in a book called *The Bridge Generation of Vietnam*. It was about experiences during wartime, during this terrible period of famine, which was called the subsidy period, and since then, the boom period, the economic boom time. We have people who talked about what they went through in each of those periods.

And that... [chuckles] I complain when I'm working on writing projects. And I complained to a friend who used to work for PBS, I think in Atlanta, so she knows about documentaries. I had given her something from the book to read and she said, "You know, I can see this. I can see this man learning how to wear leather shoes for the first time in his life because he's working in a hotel. I can see how they hurt him, how he wears white socks until someone says, 'No, you wear black socks with those shoes.'"

She said, "I could just see that in my head." Well, that's the problem. I hear people with an idea. I said, "Whoa, okay, what would that look like?" Again, serendipity. And then having one of our executive MBAs had started a marketing firm, a film company, does commercials. We talked to him and his team about doing a little documentary.

So they put together this one called *From We to Me*, going from the community to the individual and used two of the people in the book as key characters. Then



there was a younger woman. And so it really shows the clash of how culture is changing Vietnam over the last 20 to 30 years. That's how it came together.

They did a remarkable job. These are three large men who carried in backpacks all of their filming equipment and would have to scrunch into taxis and go to different places. They used a drone. We worried about that. They didn't have any trouble with it after all. They were there maybe only 10 days. If you've looked at the film, you see what an amazing job they've done.

[00:25:53] Kathy: Gorgeous.

[00:25:54] Nancy: Yeah, really wonderful. So the idea was to have a series of films, and as they started sending this one out to film festivals, this was during COVID, so they couldn't attend in person, but they sent them to 20 film festivals. They got a lot of awards for this thing.

What they learned is that if we want to do something, we really need to make a full-length feature film. We're talking about whether that's something to do next. I don't know, they're busy, we're busy. That would be another goal and to really show Vietnam as a place more about today and maybe more business-oriented to help people understand why they should consider doing business there.

But even if we never do another one, I think this one is so impactful for the people who've been able to see it and then also read the book to learn more about what people, especially during the wartime, what they went through.



It's been an incredible experience. I just feel amazingly fortunate to know these people. When I wrote them to say, "I'd like to interview you and this is what I want to talk about," I thought they'll say no. Every one of them said yes. They had just heart-wrenching stories from them, in many cases. As you saw in the movie, they talked about that they don't really tell their children they're not interested in what happened so long ago and that we're going to lose that.

I took a young woman with me on some of the interviews in case I needed translation help. She was there listening to two or three of these people talk about their experiences. She sat back at one point and she said, "I apologize for my generation. I didn't listen to my parents. I wasn't interested in their stories. And I'm sorry." She told me the next day that she had gone home and asked her dad about some of his experiences. And she said, "I really listened for the first time."

So if it can have that kind of impact... What I intended, and what I hoped for with the book, was that Americans would understand the people from the north part of Vietnam a little better. Bridge of countries. When Dau joined me on those interviews, she said, "No, this is also a bridge of generations."

Then a final person who started a very large tech firm, he said, after the war with the French, which was in the early '50s, he said, "Half of my family moved to the south and half stayed in the north, so we actually fought against each other during the Vietnam-American War." He said, "Maybe this book, these stories, will help bridge the Vietnamese between the north and south."



I don't know if that's happening, but I sure hope so. I think that certainly the bridge generation part that we have seen some other people talk about that as well.

[00:29:01] Kathy: It's incredibly impactful. You hit on the things that I had noted here, which is it definitely gave me a sense of history that I didn't have because my recollection of Vietnam, I was small, it's news clips and then it's my time that I spent in my '20s and '30s and '40s in Asia on business. So I know the business side of it and I know the historical side of it, but this is the impact to people's lives.

What was so striking to me was, yes, this is the story of the north and the south and the generations, but it's universal. When you're looking at the generations and sitting and listening to their stories or not, and trying to carve a new way, it was like this could be-- It could be my family, it could be-- It was just so universal.

So again, applaud you for being part and getting this out because it's not just a story of Vietnam, it's the story of all of us, and I think that's what made it so beautiful.

[00:30:03] Nancy: I agree. I have some relatives in Germany. I think we sent the film to them and she said, "This could be Germany."

Just on this last trip, I asked-- There's a much older aunt and then her daughters who are in their 50s. We were in the car and I said, "Did you ever ask your parents about the war?" They were young people during World War II. They said they didn't really talk and only recently has her mom been willing.



So it is universal. I think about both my parents are gone and I think, "Gosh how many questions I wish I had asked them?" Where were they when Pearl Harbor happened? Where were they when the McCarthy hearings were going on? What did they think about all that? So I hope this will nudge some people to talk to their parents and-- If the parents will speak about it.

The thing that I also learned in the film, a lot of times the parents, my friends, would say, "I can talk to you about it. I've known you as an adult. I don't know if I can talk to my kids about it, so they can watch the film."

What part of Asia were you in?

[00:31:09] Kathy: Name it - Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan. I'm probably missing some. Malaysia.

That was one of the beautiful things about working for Wall Street most of the time, of being able to-- I'm like, "Really? You're going to send me abroad?" Back then you usually go with a suitcase, with no wheels for a month. [laughter] You only got one call home a week. That was it. It was very... different times for sure.

[00:31:34] Nancy: Like one of those women we were studying.

[00:31:36] Kathy: Yeah, without a doubt. As you were sharing that story I was thinking about all of the expats at the time that I used to have to go out and audit. They were all guys with a family. I can't recall one woman.



That has changed. The last company that I was with, we did finally start to have women leaders, but it took decades.

I did want to talk a little bit about the executive MBA program and how your students change as a result of spending time in Vietnam. What are their expectations and then what do they come away with? What were some of the surprises?

[00:32:14] Nancy: I always ask them before they go to write me a paper on what their expectations are about – the economy, social situation, culture, that sort of thing.

One caveat I tell them, I give them the do's and don'ts. I say, "No drugs. No brothels. No motorbikes, too dangerous. And no politics." So I never, and no one should ever, talk Vietnamese politics in Vietnam. They ask me and I talk about my own politics here but never – so that's off-limits.

So I never even ask them what their expectations are, but they say, "It's a communist country. It's going to be lots of soldiers walking around, and guns." So they do have expectations of what that might be like and in other areas.

When they come back I say, "Now, write another paper on where you were right, where were you wrong?" And most of the time they were pretty far off. So they come back and say they're surprised at the economic prosperity.

When I first went to Vietnam in '94, the ratio was 90% bicycles, maybe 5%, 6% motorbikes and no cars whatsoever. There were some trucks and some buses but



basically bicycles everywhere. Electricity and power was not reliable. Water was not reliable. People ate on the street, lived on the street. The conditions were not good, not sanitary, all those things.

So now, when our group goes, it's like you probably experienced in Bangkok. Hanoi probably has over a hundred 70-story highrises now. So they're shocked at that, because we've talked a little bit about some of the old stories. But I'll say it's changed so much. The traffic is bad. The first thing we have to teach you when you land is how to cross the street safely and they all laugh. Then we show them videos and then they get there and they understand.

So the economic prosperity, they're surprised at, that there are no hovels, that there's clean water, that electricity's on, that WiFi is fantastic all over the country, better than many places. The material stuff is a surprise.

Then, this group, we always have them do projects for Idaho-based firms. So a company that is looking for a market supply or new markets. For example, this past October we have a large company here, a retail firm, that was looking for a source for lawn chairs. They thought maybe Vietnam would have it. So a group of participants went and we had five projects that the group did. Four of them came back with terrific leads, either market sources or supply sources.

You know from working in Asia how much time you probably had to spend drinking tea [laughter] and drinking beer at night, just spending time building that relationship. As my colleague and I say, "We spent years drinking tea and beer for you all." So when you get there, all these folks-- not 80 anymore but maybe 30,



strong relationships that we have in Hanoi with people in business, we can tie you in and they will know who you can talk to.

So the efficiency of getting to the right people because of relationship building we did over time. We can transfer that trust to our group, never set foot in Vietnam but because so and so knows us or knows somebody who knows us, they can get in. The value of relationships, particularly in business over a long period, that surprises them.

In America it's important but it's not quite the same level of depth. I'm just amazed. We joke that in the US it's six degrees of separation to wherever you want to go. In Vietnam, it's two.

The people that we know, one of them who started his own company, he's Mr. Entrepreneurship. He was in Boise as a student here and he used an ID card. And he said, "I can get into the cafeteria, into sports events, into the library." So he went back to Vietnam and started a company to make ID cards. Then they began to make Visa and MasterCard cards. Then they've gotten into e-passports and e-ID cards, security stuff. He's brilliant. He does a lot of work for the government.

So he sent me a picture a while back of himself with the ambassador to the US. He was in Washington, just went to see the man. He knows the president of Vietnam. So there's this two degrees of separation. We know people now who are at the very top levels in the country and we can introduce our guys. So that relationship, I think, that surprises them.



Some of them, maybe their parents grew up during the Vietnam war. Maybe their uncles fought there and maybe they have really bad experiences and bad things to say about the Vietnamese. Sometimes, not with everybody, but with some of them there's a little reluctance to go because they've heard only negative things.

They get there and the Vietnamese are incredibly open and they speak English, especially the kids. They want to know about America. They have internet, so they know the movies and everything. And I say, "Remember the Vietnamese won the war." We're the ones with the chip on our shoulder, they aren't."

I remember the very first day I showed up there, whenever it was, February '94. I mean, really primitive conditions at the university. People had two changes of clothing. They always looked super nice and clean and everything, but they didn't have much. They were really thin. One of them came up to me and he said, "We beat you in the war, we will beat you in business." And I thought, "You don't even know what the language, the vocabulary for business is yet and you have that kind of confidence." They will. They are, they will. That's been part of the surprises for the group.

And I think the last thing - actually, I just invited a group to come speak to our current new executive MBAs to tell them about the trip in October. One of the people I invited for this reason, she said to me, "I didn't want to go. I'm really nervous." She's a doctor, a really big-time doctor, a children's pulmonary specialist or something. She said, "I just didn't want to go. I was scared. I thought it would be dirty, scary, and soldiers all over the street."



Halfway through the week, she came, she said, "I can't believe this. I absolutely love it. I'm learning. I'm experiencing things I never thought I would. I feel great. The people have been so wonderful." Then she said, "Maybe I'll travel someplace else."

I thought, okay, if that opens up their eyes to travel as a great thing to be doing,-- I just discovered Eugene Levy's show called *The Reluctant Traveler*.

[00:39:45] Kathy: I just heard about it, yeah.

[00:39:47] Nancy: He is hilarious. He didn't want to travel, doesn't want to go anywhere. It's the same process. Watching someone, their eyes get bigger, they're shocked, and then they are engaged and then they just embrace it. That's what I love watching every time we take them there.

[00:40:04] Kathy: It changes people. And of course, I'm curious now, how did Vietnam change you?

[00:40:11] Nancy: Oh, gosh. In too many ways, I guess. Vietnam was part of my life for a long time. My dad was there before anybody knew where Vietnam was, so in the early '60s he was an infantry officer. And then I met a man and married him who had been a conscientious objector during the war, was drafted and he spent a year as a medic in Vietnam. Before he met my dad, of course, he was terrified.
[laughter]

My father, I remember I was a kid, but when he came back, he gave a talk at a church or something, and he said, "We'll never win this war. This is a different kind



of war. They have time. They will wait us out. We'll never win." And I remember the adults just pooh-poohing him. Of course, he was right on that.

Before I went the very first time, both of them were incredibly supportive. So I went into it with open eyes. Neither, of course, had been in the north. The first time I was there, I went to the canteen, which was-- [chuckles] The faculty members I worked with over there refused to go because it was so terrible. But the foreign professors would go and sit because we thought we need to do it.

So I'd sit there with my 15-cent lunch and dogs roaming around on the concrete floor and a lady squatting on the floor chopping up chicken. A student came over and said, "Could I sit with you and practice my English?" I said, "Of course."

He said he's an accounting student. He wanted to learn English and become a professor. I said, "Wait a minute. As an accounting student, you could go work for one of these foreign accounting firms in Hanoi and make 10 times what you'll make as a professor." He said, "I can't change the country that way."

So it was that thing that over and over, the people we worked with said, "We can change the country." To see that and watch that. And it's happened. It gives me chills to think about it. I get all choked up. Watching that and being a tiny part of it has-- I feel just, again, so fortunate, so lucky to have been able to be part of it. So it's changed me in that regard.

I did take my kids with me one semester. They went to an international school and they say now-- they're in their thirties, but they said that was the best academic



experience they'd ever had. They were with kids from all over the world, of course. Boise, Idaho is pretty small. We adopted them from Asia, so they were around Asians as opposed to being just with a bunch of white people in Boise.

So watching them and basically saying, "I want you to be a citizen of the world. I don't want you to be afraid of going anywhere. I want you to be able to feel comfortable in different cultures." Vietnam afforded me that to give to them. That was a real big benefit too.

[00:43:15] Kathy: Beautiful. What you said about relationship building, I can still taste the Taiwanese rice wine and remember the toast, which was *ganbei*. This is like 35 years ago. [laughs] But that's how a group of Americans can go in and audit the books of a firm. But yeah, it did take a lot of wine.[chuckles]

I also love the theme that you've been talking about here are these bridges. You're building international bridges, the fact that these are linking and spanning generations and international boundaries.

[00:43:51] Nancy: You know, one other project we were fortunate to do... When it first came up, it was in the summertime, and the president of the university wasn't around, so I went to the provost, who's the number two guy. He and a dean basically called all the movers and shakers in the state of Idaho and companies and politicians to say, "What would you think of us doing a project in the north part of Vietnam?" They all said, "Sure, as long as no taxpayer money's involved."



So we got this-- It was Swedish money. It was a chance to send-- I think 25% of our business school faculty members over the course of the nine years went to Vietnam. Some of them had never had passports. And so again, to expose people to that, which they could bring back to their own classroom, the ripple effect...

One day I sat down and tried to calculate how many people we taught who became teachers in Vietnam, how many students, if they have a hundred a semester, how many people have been taught by somebody that we initially taught? I've never calculated it as far as here, but I think that that ripple.

And, again, those bridges-- I know people have stayed in touch. One woman in Boise just returned, I haven't seen her yet, to Vietnam. She had met some of the folks that we worked with 25 years ago and stayed in touch. I love that. I mean those long relationships. So yes, bridges across countries, across people - it's so important.

[00:45:21] Kathy: I want to be mindful of your time, but I did want to talk just a bit about your book, *Wise Beyond Your Field*. We were talking about this before, about sparking fresh thinking in organizations and this gang of unlikely folks that you gathered and what you learned from each other.

The way the book-- There are a number of rules and the first part of it is all about creativity. So I just wanted to touch on a few of those because I thought the insight was really striking, especially rule number two, which is about blending structure and creativity.



That really resonated with me because I've always had those polarities and they always felt opposed to each other. It's only as I've gotten older that I realized that, "No, they're actually working, they complement each other."

So can you speak a bit about that rule, what you've learned, and how it was applied?

[00:46:12] Nancy: Sure, and I'd like to hear why you thought they were opposing. I think you're right, that most people would say, "You can't have both."

But the place where it hit me, the easiest to see, was the theater. My assumption was that actors are flighty and that they stay up all night and party and so forth. They are some of the most disciplined people I know. The director of the Shakespeare Festival here, who also runs a theater in Cleveland, Ohio and another one in Reno, Nevada, Lake Tahoe, his business model is unique. Nobody else in the country has been able to replicate it. But basically, he runs two theaters, builds them opposing seasons, he transfers actors and sets, and so you get multiple use.

But at one point he said, "Of course, structure's important. With theater, you have a clear play, you have these lines you have to do. You have opening night. You can't say, 'Oh, a new software package, let's just move it back a couple of months.' Opening night doesn't change." Same for a football game. Both those two.

They say if you have a clear sense of what you have to do, when you have to get it done, what rehearsal structure looks like, how many days, how long, who does what, when, there's your box.



Inside of that, you can be free. But if you have to constantly think about, "Gosh, should we have a rehearsal today? Should we do it from three to five or from nine to four?" He said you just set all that stuff up and that's the easy stuff. But then you can relax on the rest of it.

One of the football coaches once said he was at a conference with big-name coaches and one of them says, "So when you start getting ready, what do you do the week before a game?" This guy said, "I didn't say this out loud, I'll tell you, Nancy," he said, "What are you talking about? We have a structure from January. The last game we play, we set in place what we're going to be doing until the first game in September or whatever it is." So it's highly structured, scheduled, all that. And then within that, they can make changes.

The football coach that I got closest to was the guy who won this big game in Oklahoma and went to the University of Washington. Now he's retired. But when I first met him, he said, "Football is not creative. We do the same things we did in the 1950s and '60s. It's all about structure, it's all about the process. Same stuff. No creativity."

I said, "Okay, but you told me you would give me 45 minutes. Can I ask some questions?" "Okay." And I walked away thinking, you say you're not creative, but you recruit differently than other programs, you train your coaches differently than other programs, you train your players differently than other programs. Huh?

He kept letting me return, and finally, he said, "Okay, I guess we do things differently to get better," which is a lovely definition of creativity. He said, "But I



don't like that word creative. It's too artsy. I use innovative." I said, "You can use whatever word you want. Basically, you are doing things differently to get better."

So time goes by and he won another big bowl game. And in his interview with somebody, the paper or some commentator, he said, "Well, we're just creative. That's just who we are." I said later, "A-ha! So we've got you there."

But it took him a while to accept that what he was doing was already creative, innovative, however he wanted to define it. But he thought of himself initially as this structured organization, structured process, structured way of doing things, and so how could you have creativity in that?

So that's why it makes sense once they realize that the structure allows you to be creative inside. You don't have to be thinking about what you're going to do on those basic things.

[00:50:15] Kathy: Yeah, and I love-- You have some prompts at the end of each one of these rules. For this one, it was, "Where can you have structure that you can use to allow more opportunity for creativity," like you just said, and then, "Where can you eliminate structure that's inhibiting creativity?" I thought, I love those two sides of it.

Then just one other quick follow-up on the next rule is about making a-ha moments happen. I'd just love to hear your take on how you define an a-ha moment and then how you get there.



[00:50:46] Nancy: Yeah, so actually, an a-ha moment is when something... you understand it suddenly or you come up with something new. This one, again, serendipity, came into play.

I was giving a presentation to the football coaches about the creativity work. This same coach leaned back and he said, "We get players for four years, maybe five. It takes them two and a half years to get it, to know why they're here, what they're doing. They're students, they're playing football, but how do we help them get it faster?" So that's one type of aha moment. How do you help somebody learn something faster?

Then the other one is to say, "Ah, I can take two odd pieces and put them together and come up with something new." So this process, to me, has at least three parts to it. So you collect information and then put it in chunks and understand what it is. Then you use some processes to spark this a-ha, to help yourself come up with something a little different. And then you check it, you verify it, you say, "Does this make sense?"

So collecting information, here was the problem. A jail supervisor-- deputy, sorry, over two supervisors saw that the supervisors, one was the day shift guy, one was the night shift person. Same inmates, just day or night. The night shift reported all kinds of incidents that the inmates were doing, getting into trouble. The day shift, quiet, in control. The day shift supervisor saying, "Obviously, we're doing things right. We're keeping things quiet, under control."



This deputy said, "Okay, that just seems weird. What's going on at night that they're--? So many bad things are happening." So he starts collecting a little bit of information, talking to the people who are working there, and sat in for himself. He collected information.

Then he sat back in the jail, and I think there's a chapter in the *Wise Beyond Your Feel* book about reverse thinking. He did that. He said, "Wait a minute. Why would it be busier at night? People should be asleep. That doesn't make sense. Is there something else going on? Am I looking at this upside down or wrong? Could it be that the people on the night shift, the deputies working there, are finding things going on? They're more actively looking, watching, finding versus in the day shift? Maybe they're being a little bit too laid back."

Sure enough, that was what was going on. Before he reported that, of course, he had to verify it, check it. He talked to others at his level to see what else it might be, how would they interpret it. So it's that sort of thing, that he didn't take it at face value. Instead, he started collecting some information. He sat back and he thought about it.

One of the best ways, I think, to have these things happen is to look at something upside down. In his case, he said, "Why would it be more active at night? There has to be a reason." The reason was that the people working at night were actually watching, going around looking, finding things going wrong versus the day time.

So it's an interesting process. I think part of what sparked this book was working with the gang and also working with the executive MBA design group, that we



would go into a room once a week for two hours with a whiteboard and we knew something would come out. So we got to the point where we could say, "We've collected this information. What are we seeing? How do we look at it differently? What will that mean for us in designing something?" That it's possible to become-- I think with the gang and with the design group, we became more confident that we could come up with something new.

[00:54:43] Kathy: What I love about this is at a macro level, it really summarizes your career. You've collected the data, you've used the word serendipity throughout this conversation. That's the spark. Then there's the verification. It could also be the equation to build bridges.

[00:55:02] Nancy: Good job of putting those dots together. I hadn't thought about it that way. I love that! Wow! Thank you. Fantastic!

[00:55:11] Kathy: Please tell us about where folks can find you and where they can get in touch with you.

[00:55:17] Nancy: A couple of different places. Website is nancyknapier.com. That's probably the easiest. There are lots about the books I've written, what I'm trying to do now, information about the *Bridge Generation* book and the film.

Let me give you a couple of emails. I can send them to you, but you have the nknapier@earthling.net. The one at the university is nnapier@boisestate.edu. I'd love to hear from them.



[00:55:47] Kathy: Great. That sounds wonderful. It was such a wonderful, heartwarming conversation. I thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it.

[00:55:56] Nancy: I appreciate yours. Thank you so much for inviting me.

[music]

[00:56:03] Kathy: Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

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Until next time, be well!

[music]

[00:57:06] [END OF AUDIO]