

#12: cats in the cradle

He would get face to face with a tiger, look the tiger in the eye and make noises that were tiger noises. And the tiger would be, you know, almost stunned by the communication.

This is Jack Blum: The Corruption Diaries from the Tax Justice Network. I'm Naomi Fowler.

(cats in the cradle)

Jack Blum's work in private practice took him to some surprising places. We'll hear about the tiger later, but first... a brush with a pop star.

Harry Chapin was a songwriter, musician, quite well known at the time and a guy who wanted to give away a very substantial portion of his income, to deal with the problem of world hunger.

(cats in the cradle)

And I can remember being at his home on Long Island and watching him sit and compose a song and that was just a wonderful experience and a wonderful treat.

(cats in the cradle)

Poor Harry died in an auto accident on the Long Island Expressway. Uh, his, uh, car got into an unfortunate, accident with a garbage truck and that was that. The funeral and the memorial service for Harry was amazing because it included just about all of the prominent folk singers of the time, it was just an unforgettable thing because each of them performed in honor of Harry.

We set up an organization called World Hunger Year, which uh, was a tax exempt charity, and, uh, uh, organized his performance and appearances so that half of the income would go directly to the charity. That was, uh, uh, quite an education because what I learned was the entourage of a performing musician is very close to the entourage that surrounds a politician. And the similarities were absolutely uncanny. Politicians will have advance men who set up events of different kinds, uh, figure out what the hall is like, how many people are going to be there, so forth and so on. There are parts of this

involve money, the fundraising and sale of, uh, concert tickets. So one of the big jobs of uh, part of this entourage was to make sure that he had grabbed the money from the gate for the concert before the band could get their hands on it and use it to buy drugs or God knows what and, uh, make sure that it was properly included in income and reported and sent to the bank. So, typically a politician on the stump will have a treasurer, a campaign treasurer, and they'll collect money at fundraisers, and keeping track of all of that money is terribly important. Then there are speechwriters, promoters, absolutely uncanny to have the same kind of people, the only difference being substance, where one might be doing love songs, or story songs, or whatever, and the other might be doing public policy as the output.

The tendency of people is to stick in their narrow channel and not understand how other walks of life work, and what the value of those walks of life are. And this was something that expanded my ability to see things, I mean, I have very poor, uh, abilities in the musical area. If I try to sing, people run in the other direction. And uh, I was an utter failure as a piano student. I later learned that part of that was because of, uh, birth defects when I, uh, uh, was in a psychology class, the teacher explained one of the ways of diagnosing certain birth defects was to see if a person could follow a rhythm. So they would start by tapping out a certain rhythm and then ask the, uh, person who's being tested to repeat the rhythm. So it turned out in this particular class the teacher did that and then asked me as the sample student to do it and I couldn't, which told me, yeah, that's maybe why you're having trouble learning how to play the piano and learning how to uh, handle musical instruments and how to sing. So, you learn that there are certain things you just can't do or shouldn't try to do. That doesn't mean you can't appreciate the people who have the talent and the capability of doing those things and doing them extraordinarily well.

(Wild Kingdom Theme)

Jack: I wound up having as a client a man who had worked on the television program, Wild Kingdom. And uh, he worked with Marlon Perkins and he was the guy who, when Marlon Perkins who was this older gentleman who'd worked at the zoo in Chicago, would talk about a particular wild animal, they'd cut away to this guy who was in the field trying to either rope the animal or get to know the animal or whatever.

He was interested in taking over a failed project of then the ABC television network, which had tried to buy a piece of property in suburban Washington, Prince George's County, and their idea was to open an amusement park and have some animals in it. And this, this man, Jim Fowler, wonderful guy, had

the idea of taking it over and making it a really educational amusement park animal slash animal experience. Jim was a very large man, 6'6 or thereabouts. And, really was able to communicate with animals in a way I've never seen before or since. He could actually *talk* to tigers. And they'd listen. And any animal that was near him and he started to communicate with the animal, the animal knew they were in the presence of somebody who was a serious animal person, it was something you had to see to understand. And Jim was really a pioneer in animal conservation. He used to be a regular on the Johnny Carson Show with animals. He'd bring the animals with him and he'd introduce them to Johnny and it was always a very fun and funny episode,

We got an option on this ABC property. And the idea was to raise the financing so that we could proceed with the plans. And what Jim had in mind for this amusement park were things like a playground that was divided in half. One half would be for monkeys or other primates and the other half for kids. And the kids would be able to see the monkeys doing what they did on the jungle gyms and whatever. And on the other side, the monkeys would be able to see the kids. Uh, he also was very much into and had worked with the San Diego Zoo and other zoos where all the barriers were natural barriers, so if you knew, for example, what the ability of a lion or, uh, another big cat to jump was, you could set up a barrier so that there was enough space that the big cat wouldn't be able to escape. On the other hand, there was no visible barrier between the people and the animals. And that, that was a very important part of the idea. And while this effort to raise the money to go ahead with the project was underway, we began to accumulate animals at the site. And that led to a lot of wonderful adventures.

First of all, uh, uh, I've come away with that for a, uh, uh, a sort of, uh, proposition, with a proposition that people could appreciate, which is never invest in anything that eats while you sleep. At first we were feeding some of the big cats that were there with actual meat. And it became financially impossible to carry on with that because it's amazing how much meat a big cat can devour in a very short space of time. So, we turned to using dead chickens from the eastern shore. The rule is that if a chicken dies in one of these big chicken farms, it's, uh, not to be used, not to be processed. On the other hand, the animals don't know that and they can handle the dead chicken without a health problem. So we'd send a pickup truck over to the eastern shore. They'd pick up the dead chickens and feed the animals. And I remember being shocked the first time I went out to the place afterwards seeing all of these chicken feathers, because needless to say, nobody was cleaning these birds before throwing them into the cage with the animals. But,

uh, there was just a wonderful ability to see a lot of these animals very close up.

There was a giraffe. There was a hippo. I think if memory serves me, a couple of baby lions and tigers in the cub stage and, you know, sort of like very large house cats at the time. We had a collection of snakes. We had a python. And, I remember being there for the feeding of the python. And they were raising rats to feed to the python. And once every couple of weeks would throw the rats into the cage and the python would just, you know, take care of the whole crowd.

This whole adventure fell apart completely because it was during that period that Paul Volcker ran interest rates from 5 and 6 percent to 15 percent and there wasn't anybody who was going to invest at those prices. But we had animals that came with amazing stories. There was a bear that came with a trust fund. There was a woman who'd uh, and her husband who'd kept the bear as a pet and, and, you know, really loved this bear but when she died she provided in her will for the care and feeding of this bear for the rest of its life and gave the bear to Jim Fowler. There were a couple of large cats that came from New York City. One of them came from Mayor Koch, who had a visit from a delegation of South Africans who wanted to present the city with a gift in the form of a lion. And Koch understood that it might not be politic to take a lion from segregationist South Africans so he had to get rid of the lion diplomatically and Jim was the obvious person to give the lion to. So we named the lion Koch.

To make this all work, we needed approvals from the Prince George's County Government. And the problem was that absolutely we were not going to pay anybody off to get the approvals, so the question was, how do you make sure you're going to get the approvals without a payoff? So, Jim scheduled a day when all of the people who were in that approval process could come out to this collection of animals and the kids would all get the opportunity to play with the different animals and then we'd put on a show that allowed them to see the range of animals and things that were being done, so one of the people who was there was a falconer who showed how the birds could hunt. We had a snake handler who was Native American who did various dances, including a snake dance. That was supposed to be Native American way of curing certain diseases, and so on. And the idea was that if there was a problem, you didn't call a member of the Prince George's government, you sort of called the kids. And you said, gee, we're having a problem here, we really want to open the place, but, you know, the following needs to happen, which turned out to be much more effective than any other possible way of dealing with this bureaucracy.

It also, uh, was an eye opener to, again, another way of living and another, professional and personal approach. This would have been the early 1980s. A very terrible time to be a venture capitalist.

And it was sad that we couldn't put it together, and it didn't work, and in the end, the animals wound up going to Jim's farm in Georgia, and the property was then sold to some people who opened the Sixth Flag Amusement park in Prince George's County and then became part of the Snyder Empire. And today it's open as an amusement park, but it's a water park, not a, not a park that has animals and kids and all the things we were trying to do.

I didn't go into debt because I was providing legal services and, uh, my investment in it was, uh, more a sweat equity than anything else, but I did have some skin in the game so to speak.

The Corruption Diaries is a production of The Tax Justice Network, made by Naomi Fowler and Jo Barratt. Interviews with Jack Blum were recorded over several days at Jack's home in Maryland by Zoe Sullivan.