



Jennifer Jones-Austin CEO and executive director of FPWA. | Rob White

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## Leader to Leader: Jennifer Jones-Austin

A Q&A with the CEO and executive director of FPWA.

By GREG BERMAN (/author/greg-berman-0) | SEPTEMBER 29, 2020

One of the fault lines that runs through the nonprofit sector is between those who believe in working within existing systems to reform them and those who think that the systems themselves are the problem and that more radical change is required.

Few people straddle this divide more adroitly than Jennifer Jones-Austin, who leads FPWA. In her work, Jennifer has managed to articulate a fundamental critique of American society and our government's inability to do the right thing on behalf of communities of color and poor people in particular. At the same time, she has shown an ability to work within the system at a high level, including her service in the Bloomberg administration and her work as chair of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's transition team.

FPWA engages in advocacy on behalf of vulnerable New Yorkers and the nonprofit organizations that serve them. In a recent [Leap of Reason report](#), Stan Litow, the former president of the IBM Foundation, is quoted as saying: "No sector of the economy is more vital to achieving equality and social justice, or more deserving of support, than nonprofit agencies that are directly responsible for ensuring the social safety net doesn't completely shred."

This is the challenge that Jones-Austin and FPWA are taking on at the moment: working to ensure that social service agencies in New York receive the funding they need to continue to survive and thrive in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a battle being fought on multiple fronts at the same time – in Washington, D.C., in Albany, and at City Hall.

I spoke to Jones-Austin by phone recently about the current budget battles, about her experience overcoming cancer, and the role that faith plays in her life and her leadership. The following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

**Berman:** I want to talk about faith and money and all things in between, but I wanted to start by asking you to describe FPWA and the role that you see FPWA playing in the ecosystem of organizations that advocate on behalf of the not-for-profit sector here in New York.

**Jones-Austin:** FPWA is an anti-poverty, social policy and advocacy organization. We're small, but we are mighty. We are not a trade association, so when FPWA comes to the table on a matter of public concern, we are coming with, first and foremost, a concern about the New Yorkers who are challenged economically and the agencies that care for them.

That's why FPWA took a leadership role in the fight for a living wage – because we were centering the fact that individuals and families in New York were struggling because the wage floor was so low that it needed to be lifted. And increasingly in this moment, we are willing to take up issues that some would describe as social justice in nature.

For example, this week we are convening a symposium to address racism in social services. Even as we call out racism in other pillars of society – in the criminal justice system, in the private sector, in our overall democratic process ... we are looking at all of these other systems and nobody has looked at human services with the same critical eye and asked the question, "Well, are we engaged in perpetuating, by our policies and practices, a racist dynamic?" With this symposium, we want to ask the question: Can you be antiracist in a system that is inherently racist? Can you fight for change while being in the system?

**Berman:** I've always thought that you need both reformers inside the system and disruptors outside the system. Those who would claim that you're only doing valid work if you're outside the system ... I always wanted to reject that as a false choice.

**Jones-Austin:** I wholly agree. I think the key is to figure out how to work with the system, but maintain your independence from the system.

**Berman:** Is the "P" in FPWA's name purely a relic?

**Jones-Austin:** In many ways. FPWA was founded nearly 100 years ago to be a voice at the table alongside Catholic Charities and UJA-Federation, advancing the needs and the concerns of the nonprofit organizations serving the Protestant community. That was at a time when social services in New York City were doled out based on religion. What has happened over the course of these last few decades is that our agency has become increasingly unaffiliated with any religion or denomination. Roughly 80% of our 170-plus member organizations are not religion-based. And those that are, are Jewish, Catholic, Muslim ... we even have a Sikh organization. They run the gamut.

**Berman:** Do you ever think about changing the name or do you feel like you have so much brand equity it doesn't make sense at this point?

**Jones-Austin:** We went through a branding exercise, and what we learned is that there's too much positivity associated with the FPWA or the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies to walk away from it. There's brand recognition there.

**Berman:** One of the things that FPWA has created in recent years is a website to track federal funding for social service agencies. I'm interested to hear you talk a little bit about where you think we are in terms of federal money to support New York City social service organizations, given the COVID-19 crisis.

**Jones-Austin:** Our Federal Funds Tracker was birthed out of conversations with our member agencies following the election of Trump. Trump came, guns blazing, saying that he was going to cut federal funding in many different areas, and the nonprofits wanted to understand how their organizations would be affected. And when we looked around, we realized that the state government couldn't really give us that information and the city was unable to give us that information. So, we developed the Federal Funds Tracker to get a sense, for advocacy purposes, of the potential impact when budgets are passed and when budget-related proposals are coming down the pike.

What we have learned is that, since 2007, the federal government has cut more than \$10 billion in federal funding for critical programming to our city. And that number is only likely to grow now with the significantly increased federal deficit. So, our take right now is that if we're not advocating for key federal funding in critical program areas, our situation is going to become all the more dire.

**Berman:** Turning to the city, has FPWA taken a position on the proposal to allow the mayor to borrow billions in order to pay for operating expenses?

**Jones-Austin:** Our game plan has been, first and foremost, to push for economic stimulus, for direct aid to the City of New York. We appreciate, given the current dynamics down in D.C. with a Republican-controlled Congress and all of the politics related to the upcoming election, that the likelihood of an economic stimulus package that provides the city with much-needed funding is very, very, very small. It is pretty much dead on arrival right now.

So, if you're looking at a \$5 billion deficit and the city doesn't have it in reserves, where else can you get it? The state is not going to be able to dole out additional money, it's facing as much as a \$19 billion deficit, I believe. Where else are you going to get the money from but borrowing?

**Berman:** I had a [recent conversation with Meg Barnette](#) from Nonprofit New York and one of the things we talked about was the idea that despite its importance to our economy and to our social fabric, the not-for-profit sector seems to punch under its weight politically in New York. I'm wondering whether you think that's a fair characterization?

**Jones-Austin:** I think it is and I think there are several reasons why. I think we work against ourselves sometimes. We are not joined up in terms of what we see as the most pressing issues. The child welfare organizations go in and advocate for increased rates and they say that this should come first and foremost. And then the organizations serving the elderly will say, "We aren't funded enough. We don't have enough money for meals to provide to all of the seniors." So, competition is a central challenge with regards to nonprofits coming together.

Another issue is that government is a system compromised by society's view of the poor and the struggling. And there is a race element in that. Many think of what nonprofits do as charity work as opposed to a shared responsibility for everybody. So, nonprofits are hard pressed to create enough noise in order to be heard. People aren't listening because our society has been structured to see people in need as less than or not as worthy.

And then the third thing is that we don't really have organized labor in human services. Now, I'm not saying that to make a clarion call for organized labor, but we don't have a joined-up workforce. Without an organized body, it's hard to get beyond each nonprofit out there saying, "My need is most critical."

**Berman:** I want to pivot and talk about you personally a little bit. Tell me about your book, "[Consider it Pure Joy](#)."

**Jones-Austin:** It's a book that chronicles my journey through a life-threatening illness. I came down with leukemia and, within two days of being diagnosed, I was placed in a coma. As I understand it, I had less than 48 hours to live. So, it's a story about facing a life-death situation that my doctors attributed to my having been in 9/11, which rendered my blood and bone marrow system ineffective and required me to receive a bone marrow transplant.

The book chronicles this kind of Amazing Race chase, working against time to find a donor to give me a new blood and bone marrow system. In our search to find a donor, it was believed that we probably would maybe be able to reach 100 to 200 people who would consider being a donor for me. But because of an exhaustive nationwide effort where we engaged communities of color – because we needed someone of color – we had more than 13,000 people join the registry. It was the largest effort on behalf of one family in the history of the national marrow donor program.

I hesitated to write the book. I just kept thinking there's no need for another book about somebody's journey through cancer. But I thought it was important to help raise awareness about an illness that disproportionately impacts people of color, and to be able to also demonstrate the strength of community to take care of its own.

**Berman:** I think that a lot of nonprofit executive directors think that they have a book in them. I'm curious to hear about how you engaged in the writing process while also leading a complicated nonprofit enterprise.

**Jones-Austin:** Writing the book required me to revisit the journey. I had to put myself back in that state. And it was very painful. It was very vulnerable. But I knew that in doing that I could bring forth a body of work that people would find compelling and relatable. So, the first step was really being willing to relive the experience. It reminds me of when we're working with clients, we have to help them get comfortable with going back in to unpack the issues and the challenges that they have.

When it comes to actually sitting down and writing, the great majority of my writing and editing occurred on planes when traveling for work. I found that the plane was the one place where I could not be distracted easily. No news, no TV, no family members around me. If I was feeling vulnerable and I wanted to cry, there'd be nobody there while I was writing to try to console me and tell me, "You don't have to do this, so don't." So that's how I wrote the book over a period of about two years.

**Berman:** Speaking about your writing, you wrote a [Daily News op-ed](#) recently that argued that it is not enough to protest against racial injustice.

**Jones-Austin:** People of different races and ethnicities coming out together to call for an end to police misconduct and excessive use of force is a beginning. It is a very positive step worthy of our celebration. But we have to appreciate that doing that does not bring an end to the systemic racism that pervades all pillars of society. So, what I am challenging us to do in this moment is to not be satisfied with police reforms alone, to not be satisfied with legislation that outlaws chokehold bans or that brings an end to no-knock warrants, that says that disciplinary records must be transparent and must be shared across jurisdictions. That is all good and critically important, but let's not fool ourselves or let anyone else fool us into believing that that alone is going to bring an end to racism in America.

**Berman:** I'm curious to take your temperature regarding the American struggle for racial justice. On the one hand, as you say, many people point to the interracial nature of the Black Lives Matter protests as a real sign of optimism. But there's also a very strong pessimistic strain right now that suggests that nothing ever changes in the U.S. I'm curious how you position yourself along that continuum, from optimistic to pessimistic.

**Jones-Austin:** Greg, what I'll tell you is that when I get to have a conversation with you about this, it makes me feel optimistic. When I get to do a series of conversations over the summer with a group of women, mainly Caucasian women, where together we read "White Fragility," that leaves me feeling optimistic.

What gives me pause and concern is when we suggest that we will solve all these problems by centering on legislation and legislation alone. People ask me, “How do we still have racism in America when we had the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, affirmative action, the Fair Housing Act of 1968?” And what I tell them is that laws can dictate or influence behavior, but they don't necessarily change minds, values and beliefs. They don't change the heart.

So, what I'm optimistic about right now is that the killing of George Floyd happening the way that it did opened up eyes and sensitized people to this issue. Now we can talk about how racism has existed in America and what is at the core of it. And maybe those conversations will help to change hearts and minds, value systems and beliefs, which can then lead to a reduction and ultimately an end to racism.

**Berman:** Over the years, you have been very public about your faith. I can imagine your faith being enormously helpful as you struggled with your health issues and I can imagine your faith is part of what leads you to have chosen the career path that you've chosen, but I'm wondering what role faith plays in terms of how you lead FPWA on a daily basis?

**Jones-Austin:** I consider myself, for many reasons, one of the fortunate, because I get to bring my whole self to work. Most people have to separate their professional from their personal and their personal from their professional. I get to show up every day bringing my whole self to work. My faith informs what I believe about the world and I get to live that in this job. I get to say what I believe about, just to put it out there, what Jesus told the disciples about how they will be judged when it comes to showing care and concern for the most needy in our society, the incarcerated, the hungry, the unclothed, those who are not well.

I may not be in the office quoting scripture, but I get to bring faith-informed values into the workplace. I get to say to my board and others, we can't be fighting poverty unless we are engaged in the work of supporting criminal justice reform, because this is yet another space where people have long been afflicted and we can't stand by idly and say that we don't have a role there. We have to be in that fight too. So, the short of it is that I don't have to shy away from that which I've been taught, through my faith, is my responsibility. Everybody may not agree with me, but I get to speak to it and live it.

I think having faith as my base helps me to appreciate that when I step into certain places, I'm there for a reason. And my father used to say to us, to his four children, all the time, he's a faith leader, he'd say, “Your responsibility in life is to find a place and leave it better than you found it.” So, it feels like if I'm somewhere, then my calling and my role is to do what is possible in that moment, to make it more than it is, to make it better than it was.

**Greg Berman** is a senior fellow at the Center for Court Innovation. He is the co-author, with Julian Adler, of *“Start Here: A Road Map to Reducing Mass Incarceration.”*