

Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision

Season 1, Episode 3: Jennifer J. Raab: Creating the Crown Jewel in NYC's Public University System

Zev Brenner:

Thank you for tuning in to TalkLine with Zev Brenner. The TalkLine Network in conjunction with Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, is pleased to bring you a new radio series, Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision, a series of interviews conducted by Hadassah's CEO Janice Weinman, which highlights women whose visionary leadership and innovative approaches to the challenges in their respective fields have resulted in noteworthy successes for their organizations. And now your host, Janice Weinman.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Jennifer Raab has been woven into the fabric of New York City life. I can hardly remember a time without her. From her work as Chairman of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, where she was known for her effective and innovative leadership, to her past two decades as President of Hunter College, Jennifer has dedicated herself to the pursuit of excellence and accessible education. The Princeton Review has called Hunter College "the crown jewel of the City University System." If it is, it is largely if not entirely because Jennifer Raab has made it so. Over the last 20 years and through her visionary leadership, she has transformed the college from an open admissions institution into a college recognized as one of the best institutions of higher learning in the US. Jennifer's accomplishments and talent have been widely recognized. She was named by *Crain's New York Business* as one of New York's 100 Most Influential Women in Business in 2007 and one of the 50 Most Powerful Women in New York in 2009 and 2011.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

In 2018, she was honored as the champion of educational opportunity by the Harlem Educational Activities Fund, named by *City & State* to its Women's Power 100 and Manhattan Power 50 lists, and inducted into the Manhattan Jewish Hall of Fame. Jennifer Raab is a New York treasure, a leader whose counsel and achievements have benefited all New Yorkers and individuals beyond. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and is on the board of the United Way. I am thrilled as someone who has known and watched Jennifer over many years, that she is here to speak with us. Jennifer, my first question I have for you is, you have been President of Hunter for almost two decades, what accomplishments are you most proud of and what would you like to accomplish going forward?

Jennifer J. Raab:

Well first, Janice, thank you so much for this opportunity. Thank you for the just moving and

extraordinary introduction and just for all you've done for the city and for this time altogether. You put your finger on it when you talked in the beginning about when I started almost 20 years ago. There was a decision to take this incredible institution of the City University of New York and restore some of the grandeur that it historically had had in the city and the impact. And I was able from that time to begin to build on the reclaiming of accessibility, where we accelerated the ability to have high standards, but to still be open for students of the city and the state, and really, a priceless education at a price people can afford.

Jennifer J. Raab:

And that was really this vision that private education had really priced itself out of the reach of so much of New York. Private education is \$50,000 a year for four years, times two kids. Think of that pressure just on middle-class families, and then think about our immigrant population, first-generation college-goers. So the vision was to take a public college and create a place where the faculty was incredibly strong. And being in New York, we were able to begin to recruit the best. To think of making our student body ready to take advantage of what Hunter had to offer. One example that you know well is our Macaulay program. We have the most competitive and the largest Macaulay program in the CUNY system where students are coming in and just excelling.

Jennifer J. Raab:

We then began to really invest in what makes Hunter special. We call ourselves Hunter College, but we're really a university. We're the largest school in the largest public university system in the country. And not only are we a large undergraduate liberal arts population, we have four extraordinary free-standing professional schools. Education: we train 10% of the New York City public school teachers. Our social and our schools of health professions all, as well training speech pathologists and all types of clinicians. So we are so broad based as a part of the backbone of this. But also, in two other ways that have really been important to the success. One is really reinvigorating our physical structure to say to our students that a public university can be a beautiful place and a place with the most up-to-date facilities.

Jennifer J. Raab:

We built our social work school in East Harlem and invested in a neighborhood where we could live our mission. We created an arts college down in Tribeca. We are training some of the top studio artists in the country. And we restored that extraordinary jewel, Roosevelt House, where we now have a Public Policy Institute and a human rights program that engages both our students and our community.

Jennifer J. Raab:

So our campus is throughout the city. It is strong, it is vibrant. And one of the keys is something you know so well, of course at Hadassah, is the real magic of fundraising. And as a public school and as a women's school, it was not a strong foundation when I arrived. And I've really spent

much time reaching out to alums to engage them with our students, to see really their responsibility. What did Hunter give them as a school that made so much opportunity possible, and how could they give back? And the over \$450 million that we've raised has gone back into scholarships, into faculty support, into renovating buildings and into really making the American dream possible at Hunter College, which is really our vision. So putting those together we've been able to move up just rapidly in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings and offer, as I said, this priceless education at a price our students can afford. They can leave without crushing debt, move on to graduate school and come back and live the Hunter motto, which is *mihi cura futuri*, the care of the future is mine. And we ask all of our students when they leave to find some way in which they repay their obligations to society that supported this extraordinary public college.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

That's really a beautiful testimony. Thank you so much. So I want to ask you, Jennifer, before moving into higher education, you worked as a corporate litigator, a campaign advisor and chairman of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. How have those experiences formed your work at Hunter College? What among those many experiences really influenced all of the things that you're describing now as the accomplishments that you've had?

Jennifer J. Raab:

That's a great question. In terms of training, becoming a lawyer was always a passion. And I am very convinced that as a lawyer and particularly as a litigator, I learned to be a great advocate. My clients right now are the students of Hunter College. So I never miss an opportunity wherever I am to advocate for our students and our institution, it's in my blood. So whether it's fundraising, whether it's working with government officials, whether it's convincing a great faculty member to leave one institution to come teach our students, this commitment I have to advocating for this extraordinary school, really, it was born from my legal experience. I think lawyers are actually very well trained for leadership and management positions. When I started at Hunter, there were not that many attorneys who were running colleges and there are many, many more now. And I think the ability and the requirements that you have as a lawyer to process much information, to be able to negotiate, to be able to parse information and do strategic decision-making is extremely, extremely useful.

Jennifer J. Raab:

So those legal skills were very much part, I believe, of being able to change careers, to learn what I needed to learn, to be able to move forward in a school of higher education. I'd say one thing that is also a special piece, I did have this wonderful time as head of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in New York and that was something that led me to commit to re-opening our Roosevelt House. And as your listeners may know, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt lived on 65th street. They received as a wedding present from Franklin's mother this beautiful townhouse. And the surprise was that Franklin's mother would also move in with the newlyweds, which of course led to many stories. And Franklin's mom died, they arranged for

Hunter to buy the house at a minimal price then. And Hunter used the home, but in the 90's it was closed, there were no resources to maintain it.

Jennifer J. Raab:

So we did an extraordinary renovation and have brought back that Roosevelt legacy, that commitment to social justice and to effective government to our students and to the population of New York City. And I think that the ability to come full circle and restore a landmark to make it come alive with its history and its legacy for New York was a special little blessing of that experience for me.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

That's very interesting. Thank you. So I'm going to change the questions a little bit to something broader and ask you this. In recent years, under the guise to banish all forms of speech, many students deemed racially, ethnically or sexually oppressed by speech that they deemed to be racially, ethnically or sexually oppressive, campuses across the country have been roiled by violent antisemitism, anti-Zionism and calls for administrations to endorse the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which as you know is BDS. I wanted you to tell us a little bit, your own campus and other city campuses have not been spared, and you yourself have been outspoken in your condemnation of these attacks. Where is the campus movement today and how are you and your fellow college and university leaders dealing with this?

Jennifer J. Raab:

A really important question and I think you must remain vigilant to maintain, to make sure there's not discrimination, not antisemitism. And even though we're working remotely to be careful and to be vigilant about what kind of programs or initiatives are underway. It's very much part of Hunter's history to support all races and religions and to make all races and religions feel welcomed. In somewhat an old fashioned language, when Thomas Hunter created the ninth school in the United States for women, he wrote, Janice, as I said, a somewhat old-fashioned quote, "The Negro will sit next to the Jew who'll sit next to the Gentile." That's just extraordinary for the 1870s. So Jewish people, Jewish women, were always welcomed at Hunter College and have always been very much a part of our population. We were often known as the Jewish Radcliffe.

Jennifer J. Raab:

And when I started at Hunter, there were undercurrents of people concerned about potential possible antisemitism and it was something always very important to me to make sure that we were really careful, that we were protecting all of our population, but also not allowing antisemitism to be present at all. And we began to work very hard about bringing our student groups together because that's where we think it all starts. If there's understanding and there's conversation and we're approaching and we're calling out prejudice and doing it by education,

we have a better sense of success. And we for many years had a lot of programming, we created an interfaith center where we brought our Muslim students next to our Hillel, with our Hindu students with a Christian fellowship, and we have a campus nun that sits next to the Hillel office. And again, constant education.

Jennifer J. Raab:

And we felt much more comfortable about all groups attacking and not making antisemitism really unacceptable on the campus. The BDS movement, which is part of the Students for Justice in Palestine movement as well, came onto our campuses, I think, for many of us, really from the outside and did not feel like it was growing from a student body, but somewhat imposed by national forces. And that really made us double down on education for our population about yes, free speech must be supported, but you must be looking at your speech and whether if there's unacceptable conversation.

Jennifer J. Raab:

And you mentioned, the City University, because of where we're located, we tend at Hunter to often have protests. And there was a protest about five years ago in which there were people yelling, "Zionists out of CUNY." And our reaction at that point was to take immediate action. And we brought the students in and all of the student leadership and said to them, "If you heard any other group being called out, right, if any other groups is, has to be out of CUNY, whether it's a nationality or a race or gender, exed out of CUNY, would you find it unacceptable?" And the students said, "Absolutely." And we said, "Well, that very much is what Jewish people hear when they hear Zionists out of CUNY." And we immediately got the students and the faculty groups to condemn that. So the taking of immediate action and not letting it linger and calling it out was really important.

Jennifer J. Raab:

And then I'd say again, this continuing, going back to what we've been doing for decades now is the continuing education of the population and dealing with people who would veer towards antisemitism and also anti-Israeli attacks which often are just a couched way of talking about antisemitism on campus through education. So we launched a Jewish Studies Center, we recruited one of the top faculty in the country, and we have a full curriculum of Jewish studies, both for credit and extracurricular activities so that non-Jewish students can learn about Jewish culture, Jewish history and really connect. And we've also been working with many of the Jewish groups to try to support both our Jewish students, but also our non-Jewish students to travel to Israel on study trips and to learn really the truth about Jewish culture, about Israeli culture and history. So that there's, really through education, we're really attacking potential prejudice. And that's really our commitment. Call it out, don't hide from it, talk about it and try to educate, which is the role of the university.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

You know, Jennifer, Hadassah is deeply committed to combating antisemitism. And really on behalf of Hadassah and myself and so many others, we really want to express our gratitude to you not only for what you've done, but really for being a role model in this regard. And it is a very, very important thing that you have done, it's historic.

Jennifer J. Raab:

I appreciate it.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

So I just want to touch on something that you refer to as well. You talked about women and about the fact that Hunter was originally a woman's institution or a certainly one that was one of the first colleges to admit women. You serve on the advisory committee for women.nyc, and you have really ensured that women have access to education and to their chosen professions. Have women achieved equal opportunity in both areas? Does your being a woman create challenges that your male counterparts do not face?

Jennifer J. Raab:

You and I could have lots of long conversations there. I think we've come, and I think you'd agree, so far. And I think now about even when I went to law school, only a third of my class were women. I was in some of the top Wall Street law firms and there were very few women and now there are women partners in both of them and there's been great success. But I don't think we have achieved an end to the glass ceiling or to discrimination. I think we've made great progress, but I think there's still a lot of subtle barriers, whether it's just in terms of expectations of behavior, of decisions regarding childcare and options for women to have full lives. There are that many, many challenges that remain. I think we're still seeing the traditional meeting where a woman says something and the man says it three minutes later and it was a great idea, when nobody heard the woman the first time.

Jennifer J. Raab:

So you still see some of those patterns of behavior. So my answer, Janice, is we've come a long way. We have not solved all the problems. And we, again, it's one of those areas where we still have much work to do. I think it's very important. On campus, I try to encourage our young women to be strong, to be confident. And I see so much more courage and confidence each year as we graduate young women. So I see so much progress being made, but I think it's not time to let down our guard and to really continue to think about areas of what careers women are choosing, what their access is and what their opportunities are as they go and try to make all parts of their lives work together.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you. Thank you so much. So speaking of glass ceilings, Hunter has become more selective in the students it admits. Why is it important that applicants have a higher level of educational achievement than was previously required?

Jennifer J. Raab:

One of the great things of the CUNY system, being part of the system, is that there's really a strong place for everyone within this system. And it was important for us at Hunter to really focus on the fact that we had so many strong competitive programs, and we want our students to be able to take advantage of the education that we offer. But we also have the opportunity where students can transfer to Hunter as they get their grades up and get more experience from the community colleges. So we managed to maintain and increase our excellence as well as keeping our gates open as a place of opportunity. And we're really very, very proud of that. One of the ways that we've also built on becoming more selective is to help really create pipelines of underrepresented minority students, first-generation students, immigrant students, to the next level of achievement.

Jennifer J. Raab:

So I'm extraordinarily proud that we have had, in the last few years, our first two Marshall Scholars, our first Road Scholar, five Schwarzman Scholars, which is the sort of the Chinese Road Scholarship to an education in Beijing, and access and acceptance by our students in the top medical schools, law schools, Harvard, Yale, all of the Ivies. So our impact in diversifying faculty and other institutions by creating students from underrepresented minority groups that are going on to PhD programs, there's a real benefit to finding the best and then supporting them on this pipeline to achievement, and as they move on, as I said, from often being first in their family to go to college to making that mark by being accepted into the top graduate programs in the country.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

So you've told us a lot about the achievements that you have made and that Hunter has achieved. What are the biggest challenges that Hunter and other institutes of higher learning face today?

Jennifer J. Raab:

Well, there's a lot of opportunity and there are many, many, many challenges. I think, one, the pandemic has had a, obviously, enormous challenge in being remote and now we're planning to come back. But that's highlighted the question of technology. And that has been something that is impacting higher ed in every institution. I think what we've learned is that there's still a hunger for people to be in classes and to have conversations and to have social activity. I think we have also learned that there are better and increasingly more important ways to integrate technology into learning. And this pandemic has pushed us to do so. The role of higher ed is

something that is always being questioned a lot because of the cost of degrees. And that's why the role of a public college, a strong high-quality public college, which offers such a strong education at an affordable price is so important.

Jennifer J. Raab:

And I think that the connection between a college degree and the next step in young people's lives, the workforce, is a very big challenge. And we spend a lot of time at Hunter thinking through how do we offer a high-quality liberal arts undergraduate education, but help our students think about what is their next step? So one of the challenges we've embraced is to think that question through. We've started to offer more certificate programs as part of our undergraduate education to help students think about that career step. And I'll give you a few examples. We celebrate our role as a school teaching the arts, but we also know that not every student's going to be able to become a performer or an artist. So we offer a certificate in arts management so students can have skills and some background in legal principles, accounting, management, et cetera, so that they can think about a job as an arts administrator.

Jennifer J. Raab:

We have certificates in public policy and human rights that help people think about jobs in the government and nonprofit in which they build on their liberal arts degrees, but has skills that help in those areas. We've added a business certificate again so the students who are maybe a history major but want to think about working in a corporate setting, have the right vocabulary and exposure to apply for those jobs.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

You know, Jennifer, this has been so interesting and so meaningful. I'd like to ask you just one more question. And that is, what personal characteristics have made you the leader you are? Someone able to approach challenges, to assess a situation or an organization, to envision the changes that need to be made, realize its potential and turn what you envision into a reality, which you have done so superbly.

Jennifer J. Raab:

It's a wonderful question. As I said, it's a joy to be able to have this leadership position. And a lot for me has been that I so much identify with the Hunter student. I came from a background where I was the first in my family to go to college. My mother was widowed when I was very young. And I really had to keep an eye on the prize, be very directed and very, really just tenacious in getting towards my goals. And I was very blessed to be accepted to Hunter High School and where I was then put on a track to go to college. But that tenacity and that commitment and that real eye on the prize that started as a young person has really carried me to this vision of not accepting people who tease me that I'm someone who doesn't accept no. And I think that's one of the really important leadership qualities. If you have it, you need a

strategic vision and you need just the tenacity and the commitment and almost the relentlessness to turn that vision into a reality.

Jennifer J. Raab:

I also think that I'm very blessed by having grown up in a situation where I needed to really work for what I was going to succeed, to develop an empathy and a connection to our student body. People tease me, like I always loved children, and now I feel like I have 23,000. I love our students and it's a very real connection for me. And it makes me want to continue to work harder to give them more opportunities, to look at what the finest schools in the country that have great endowments give their students and find a way for a Hunter to do that. And we've succeeded in doing that. So, sort of the connection of having a real commitment and tenaciousness and the empathy to understand why we're making this commitment for this public college and to try to really do everything I can to realize them.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you, Jennifer, so much for everything you've done for the next generation of students, for women, for the Jewish community. You have really been, as I said before, a role model. And we're deeply grateful for what you do and for being on the show today. Thank you.

Jennifer J. Raab:

Thank you for this opportunity and thank you for all, again, for Hadassah, for your support and for the partnerships that we've had. Thanks so much for having me today.