

Speaker 1 ([00:06](#)):

Welcome to HUD Co Radio. I'm Jim Kennelly. Today I'm joined by Matt Caranante Program development specialist for the Hudson County Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs Tourism Development. The office supports a range of projects including celebration of our local history. Matt will be conducting a series of interviews on HudcoRadio, doing just that. Welcome to HudcoRadio. Tell us a little bit about your work and what this series will entail.

Speaker 2 ([00:32](#)):

Thanks, Jim. Much of my focus within our office is to help the community celebrate and preserve its history and heritage. Hudson County is one of the most culturally diverse places on earth. With nearly half of our residents being born outside of the United States. A big part of what has made Hudson County home to all of this culture is its history as a first stop for millions of immigrants. Throughout modern history, Hudson County is known as the Gateway to America for good reason. Beginning in the 16 hundreds through the Ellis Island years and up until present day, immigrants from every corner of the globe have made Hudson County their first stop with millions planting their roots right here, becoming an integral part to the growth and prosperity of Hudson County, the United States and beyond. This series of interviews is part of a program called Hudson County and Immigration, the Story of America. I've invited a few of our community leaders to share their experiences as organizational leaders, Hudson County residents, and immigrants themselves. Each of these guests represents a different background and has a different story to share. Our hope is that you can learn something from these amazing people. Regardless of your own background, I'd like to welcome Olga Levina, who is the executive producer for Jersey City Theater Center at 165 Newark Avenue. The interest is on Barrow Street, and they also work in White Eagle Hall, and the website is www.jctcenter.org. Hi Olga, thanks for being here.

Speaker 3 ([01:57](#)):

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me and yes for having me. Thank you.

Speaker 2 ([02:04](#)):

Yeah. So please tell us more about yourself and your organization.

Speaker 3 ([02:08](#)):

Well I am executive producer of Jersey City Theater Center. I am also a founder of Jersey City Theater Center. We started in 2006 and we incorporated the company in 2006. And in 2007 we had our first show. And although we fundraised in Hudson County, but we signed a contract with Foods in amia, award-winning writer and Louis Santoro. And when we brought him to Jersey City, he loved the diversity, but we couldn't find even a basement where professional equity artists can come and perform. So we had to go to New York City. We had very successful show. It was on Christopher Street, very close. So all our supporters came but we made it a goal to make sure that we built performing art center and performing and visual art center here in Jersey City.

Speaker 2 ([03:17](#)):

Great. So let's go back to more of your story. If you can tell us a little bit about where you grew up.

Speaker 3 ([03:24](#)):

Well, I was born in Kiev, Ukraine and I grew up in Minsk, Belarus. I'm from very diverse family Ukrainian, Russian, Chinese and on my father's side, Bella Russian Jewish. So if one side is Christian, another side is Jewish from Bellas.

Speaker 2 ([03:54](#)):

Great. And then so what year did you first immigrate to the United States?

Speaker 3 ([04:02](#)):

I immigrated to United States in 1992.

Speaker 2 ([04:06](#)):

Wow. And then if you could share a little bit about that experience when you first came here.

Speaker 3 ([04:12](#)):

Well it was incredible. I would repeat all over again. So I came here, I was relatively young, but I already had a child. And I remember my family as soon as they stopped from airplane and my father saw me embraced me, he said, just remember you an immigrant here. No arts, <laugh> arts are not for immigrants in this country. Yeah.

Speaker 2 ([04:47](#)):

We spoke about this before a little while back about how when you came here and the arts were, your father at least didn't care for that or think that an immigrant should focus on that. But here you are have done some incredible work and we're all glad that you did do that. So where your father was already here then?

Speaker 3 ([05:07](#)):

Yes. My father came only couple of years before me and my family, my grandparents who raised me. So I came after my family. I already flew straight from Belarus while they went through the whole immigration process. So they went to Austria and Italy. And in Italy they waited for six months while governments were making decisions if they gonna go to United States or to Israel.

Speaker 2 ([05:44](#)):

Where did you first settle when you first came

Speaker 3 ([05:46](#)):

Here? When I first came here, I came to Brighton Beach, of course, Coney Island, Brighton Beach. And it was amazing. For the first time in my life I saw Ocean.

Speaker 2 ([05:58](#)):

Oh wow.

Speaker 3 ([05:59](#)):

And it was only two blocks away from my apartment building. So I remember just going every day to see this powerful body of water. And to me it was happiness, <laugh>, and of course everything. Everything

was new, everything. Although on Brighton Beach, of course it was. I understood all the signs, everything was written in Russian. But I was interested because in Belarus I represented diversity. But outside of my home, I saw all these people from all over the world. And the only things that I was kind of like how I can tell their story, how can I learn their story, how I can tell their story, how we can share. So I had that desire to get to know these different beautiful people.

Speaker 2 ([07:06](#)):

Wonderful. When did you first arrive in Hudson County?

Speaker 3 ([07:10](#)):

In my husband, Piccolo brought me to Hudson County because he is a builder developer here, and he was trying to, first year we lived in Brooklyn and he was trying to open my eyes to <laugh>, New Jersey because he loves New Jersey. So he took me to Liberty State Park and he took me to look at the history of Hudson County at different buildings, and he would take me almost every weekend. So I had just because I grew up in the city, so he knew that suburbs, I'm not gonna go for it. So he would take me to Jersey City and I fall in love with it. I remember the first question I asked him, I said, can you please take me to museum or to performing art center because it's so important for me. If I make that decision, make that step to move to New Jersey, I need to know that I live in an area where it exists. <affirmative>. So he took me to our Jersey City Museum At that time, it was my first introduction to, so New Jersey Arts.

Speaker 2 ([08:40](#)):

Great. And so all the wonderful stuff is what made you settle here. And you currently live in Hudson County? In Jersey City?

Speaker 3 ([08:49](#)):

No, I don't. Not anymore. I only work at Cas that time. 2007, 2008. We, well, we moved out of Hudson County. We sold our house and moved out in 2009 <affirmative>. We built a beautiful home on eighth Street in Jersey City. It was home of our dream but when economy crashed in 2008, unfortunately, like many other people, we had to move out because band lost a big project. And in order for us to survive, we had to sell our house and move out because we couldn't afford Hudson County any longer.

Speaker 2 ([09:43](#)):

<affirmative>. Well, it was a rough time for a lot of people. For sure. So let's go back to you work. Obviously you're the executive producer for the Jersey City Theater Center. So can you tell us a little bit about some of your favorite plays or projects that you've put on since you've been running the organization?

Speaker 3 ([10:14](#)):

Wow, that's great question. I believe that each and every artist that we bring or we work with, we create very close partnership and each and every one of them special in their own. But I can tell you a little bit about what is coming up this season. Because of the incredible support from the state, from new public in Jersey City, through the Arts Trust we able to bring work very closely with our artists in Greenville. Also, I love Greenville as a great organization. They were the first ones to accept an immigrant and give me an opportunity to work with their community, with their artists. And I'm very grateful for it. I'm very grateful also to Hudson County Cultural Affairs because when nobody knew who

we were, and I don't think anybody believed that we can build Weigle Hole bill Larosa said at that time said, Olga, I think you can do it and please apply for our first grant.

(11:38):

So the season coming forward is very diverse. We work closely with our local artists, but we also bringing artists from all over the world because I believe that that very exchange between people and artists is where the magic is in performing arts. And we opening our season with the heart of Afghanistan, how much in the last 20 years we heard about Afghanistan, but we only know Afghanistan from one angle war. There's so much more, and this is what culture and arts and music bring. So please come and see this amazing performers, they refugees to United States. They were very famous during their time, but they were on the side of democracy. So they came here as refugees. Then we also bringing artists Choreographer Heidi Latsky, who work with disabled dancers, she's going to develop in our residency, we work with our own artist in our community, Savanna Joyce.

(13:09):

And she's coming with Broadway producers with a new place that she's developing. It's called The Last Match, and it's pro wrestling play. Oh wow. And she's incredible lyricist and composer and actress. She lives here in Hudson County. We have long relationship and I'm so happy that I'm gonna have this opportunity to present her project at W Hall. Then of course, we are bringing incredible world renowned dabra this year and I feel like it's not only for me coming to my own roots, but also bringing peace of Ukraine here to Hudson County. We are also working with national academic, the of Ukraine of Less Ukraine Key, and they bringing on the fields of blood. It's the piece we bringing artists from Barcelona. We bringing someone from Chile to develop a piece. Young theater makers from Chile, we bringing Thomas Richards who was a right hand friend and core cystic director with ovs. He's coming for professional workshops and also with his new work hand. I'm just going through my season. Yeah, it's

Speaker 2 (14:57):

A lot. Well, it's amazing. This is why I wanted to have you in your programming represents the diversity and all the different personalities and art and all the wonderful things that Hudson County has happening. So thank you for sharing.

Speaker 3 (15:15):

This is how I'm looking at, I'm always like, I look at my season and I feel like I have an obligation to serve, to serve people, to serve every community. For example, this year we are also working with a producer from Philippines who bringing Filipino grams with all their artists as well. So we are giving little bit to every community, making sure that we are really inclusive. And that's, I believe the most important for me because growing up I was always the other <affirmative>. So I wanna bring as many I would love for Jersey City Theater Centers programming to be as diverse as possible.

Speaker 2 (16:07):

Great. And that brings me to my final question. What sort of advice do you have for future immigrants that would come to the United States?

Speaker 3 (16:18):

Don't ever accept? No. Just stick to it. It will be difficult, but through that difficulties, you going to find the most amazing beauty and the most genuine people. Because when we lost everything and we decided to develop white hole to restore white hole, we didn't have money. So the most genuine and

beautiful people came to support us on a business side, our investors, and also in terms of artists, Timothy Harrick New Jersey, Hudson County, Luvata Bank, Fernando Rees, Daniel, Danielle Pucci Dan Perini, artists like Frank Polito artists like Joe Waks, artists like Robert Per Jennifer Roberts doing that, I know that organization is gonna grow. We started to get grants. We started paying people, but you only know and you learn how genuine people can be when you don't have anything. So don't look at when you down. You can truly know who your friends are. So don't get disappointed. Don't stop going for your dreams.

Speaker 2 ([18:08](#)):

Great advice. Finally, can you share how people can reach you and how they can support Jersey City Theater Center?

Speaker 3 ([18:15](#)):

You can find all our information on our website, www.jctcenter.org, or by just Googling Jersey City Theater Center. You can find our phone number, a button to donate. You can also donate through in May through the Chamber. It's Hudson Gifts campaign. It's incredible how much money we are raising right now for Hudson County non-for-profits and contacting us through info@jctcenter.org or me personally, olga@jctcenter.org.

Speaker 2 ([19:05](#)):

Great. Well, Olga, thank you so much for being here. It

Speaker 3 ([19:08](#)):

Was wonderful speaking with you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much be for having me. Thank you.

Speaker 1 ([19:13](#)):

Thanks, Matt. The Hudson County and Immigration, the Story of America Interview series is supported by a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission. To learn more about the Hudson County Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs Tourism Development, check out their website, visithudson.org. Remember, you can keep up to date with county government news and announcements by following us on Twitter. Our handle is [hudcotweet](#). Videos of county events can be found on YouTube where our channel is, [HUDcotv](#), and we're on Instagram at [HUDcolnsta](#) and on Facebook at [HUDcofb](#). Finally, thanks as always to Hudson County executive Tom DeGise and the Board of County Commissioners who support the programs and services featured on this podcast.