

Jerry

"I remember we just did things for the risk. We would walk along the edge of the cliff. And we would do that from mile or two down to the river. Just risking our lives over and over again. And we just loved it. It was not risking our lives as much in a self-destructive way. It was more in a courageous, playful way. Without good sense to know that we could kill ourselves. Maybe. But, that's when it started, is in the forest, in the woods, along the creek. The longer I'd be in the creek, the wilder I would become. By the end of the day, I didn't know my name. I was just an animal running in the woods."

Nina

"I'm Nina Friedman. And this is WHEREING. WHEREING explores where we are. It is dedicated to those who believe in the inherent pride of belonging and all the ways we feel we belong and connect, to ourselves, to each other, and the spaces that hold the stories where all of this comes alive. Where each experience of belonging is a work of art, created by chance or by design. Dare I ask, is belonging where you are, not what matters most? WHEREING is the spatial story. Welcome."

Nina

Quote, *"It has been brought to my attention that Jerry Roback participated in the recent evacuations of refugees from Mimot. While I respect the courage and spirit of enterprise which he demonstrated, accompanying officers into Cambodia was a direct violation of explicit instructions."* Unquote. This is part of a letter Jerry proudly shows as evidence of the time he violated the rules to rescue 1000 refugees.

What does it mean to live on the edge? Jerry Roback is most comfortable describing himself as a wild man, a humanitarian adventurer, a self appointed and fearless grassroots citizen of compassionate service. He has been a Vista volunteer, run dangerous rescue missions, assisted with mine and agent orange recovery and provided for orphanages. He has worked in community development, the healing arts, mental health, and has fed the poor out of his own kitchen. He continues to seek what he calls the Oasis, the calm, the magic, the rescue, a sanctuary for discussions across divides, or simply the place to meet need that reveals itself in spontaneous encounters. This is his fertile ground. His home. This unbridled spirit has provided a life resume of the ordinary extraordinary, in places near and far. His disarming conversation is heartwarming. Let's listen.

Nina

The first thing that I'm going to ask you, is, where are you right now, Jerry?

Jerry

I'm sitting in my home, where I've lived and worked for 30 years and partnered and built organizations and had friendships. This has been a centerpiece of my life here. So it's home. I live in Tacoma, Washington, half of the year. That's where I am now. And the other half of the year, I live out on a Lake, and pretty much retreat in the winter. So I have two real homes that I feel at home at. I feel very blessed that way.

Nina

That's wonderful. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood home? And if there were a few for you, just choose one that stands out.

Jerry

Well, I lived in two homes. One was when my dad came home from the second World War. It was a home from the post-war period. All the new developments were being built for the soldiers returning home. We lived there for nine years, then we moved to my second home, which I consider to be my home. The day I was 18, I moved out of my home. I wanted to be free and independent and gone. So, I lived there from the time I was nine until the time I was 18.

Nina

Tell us a little bit about that home.

Jerry

Well, the first thing that comes to my mind to say is, I had a creek. Creeks were big to me, going into the woods was big to me. And so the fact that I had a creek down at the end of the street, that I could go down there and have a life down there, have my tribe down there, have lots of adventures, was really important. We had six kids in the next nine years. So we were pretty packed in there, but it was a great place. Beautiful lot. We could play catch. Enough room to throw a football. We had a good time.

Nina

So let's dive in.

You have described yourself as a wild man. Proud of living on the edge, living, I would say with intentional spontaneity and sometimes dangerously. Right? So my question is, as we think about the early years, the childhood home, did it begin there and, did you frequent places that were on the edge in this earlier stage of your life? I know for example that as you grew, and this is maybe a little bit later, that you lived on an Indian reservation, you worked with some of the youth there. And, there was a period of your life where you worked with African-American teenagers and they specifically invited you to accompany them into the race riots, as a white man. You found yourself even early on choosing these kind of unexpected homes. How did this begin? This propensity, to wanting these kind of experiences, and maybe the word edge is the wrong word.

Jerry

It's a good word. I can relate to that.

Nina

How did it begin? These threads...

Jerry

I'd love to tell you about that. It really began in my childhood, as soon as I was old enough, to leave, to be independent somewhat, to get out of the sight line of either of my parents. I was turned loose to be a wild boy, because the world was different then. And that was just the way we were raised. We were off. I had brother, three years older than me, and I spent my whole childhood trying to keep up with him, do what he could do. He was very wild, man. I remember we just did things for the risk. Even at the age of ten, nine, we would walk along the edge of the cliff. I don't mean at the top or the bottom, I mean right on the cliff. And we would do that from mile or two down to the river. Just risking our lives over and over again. And we just loved it. I was wild. And, I remember times when we would do that with other kids, go along the front of the face of the cliff, and they would get scared. We were noble. We never would leave somebody scared on the side of a cliff. If it took all afternoon to talk them down, we would do it. And it was always this respect of what we were all doing. There was an honor to it. And so, it was not risking our lives as much in a self-destructive way. It was more in a courageous, playful way without the

good sense to know that we could kill ourselves. Maybe. But that's when it started, is in the forest, in the woods, along the creek. The longer I'd be in the creek, the wilder I would become. By the end of the day, I didn't know my name. I was just an animal running in the woods. And, that was a great beginning.

Nina

I'm very moved by this sense of danger, a sense of honor and respect for what you were doing, and a kind of honor code between the children.

Jerry

It wasn't done to die. I mean, we stepped over the line. We were kids. And so if you had someone that were mad at, you might not be so kind to them when they were afraid the next time. But we really did have a sense of honor as the underlying principle. As a matter of fact, Nina, I can remember times where we had pyromaniacs in the woods, other kids, and we had to make sure they didn't set the woods on fire. And we took that responsibility on, like, it was our forests and so it was a very real, and it was wild. That's why the wild thing is so natural because we were in charge. First time I saw a no trespassing sign in that woods, I couldn't even believe it. I mean, it was our woods. It didn't belong to anybody else. It was ours. We lived it. We knew when the creek rose and fell. And, we knew when the ice was frozen enough to walk across. We knew everything.

Nina

It's a beautiful sense of belonging.

Jerry

Exactly.

Nina

It ties so much into what comes later for you. All of this sounds so seminal, and the seeds of what was to come. There are moments or periods in our lives where things change. And often, this also involves a place, and it's a place that's out of our comfort zone, perhaps it's a place that's thrust on us, not by our own choice, but it becomes an unexpected home. It becomes this place in our hearts where the place remains with us, whether we're there or not. These moments, these places, are places that we go back to, places that we bring with us. It often defines for us what our work is going to be, who our friendships are. It's a place that we bring our friends and family back to. And it's a place that we long for.

Is it fair for me to say that for you, this place was Vietnam, your heroic commissions as an aid officer in the Vietnam war? Something about that experience changed the course of your life.

Jerry

Oh, for sure. I consider Vietnam my second home. I still do. When I got cancer a while back, one of the first things I wanted to do was to get back to Vietnam before I got too sick. And that struck me deeply, you know, it brings tears to my eyes right now. Because, I went to Vietnam to do good. I mean, I actually said those words before I left. I'm gonna go to Vietnam and do good. I'm not a soldier. I don't want to fight in the war. I don't want to go to Canada. Demonstrating is not satisfying to me. It's not hands-on enough for what I wanted to do with that young, wild time of my life. Plus, I didn't want to be drafted. A lot of times the ball gets started by some half, two thing, and then a whole series of acts and experiences fall into place. And that's how Vietnam was for me too. I was 21 years old, and I don't think I had the maturity, but when the half two came in and it met the one too, then I went. And then, nobody, this is an important part of the story, nobody wanted to go to Vietnam. Some screwball like me

came along and specifically wanted to go to Vietnam. They were like, sign him up. And then, I went into the state department because I couldn't go as a volunteer. I couldn't get a deferment. In a way, Nina, a lot of these things seem divinely guided somehow now, in retrospect, you know, really they do. I just wouldn't have gotten myself together if I hadn't had the pressure, and I would have gone as a volunteer happily, that would have been in consequential in a lot of ways, because I wouldn't have had the resources nor the opportunities to do the things that I got to do, if I hadn't been in the state department. So those things, I think of those things as being blessings

Nina

That time, it was so impactful. And when I think back to what you were just saying that as a young man, you were living with a lot of risk, even at a young age. There was a code of honor to it, and a respect. And then, when I think of your time in Vietnam, from how you speak about it is kind of a place of dangerous service.

Jerry

That was a big part of it too.

Nina

You've also gone back there, perhaps not as many times as you would have liked to, but since Vietnam, you founded the Southeast Asia project, which you call an humanitarian adventure, which assisted with mine and agent orange victim recovery. You raise money to support families in Vietnam, recovering from the war related illnesses and injuries. You provided needs for orphanages there. And, you volunteered there to help the Aboriginal mountain people get electricity. And you established work opportunities for the deaf and the blind. The Vietnam war experience continued, a place of service that you keep going back to. I'm interested in how the impact of a place of war, how it became for you, a place to unite, to bridge across invisible boundaries, becoming a place of healing, and the lessons that you took from it. I'd like to hear about that impact.

Jerry

Okay. Well, that's a wonderful question, thank you so much for giving it to me. One of the things that I learned as a younger person before I was in Vietnam, was that I love to contribute. I love to do good. I love to go on adventures. I love to stretch myself that way. And when all my brothers were going to Vietnam, cause the military was mostly men in those days, I felt a responsibility, and I felt like I wanted to participate. I wanted to do it in a way that was consistent with my values and my way of living. And that's exactly what I did. I went to Vietnam and I did good. I couldn't have done what I did without my military friends and buddies, because they were always there doing something when we needed help to get some people out of a messed up situation, or to get water to people or to get tents to people to live in until we could find them places to live. And that was because I was a brother. That was important to me. When I came back from Vietnam, it was hard, because I was separate. I wasn't in the military and I wasn't a peacenik. I was against the war for sure. But that wasn't my identity. My identity was what I created, which was, peace warrior, to save lives. And that's why I felt so drawn to Vietnam because it was, so intensely real and challenging and unpredictable and frightening and inspirational, or the bringing on, of great deeds in life. That was my time for that. And I did it. When I came back home, nobody knew who I was. When I was in Vietnam, we were brothers. I speak Vietnamese. That helps quite a bit. The soldiers in that war, 70% of them saw less action than I did, because they were more logistics and planning and just supplying the 30% who were doing the war. My friends back here, they thought I was in the CIA. And so I was alone, really alone. Oh my gosh, I felt isolated from people who knew me, and to go from a place of accomplishment and satisfaction somehow, in this war, to not being believed.

Nina

Are these the reasons why you went back and did all the things you did after the war was over?

Jerry

Yeah. It was a big part because of what I had accomplished. Like I said, Vietnam is my second home. I have a family there. I remember lots of people from the war time. Oh, there are so many amazing stories. I had a lot of love for the people, and I saved a lot of lives. I risked my life to do it. And it was a bond, a big, huge bond to me. You know, I had times when I was driving my international scout into a Hamlet or a village Montagnard, which are the Aboriginal people that most Americans loved so much, the people started waving me down. At first, I thought they were just saying, hi, here comes the refugee guy, got some rice, got some tin roofing, hot dog, you know, but then I saw it was stop, stop, stop. And then I stopped. And the few men came over to me and said, don't go in there. They're waiting for you today. That's just the first example that comes to mind, cause we loved each other and we went through a lot together, and they had seen me. With a capital S, and I had seen them. We were brothers and sisters. It was very beautiful. I have a picture . And, it's of me standing talking with a Montagnard man this last time when I was in Vietnam. And he's got his old uniform on, and he didn't speak Vietnamese other than a few words and I didn't speak his dialect of aboriginal language, but we stood there and talked to each other for 20 minutes about the war, and how much we loved each other. We both knew it. We didn't understand a word, but we were bonded at that level so much. That was a touching experience.

Nina

Very moving.

Jerry

Thank you. Yes, it was very powerful. They carry outside of the bodies you live in. That's the kind of thing you get with war sometimes. I'm not a warmonger. I know I'm not a pacifist because I have picked up a weapon in that war to protect my refugees. We were under attack. I would protect my family, my brothers and sisters.

Nina

You're someone who sees the world as your family?

Jerry

Yeah, I do. Oh, that's such a beautiful comment. My God. Oh, I love that.

Nina

You said something a minute ago, which was, and I wish I can rephrase it the way you said, it was when you're living outside your bodies, you have that bond and, something about places of war that can do that.

Jerry

Yes. Places of adventure, places of risk. There doesn't need to be a war. I've climbed a few mountains in my day, and you get the same deal. People see you, you see them in really deep ways.

Nina

Well, what you just said about the body though, let's come to the body. Because when I think about these threads that carry through, and the risks and the danger; there's another home that we can speak about. And that's the home of your body. I'd like to talk a little bit about the diagnosis that you have now of cancer, as another battle that you find yourself immersed in, a danger that has invaded, and the way that you've been living with that, which is in

keeping with the way you've been living your whole life. Which is this code of honor, this accepting of risk. And, you've been beating it with this way that you've developed from the time, it seems, since you've been a child, as you've walked into all these unexpected homes and places as a citizen of the world approaching dangerous situations, carving through them to know what to extract and how to love in those places. This is another one now, different, but it's another one. And it's now come to the home of your body. Even in this place, you are extending yourself outwards. I'd like to talk about this with you. So, threading along this theme of the edges and the thresholds and the risk and the danger and how you've approached this as a new threshold now, knowing that your time is more limited, than it might have otherwise been.

Jerry

Yeah. Wow.

Nina

That's a long question.

Jerry

That's a wonderful question. It's a wonderful comment. I'm just taken by it. You're opening me in a very beautiful way. And, it's true what you say. I can't be riding this cancer thing forever. I'm just crazy enough to have just this tiny inkling that I might live forever.

Nina

You've broken the rules so far.

Jerry

I know. And, I'm not even saying I would want to, but, it's a border, it's a limit, but at the same time, I've been very close to death a couple of times. And in the war, I was very close to death, many times. I've let go to dying, sincerely, before. It's not that terrifying to me. I love to be alive. I love my life right now. This very moment, this very day. I want to be here, loving life. That's my spiritual medicine. I have plenty of data on my mortality to work with. So, it's not a Superman thing. But right now, I'm living as well as I can, and I've learned that from other people with cancer, by the way. There are people there at teach, how to love life with cancer. It just gives you a lot of reason to want to live, and experience, and dream. I mean, it gives some impetus, just like the war gave me impetus. To move. So I take these things to be used and and to learn from other people. I formed this thing called cancer buddies with a buddy of mine, and we buddy up with people, all over the place who are just entering into cancer experience. There's a place where a lot of cancer people have to go, and we call it the juice room. Sometimes people are all there with their eyes closed. You need to be very respectful and very gentle. We play. You could feel the electricity in the air, cause we're going to do some stuff somehow, but we go very slowly and very quietly. It's like the room knows when we come, and maybe they aren't the same patients, but the room carries its own memory. One time recently, this woman, I thought she looked like she was so, so slck, and her daughter was sitting there with her with some kind of word game. She'd been there for hours, and after awhile, she opened her eyes, and she had this big grin on her face, just huge. And, she says something like, thank you, so nice to have you here. And, her daughter just cried because it was so hard for her to be there, with this person that she loved enough, to sit with for hours. And this is the kind of energy that we unleash, and the juice room knows love from that. It comes alive and the room remembers.

Nina

The way I hear it. When I think about everything that you've been saying today, it's all these places that remember the cliff, the creek, Vietnam.

Jerry

Oh yeah.

Nina

And these new rooms in your life, they know, and they remember, and in the service that you've done by living this way, on the edge, in the risk, in danger, facing it with a smile - you have allowed spaces for people's stories. You have lightened their room.

Jerry

Very much so.

Nina

In closing, Jerry, where do you belong? And, that for you may not even be a relevant question. Your belonging is what?

Jerry

I belong living in my heart. And, when I'm living fully in my heart, I belong wherever I am. I just feel it. I'm just feeling at home.

Nina

That's beautiful. I think that's the truth.

Jerry

Thank you. Yeah.

Nina

Dear listeners. Thank you for being here. I invite you to reflect on what you've heard today and send your thoughts or stories. We would love to hear from you. Stay in touch on Facebook, Instagram, or on our website. thewhereing.com. Subscribe free to WHEREING wherever you get your podcasts so that you are alerted when the next episode airs. WHEREING is a pro bono initiative of Dreamland Creative Projects, which provides architectural and interior design services for the places where we live, heal, age and inspire. If you wish to have a design consultation, visit dreamlandcreativeprojects.com or email me nina@dreamlandcreativeprojects.com. Until we meet again, goodbye from WHEREING.