

In spring of 2002, my good friend and former Plain Dealer colleague Margaret Bernstein told me she was heading down to Ripley, Ohio, to cover the start of Joan Southgate's planned walk across the state to honor freedom seekers and freedom fighters brought together by the Underground Railroad. Margaret had been covering Joan's preparation for months. I wasn't planning to be involved and honestly hadn't given much thought to the Underground Railroad since childhood, when I grew up hearing about that influential abolitionist, the Rev. John Rankin. Mostly, I remember that a star used to shine outside his home each Christmas and truly could be seen throughout that whole part of the Ohio River Valley.

Then Margaret told me that Plain Dealer editors had suggested she make her base of operations Cincinnati – more than an hour away from the place history Joan's walk was highlighting. Well, that big-city bias just made me mad. So there you have it. I'm here today at least partly out of petty spite. I felt called to stick up for the charms of small towns around Ohio, small towns like the one I grew up in, small towns where often history still lives. So I offered to be Margaret's guide to that "great unknown" of rural southern Ohio. That's really as simple as my involvement in this remarkable story began. Maybe many rewarding life journeys start with similar impulsivity.

By the drive back to Cleveland a few days later, I was hooked. I, like so many others before and after, had already become enthralled by Joan's adventure. The ways in which people were responding to her inspiring, but let's be honest, kind of crazy, idea of walking across the state and staying in the homes of strangers was irresistible. Joan's impassioned actions and the emotional reactions they elicited from others prompted a crazy, jumping-in-with-both-feet idea of my own: Partnering with Joan on a book that used her stirring story to tell the harrowing and heartwarming histories of the people and places she visited.

Then the serendipity began: Joan, it turns out, had, for a time, been my mother-in-law, Virginia Mook's, roommate in college. My husband's ancestors, the Fords, it turns out, had been some of the best-documented Underground Railroad conductors in the Cleveland area. One of the Fords, it turns out, had married into the Cozad family – and that union was responsible for donating the land that made possible many of the University Circle-area institutions of today. Virginia, my mother-in-law, it turns out, had been telling me for years that someone

needed to do something to save that lovely, grand house on E. 115th St. – I just hadn't been listening. Do you ever get the sense the universe is trying to tell you something?

In 2003, just a few weeks after stepping off from the porch of that beautiful but neglected Cozad-Bates House on the final leg of her walk to St. Catharines, Canada, Joan invited Virginia, me, and four other women to her home to talk about saving that important link to Cleveland's past. I can still recall the giant, bright, hand-lettered sign completely encircling the top of her dining room walls, reminding us to Dream. Do. And be Bold. Those early meetings at Joan's house soon became slightly larger organizing meetings at Western Reserve Historical Society and later Euclid Avenue Congregational Church. We settled on a name: Restore Cleveland Hope, drawing on a story of Cleveland's code name as a station on the Underground Railroad to suggest that remembering our past could actually be a path forward to a better future.

A couple of women, perhaps channeling the creativity and resourcefulness of the Underground Railroad conductors they sought to honor, started talking about chaining themselves to the house. They knew media outlets wouldn't be able to resist the image of shackled 70-year-olds standing down UH executives and bulldozers. Fortunately -- or maybe unfortunately, because I would have PAID MONEY to have seen it -- chains and handcuffs weren't necessary. University Hospitals, after many, many years of letting the Cozad-Bates House sit empty and decay, decided to donate it to University Circle Incorporated -- a fitting caretaker given the house's importance to the area UCI serves.

The Underground Railroad, like other events and movements throughout history, are populated by those who are very deliberate in their decisions and those who just get drawn in. In this story, Joan is very much the former; I am the latter. Restore Cleveland Hope drew to it a number of wonderful and dedicated people who had long been engaged in preserving Cleveland's past, improving Cleveland's present or shaping Cleveland's future. And it drew a great many others, equally dedicated and wonderful, who were simply moved to action by Joan and her story. I have been blessed to know them all. But, even more humbling and gratifying for me, are the many extraordinary Underground Railroad conductors and travelers I have come to know – men and women, black and white, who stood up for what they believed in, stood up for what was right, at great risk to

themselves and their families. The privilege of sharing their stories with others has been a life's honor for me.

I'm listed on the program today as a historian. As the beginning of my talk makes clear, I didn't start out that way. Joan's personal journey and mission have launched me and many others on journeys and missions of our own. And we're all the richer for it.