



## Episode 2: Catherine Berman (COM'97), CNote Founder & CEO

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

Three-time social entrepreneur, Catherine Berman (COM'97) is the Founder and CEO of the impact investment platform, CNote. Cat has embraced a career in generating positive social change and shares the lessons she's learned from her experience launching and scaling mission-driven businesses.

### Podcast Transcript:

- Jeff Murphy : I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU Podcast.
- My guest today is Catherine Berman, three time entrepreneur and CEO of the impact investment platform, CNote. Cat graduated from BU's College of Communication in 1997 and since then, her career has spanned: management consulting, venture capital, and social entrepreneurship. Cat and I spoke about her time at BU, her passion for social justice, and what she's learned from launching and scaling mission driven businesses.
- So Cat, to get us started, when you were a kid, did you see yourself doing this kind of work?
- Catherine Berman: [laughing] Not at all, actually when I was a child, I think my two biggest aspirations, which are quite different, was to either be a choreographer or a senator. [laughing] So, quite different but both passions of mine.
- Jeff Murphy : Wow, and where did you grow up?
- Catherine Berman: I grew up in Southern California.
- Jeff Murphy : Okay, so tell us a little bit about your decision to come to BU. In the 90's, BU was a different kind of institution but still amazing. How did you find yourself in Boston if you grew up in Southern Cal?
- Catherine Berman: Just kind of a funny story, so growing up in California, my parents very much wanted me to stay in California. So, they had me look into Berkeley and UCLA, yet I knew that I loved communications. I loved writing. So, one day I was at a friend's house, her dad was a professor, and she had a huge pile of brochures from colleges across the country, and she also knew that she wanted to go into communications. But, she had been looking at the top communication schools across the country. I didn't know of any of them. And so, I started going through the different brochures and here I see this one brochure with this beautiful picture of the Charles [laughing], folks rowing, running, and I thought what's this school? And, she started talking to me about Boston University. And so, I started looking into the top communications schools and BU was always number one, two, or three. And so, that really solidified the decision to apply. And then, when I went out to visit, it was between BU and a

few other schools. I did the whole campus tour with my mother and just fell in love. I mean, it was very much a cultural fit for me. The people were so smart and so kind and it was just a really exciting place to be. There was just a sense of energy and excitement on the campus, and I knew after that trip, that's where I wanted to go.

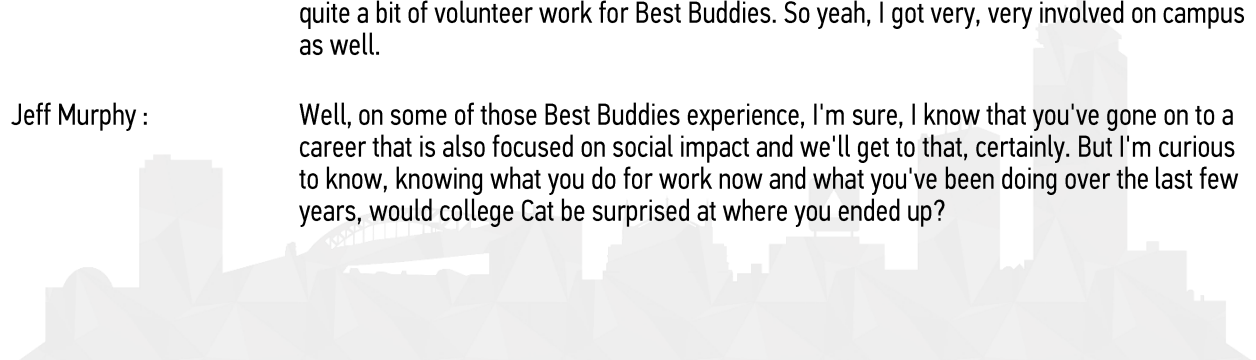
Jeff Murphy : So, tell us more about your BU experience. When you got here to Boston, did you love it immediately? And, I'm also really curious to know if there were folks on the faculty that really sort of stood out to you as helping shape your BU time.

Catherine Berman: Yes, BU was an incredible and formative experience for me. I do remember my freshman year living in Warren Towers, it was one of the worst winters [laughing] Boston had experienced for many years and I'm this new California girl, thinking, "Yay! East Coast living!" And so, it certainly took a while to get used to, but because it was such a novel experience for me, I had a great time. I didn't see it as a negative, the change, the winters, or whatnot. In terms of faculty, certainly, I do think several of the professors in the College of Communication, because the focus is so pragmatic, it's so much about practical experience in the world. That was really helpful for me to get some earnest skills, not just in-theory skills. I think outside of the College of Communication, there was quite a few professors, particularly I took a great course in Women's Studies, talking about feminism and women's rights and grew very passionate about that. So, I think a lot of the courses I took outside of even my discipline were really helpful. I ended up getting into Elie Wiesel's course before he passed and that was phenomenal and eye opening. So, a lot of just really wonderful opportunities to feed my natural curiosity and learn things outside of my course of study and to no surprise, I think the friends I made on campus also contributed to the learning. I ended up meeting some incredible folks from all over the world. I mean, Jock from Hawaii, Eane from the British Virgin Islands and ended up meeting my very best friend who today is my best girlfriend who is from neighborhood Franklin mass. And so, I think just also being surrounded by individuals who also had this natural curiosity and drive but also were just incredibly kind, lovely people was an important part of my experience.

Jeff Murphy : You told me before we got started that you worked at the Top of the Charles restaurant, which we don't believe exists anymore, but were there other sort of outside of the classroom experiences that maybe helped inform your experience or even lead you down the career path that you found yourself on?

Catherine Berman: Sure. Well, I can speak to many, I would say I always had jobs working through college, so did the Top of the Charles working at that restaurant, I worked at Sonsie, I worked at Hard Rock Cafe Boston. So, always a very hard worker outside of the classroom. And then, extracurricular BU I was quite involved, so I ended up being part of the soap opera, Bay State. So apparently, I always loved performing, so that was fun to be part of Bay state and that year actually MTV came and interviewed Bay State. So, the funny story is my grandpa who is not familiar with soap operas was looking at these clips that my parents were showing in pride, only to see his granddaughter kissing someone on this college soap opera [laughing]. So, kind of one of those funny, what am I paying for, BU moments. But, Bay State was a great experience, served on the College of Communication Student Council, was involved in the Greek System, Gamma Phi Beta, and was involved in Best Buddies. I did quite a bit of volunteer work for Best Buddies. So yeah, I got very, very involved on campus as well.

Jeff Murphy : Well, on some of those Best Buddies experience, I'm sure, I know that you've gone on to a career that is also focused on social impact and we'll get to that, certainly. But I'm curious to know, knowing what you do for work now and what you've been doing over the last few years, would college Cat be surprised at where you ended up?



Catherine Berman: A hundred percent. Absolutely, at the time I knew that I was a creative soul and I loved building things, but if you would have told me many years ago that I would be on a path to create the future of finance, I would have laughed at you [laughing]. I would have said, "Who are you speaking to?" And so, I do think, and I love that part of my journey. I do think it's important to share that you do never know where you're going to end up, and I think if you keep following what interests you and what excites you and be open to that, you can follow really interesting trajectories. When I look at the common threads of my career of social justice and a passion for problem solving and building things and it makes tons of sense, but because it wasn't my earliest career path I think I would've been surprised.

Jeff Murphy : So with that in mind, how did you get started? You get your diploma, you walk across the stage, you spend a day hopefully with your family celebrating and then I think so much of somebody's career path comes down to decision making. What was your decision process for? What did you end up doing once you finished your degree?

Catherine Berman: Yeah, so I thought I wanted to do advertising, so I ended up landing a job as a copywriter because I loved writing and figuring out clever solutions to marketing problems. But, I learned, probably within the first year of that position, I didn't want my boss's boss's job and so I knew this was not going to be my long-term career path. Then I thought, well, okay, what do I want to do? And truthfully I didn't know. And so all I knew in my gut is that I really wanted to do something that was meaningful and purposeful. So, I ended up joining AmeriCorps in Puerto Rico very much like Peace Corps, but it's a US program. And, my mother is from Argentina, so I was able to use my Spanish down there to help low income communities with literacy and homeless efforts. That was my first job [laughing] outside of communications, but then after AmeriCorps I really had to think. Okay, so if I'm not going to do advertising then what? And, I ended up going into marketing in New York and then from there it's a long, wonderful roller coaster that got me to where I'm here today,

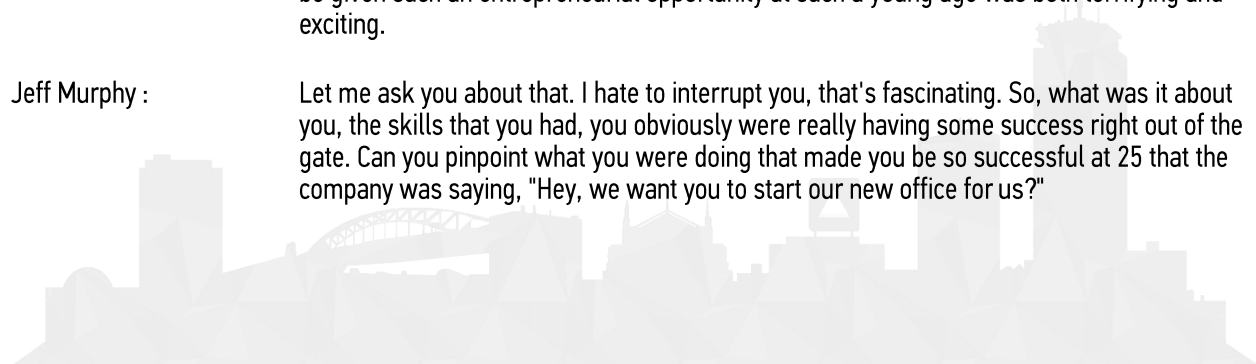
Jeff Murphy : Yeah, it is great to hear that you are an AmeriCorps alum, not that this podcast is sponsored by AmeriCorps, but I'm also an AmeriCorps alum myself. What a great way for somebody who finishes up a college degree and isn't quite sure what the next step is to sort of get out and get some real experience and make a positive impact. So, kudos to you for doing that. That's nice to know we have that in common.

Catherine Berman: [laughing] Absolutely.

Jeff Murphy : So, not to make you rush through your entire career, but can you kind of from there, walk us through the different companies you've worked for in the roles that you've had and how that led you to where you are now?

Catherine Berman: Sure, so as I shared, after AmeriCorps I moved to New York where many of my BU friends were and joined a marketing firm to see if integrated marketing was a better fit for me than advertising. And, I was very lucky at 25 I was given the chance to open our West Coast office. And so, the firm asked me to go out to San Francisco, find the real estate, hire the employees, bring on new clients, the gambit, and that is when I was really brought alive. To be given such an entrepreneurial opportunity at such a young age was both terrifying and exciting.

Jeff Murphy : Let me ask you about that. I hate to interrupt you, that's fascinating. So, what was it about you, the skills that you had, you obviously were really having some success right out of the gate. Can you pinpoint what you were doing that made you be so successful at 25 that the company was saying, "Hey, we want you to start our new office for us?"



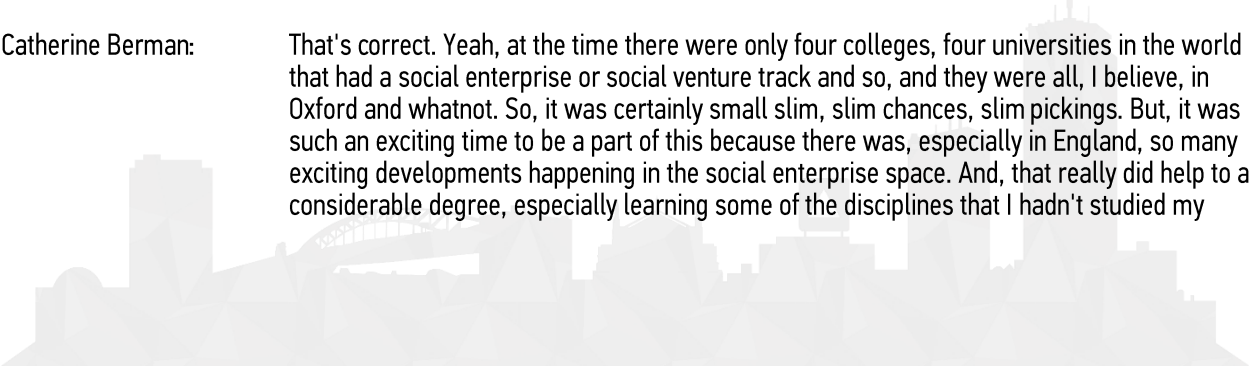
Catherine Berman: Great question. If I had to think about it as objectively as possible, I'd probably say it's looking at problems differently and then solving them successfully. So, I answered this marketing firm that was just kicking off a technology division at the height of the tech pop at the tech boom, really trying to figure things out. And so, I was able to not only quickly get up to speed and bring in new clients, but also ended up adding a lot of new processes, a lot of new business development practices, and a lot of new opportunities for that firm where I ended up just getting promoted, promoted, promoted. So, I tend to look at old problems and develop new solutions I'd say that, you know, if I had to say what I did during that time. And so, that ended up resulting in quite a bit of success and new sales and new business for that firm and so that's part of it. And then the second piece of it, as I was getting promoted, they would put me in management roles where I got to hire more people and I got to build teams and I thrive in that environment as well. And so, I think those things ended up positioning me for the opportunity of: you are the one that should go really start our West Coast division.

Jeff Murphy : So, you go out to the West Coast and start this division, I'm guessing it's super successful, how did you know when it was time to leave that company for another opportunity?

Catherine Berman: Well like any good story, drama unfolded, things were going beautifully out West until the .com bust and for any listeners that remember that period, it was a time of feast and then famine. And so, I remember thinking to myself in the midst of the .com bust that I thought it would be unethical frankly, to continue pouring money into this effort during a time where pink slips were floating out of buildings in San Francisco. And so, I phoned the CEO of the firm and just laid it out plainly. I said, "I really think that at this point you don't want to be pouring money out here. We want to be a profit center for you, not an expense burden and so this isn't the right time to double down on a tech focused expansion." And, he agreed. And so, then the question was, well now what do I do? He invited me to come back to New York and climb the ladder there. And it was really a great soul searching time for me, because I'm in the middle of San Francisco, this tumultuous time in our economy and thinking to myself, "Well, what next?" And, this is when my passion for social justice crept up again, because here I was in San Francisco, a place known for social innovation and equality, and I thought to myself, could this be a place where I could finally marry that passion for business and that passion for social justice. I'm going to sit it out, because I want to find out. So, I ended up telling the CEO that I really wanted to explore opportunities out west, because I really felt the need to see if I could fit those two together and lo and behold, I did. I ended up doing a lot of informational interviews just finding out what was happening in the social innovation space in San Francisco, and landed a great job at an organization that was looking for someone like me who could speak both languages, both the nonprofit and the for profit world. And, from that organization I spun out my first social enterprise. And so, that ended up leading to a great opportunity. I ended up going back to business school after that, knowing that I wanted to focus on social enterprise, social venture. And, I think it was that "aha" moment where I knew that this is what I love doing. I loved building scalable businesses that create a better world.

Jeff Murphy : So, you went to, and I know you got your master's at Oxford, moved all the way over across the pond, well not quite across the pond, but can you tell me a little bit more about the decision? And so, you went to Oxford with the idea of kind of social innovation.

Catherine Berman: That's correct. Yeah, at the time there were only four colleges, four universities in the world that had a social enterprise or social venture track and so, and they were all, I believe, in Oxford and whatnot. So, it was certainly small slim, slim chances, slim pickings. But, it was such an exciting time to be a part of this because there was, especially in England, so many exciting developments happening in the social enterprise space. And, that really did help to a considerable degree, especially learning some of the disciplines that I hadn't studied my



undergraduate degree and getting much more comfortable with operations and finance and other pieces of marketing and management. And so, it was a great experience at Oxford and then getting to put that overlay of social enterprise. And, how do you build a for profit company that has that underlying social mission and make it scalable and make it impactful? All those things were critical parts of that learning at Oxford.

Jeff Murphy : And so, after Oxford, you launched Global Brigades, right? Is this the Global Brigades that everybody is thinking of, like Global Water Brigades, Global Medical Brigades or is this a different organization?

Catherine Berman: That is correct, you have it on BU campus. So yeah, the funny story is after, I like inserting this for the listeners on the call who are students with student debt can feel that I can feel your pain. After I graduated business school, I had student debt and had to find a way to pay it off. And so, I spoke to the career counselor at Oxford and I said, what do you think? I know I want to do my next social enterprise, but I have this tremendous student debt. And he said look, you love problem solving and you're really good at it, why don't you do management consulting for a few years build up a stockpile and then do your next one? And that's exactly what I did, so I ended up doing management consulting with Deloitte for several years, paid off my student debt, erstwhile, worked with my friend who became my co-founder for Global Brigades. And, that's where we really started creating this idea of how do we build the student movement for good. So, we launched. So, I ended up leaving Deloitte to do Global Brigades full time. And now, it's industry leader. We're in five countries with over 300 campus chapters and really a wonderful ride.

Jeff Murphy : And so, here's where your serial entrepreneur comes out, you make the decision eventually to take on a new challenge after Global Brigades. What led you to go down that path?

Catherine Berman: Yeah, so we became, Global Brigades, we became very big, very large, and I started getting interested in finance and the flow of capital. Because now, we're looking at how money was flowing in and out of countries, how different communities were using money, micro finance, we spent out our micro finance programs. And so, I started getting very interested in the flow of dollars, who controlled it, who didn't. And then, this field of impact investing was emerging, and folks were talking about impact investing and what that could do. So, I ended up taking a board seat. So, still a leadership position, but a board seat with Global Brigades, because I really wanted to get more involved on the finance side of this equation of social justice. I ended up joining an impact investing firm called Ostia. It's in the West Coast, as well as New York and England, and had a wonderful experience learning more about impact investing, the different vehicles, the different organizations that we could fund. The thesis of asking in particular was funding women entrepreneurs. So, that was incredibly exciting and it really started, you know, I would say increasing my interest in what finance can do as an instrument for positive change and moving forward. From there, I ended up getting a wonderful opportunity to work at Charles Schwab, obviously a very large financial services company. They were looking for someone to lead a strategy group focused on strategic direction and predictive analytics and thinking through what does the future of finance look like, when you think about new market segments, when you think about fintech, when you think about advisory services or working with limited millennials. Wonderful group of people that I worked with there and it was really during my time at Schwab that I had that you know, that "ah ha" moment that yes, in fact finance can be an instrument for positive change, but at the same time let's look outside my office window. The wealth gap in the United States is growing bigger and so I can either sit in my office and continue to create financial products that successfully benefit the wealthy or I could get out there and start creating financial products that create a more inclusive society. And, I think



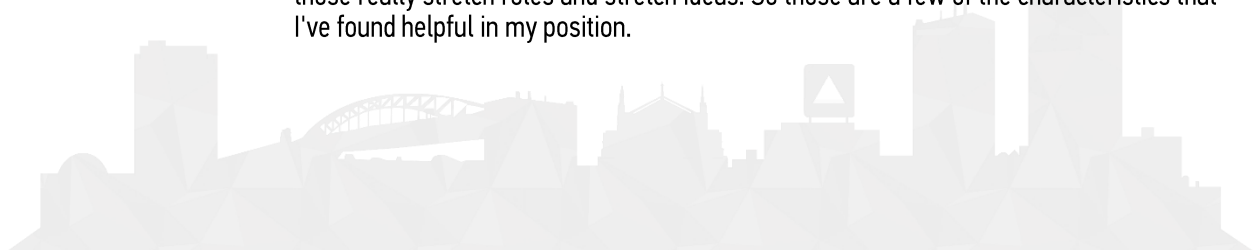
that's what I was very inspired to do, and that's why I went off and started the fintech company, CNote.

Jeff Murphy : Amazing, I think I saw this term maybe on your LinkedIn page, but that you sort of find yourself at the intersection of money and meaning, and that really sort of jumped out at me. I'm curious, if we asked you to come back to campus and sit in front of every Questrom School of Business student to share some advice with them about their role in the world and the opportunities that they have to make change. What would you tell these 18, 19, 20 year old students about their, how they could do that. Does that make sense?

Catherine Berman: Absolutely. No, I think it's an excellent question. And, I would remind folks that each of us has the power to make that change regardless of what they're studying. So, if you're a psychology major, a literature major, a biotech major, whatever you are, I think there's an opportunity to create the world that you seek to live in. And, I think the emphasis is on the how. So, often when we think about our career path, we think about the what, I want to have this title or I want to create this product or I want to have this type of office, but we forget that the means, the how we do that is just as important as the what. And so, I would argue that even just the type of manager that you are or the ethical practices you have in your day to day, and then of course the types of products or services, all of those things can be integrated with transparency, with equitable values, with a lot of the things that we all want to live within, if we're conscious about it, if we're intentional about it. So I would certainly share that each of us has the opportunity to create that social change. It's not just for folks that call themselves social enterprises and social entrepreneurs are change makers.

Jeff Murphy : So, we talked about this, I think, about some of the skills that you found helpful early in your career. So now, somebody who's interested in diving into the world of, I think also you quoted it at a sort of values aligning investing which helps people do, what are the skills that you've found that you've needed to rely on as the CEO of a company? For folks that want to sort of lead their own organization someday. What are the skills that you think that people need to work on or have?

Catherine Berman: Yeah, that is a great question. I would start with the North Star. There's that great quote, "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." I truly believe that, so finding something you're truly passionate about, whether it's a problem or an issue or an industry I think is a great place to start. Because, then the learning curve and the hurdles and the inevitable bumps in the road won't feel as bumpy, because you are passionate about what you're working on. So, I think that's a great place to start and there's always that intersection of what you're interested in and what you're good at. Making sure that whatever you're passionate about, you find that piece of it that you're actually good at or feel competent in and can build on is actually another great piece of advice that I received years ago. So I think starting with that passion and then that competency is a great place. And then, from there, just as a leader, I believe in things such as kindness and being a good listener, humility and being a strong example. Because, I think, just like a parent, folks often do what you do, not what you say, and so I think modeling the type of culture that you want in your business. For us at CNote it's a lot about transparency, direct communication, respect for individual ideas, disagreeing without being disagreeable, creative ideas. I mean there's no such thing as too crazy of an idea. We love when folks bring to us wacky ideas because I think you have to start there and then you dial it back to what we could actually implement or pilot, but I do think some of the most groundbreaking innovations come from those really stretch roles and stretch ideas. So those are a few of the characteristics that I've found helpful in my position.



Jeff Murphy : And I want to talk more about your role as CEO for CNote. And I'll ask you this question, I don't know if you've written your own LinkedIn profile, but your position with CNote is listed as Chief Bottle Washer. Did you write that?

Catherine Berman: [Laughing] I did.

Jeff Murphy : What are you trying to say by listing your title as such?

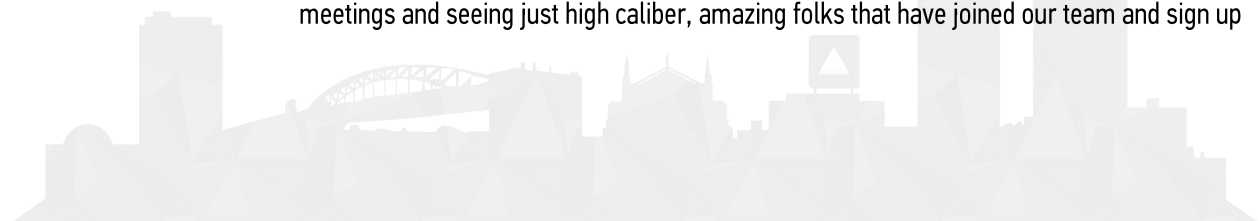
Catherine Berman: So, I think entrepreneurship is very much romanticized in the United States and probably internationally. And, I think when you start up, particularly in the first five to seven years, you're doing everything. I mean, one day you're writing, the next day you're speaking, the next day you're selling, the next day you're recruiting, the next day your, you know, and you don't ever know really what you're going to be asked to do. You pretty much do what needs to get done to get to the next milestone. And so, I share that because again, I think that is threading in that humility, which I think is so important for startups and for, specifically CEOs, to have is that the end goal is about the mission and the end goal is about creating a strong organization, not about the hubris of the CEO. And so, it's just to remind all of us that to execute successfully, it's dirty and it's getting in the weeds and it's often not glamorous and you do what it takes, but it's because you believe so strongly in the success of the organization.

Jeff Murphy : I kind of had a feeling that that was the spirit behind Chief Bottle Washer

Catherine Berman: [laughing]

Jeff Murphy : The amount of work that goes in and I'm glad to hear you sort of share that with folks. Tell me a little bit about what are the specific aspects of your work that make you the most happy? What are you the most proud of?

Catherine Berman: Yeah, I mean, probably one of my happiest moments in this journey with CNote, was the day we heard, it was the first 10 months of us being in operations, we had created over a thousand new jobs across the United States. So, our whole thesis at CNote is that each of us can play a role in closing the wealth gap in this country. Traditionally we think, well, that's government's job. Why is there so much inequity, racially, economically? Oh, that's foundation's job. Oh, that's nonprofits job, but the wealth gap is expanding so rapidly right now. It used to be 40 times, the highest income families had a median net worth of 40 times more than low income. It's now over 75 times more so it's just getting bigger. And so, our thesis here is, well, if we don't wait for others to solve the problem. What if each of us can play a role and not by donations, but by investing really taking some of those dollars that we're investing and putting them to us to close the wealth gap. And so, we came up with this idea and we thought we're going to create those financial products that make it really easy for folks to put their money where their values are and it's going to produce results. It's going to produce results, like creating jobs. It's going to produce results, like more fair access to capital for women. It's going to produce results, like more affordable housing for low income communities. And, like any good company, you come up with these ideas and you hope you're correct and you hope you can execute. And so, when we first received those numbers, that was less than a year, we were able to do what we said we were going to do and create new jobs in the communities that needed the most. That was just absolutely exciting. And, I was ecstatic to hear that. So, that was certainly one of my happiest moments. And then I think as a team, just looking around, even when I go to my team meetings and seeing just high caliber, amazing folks that have joined our team and sign up



every day to do this hard work and in such a fun manner, because we have a great time together. That also just brings me tremendous joy.

Jeff Murphy : Well I'm glad to see that AmeriCorps spirit of changing the world is still with you.

Catherine Berman: [laughing]

Jeff Murphy : I am not trying to be funny about that. I love to see people who are in finance have that kind of perspective. And listening to you talk, I can't help but wonder, for you in the next 5 to 10 years, what do you see as kind of being next for you? I can't help but wonder if you've got political aspirations. [laughing]

Catherine Berman: Oh Wow. So my husband probably hopes I do not. [laughing] I think there is enough to do on the social enterprise front without getting involved in politics at this point. I do think there's a lot we can do from an economic perspective, and you made a great point just about that lens on finance. I always laugh and say most people don't wake up in the morning thinking about their finances and what should I do today with my finances? And so, we think we have a wonderful opportunity to really reframe finance, and really rethink about who finance can serve and what finance does. That it doesn't have to just be what a lot of folks think as an area for greed. It can certainly be an area for good. So I think in the next 5 to 10 years we have an opportunity to continue to create these open for everybody, financial products that make it very easy to do good and do well. And on one side, great it's changing what your experience is of finance; on the flip side, it is changing these communities. It's really giving new opportunity to the communities that are often neglected by traditional finance. So I think there's a lot of good we can do and I think that will drive, not just billions of dollars into underserved communities, but we'll continue to create the kind of metrics we're excited about: closing the wealth gap, creating more access to capital for women and minorities, creating more funding and support for low communities, and just closing the wealth gap inevitably.

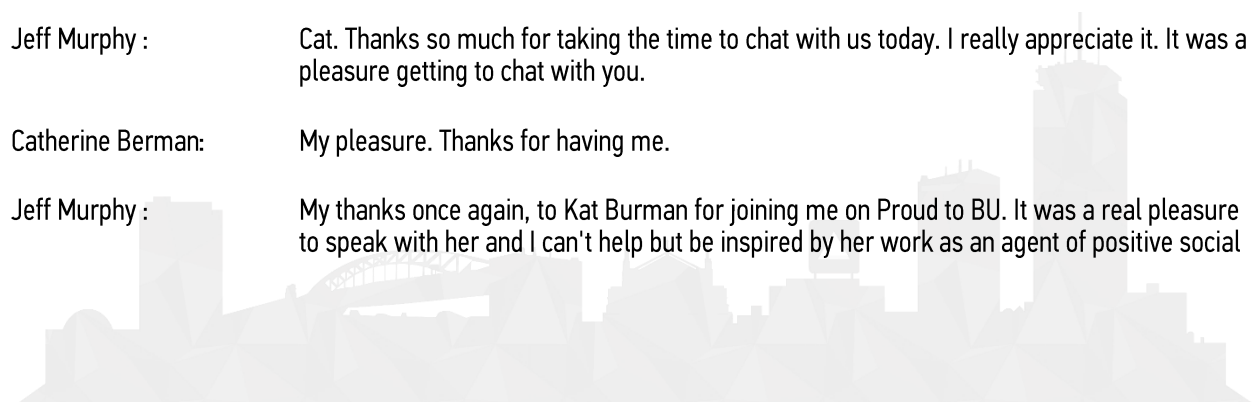
Jeff Murphy : Yeah. Well, I know you're a busy person and we're running up against our time. My last question for you is if we sort of try to put a big bow on this and for you to from a 30,000 foot view of your time at BU and your subsequent career, any final thoughts or wisdom or lessons learned that you feel like you could share with the BU alumni community?

Catherine Berman: Absolutely. I would say from an alumni community, stay involved. I've been so blessed to stay close to my BU contacts and I'm sure most folks listening have a similar impression of just the high caliber of people you met during that experience. I say stay close and stay connected even if you don't live anywhere near each other to your BU contacts. And then, for second thing, I would just say is pursue your natural curiosity. Oftentimes, we get boxed in into our careers and only learn the continuing education or the next best thing in our current function or current job, but pursuing whatever you're naturally curious about, even if it's far outside of what your current role is or what you studied, I think is wonderful because it could lead you in some really exciting new directions.

Jeff Murphy : Cat. Thanks so much for taking the time to chat with us today. I really appreciate it. It was a pleasure getting to chat with you.

Catherine Berman: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Jeff Murphy : My thanks once again, to Kat Burman for joining me on Proud to BU. It was a real pleasure to speak with her and I can't help but be inspired by her work as an agent of positive social





change. If you'd like to learn more about her current company, CNote, visit [mycnote.com](http://mycnote.com). We also talked about her work, founding Global Brigades, and you can learn more about that organization @GlobalBrigades.org. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU Podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU Podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit [bu.edu/alumni/podcast](http://bu.edu/alumni/podcast).

