



**S2 E17: Transforming Personal Loss into an Encore Career
Bill Cohen (Questrom'74), Founder, Cohen Caregiving Consultants, LLC,**

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

Bill Cohen (Questrom'74) founded Cohen Caregiving Consultants, LLC, to provide advice and counsel to families who are grappling with a diagnosis of dementia or Alzheimer's. His work with caregivers follows a fascinating career that included time in hospitality, financial services, and state government. He joined us on the podcast to talk about the personal loss that inspired his "second act" or "encore career" and to provide a roadmap for other alumni who are looking to make a career change but aren't quite sure how to get started.

Podcast Transcript:

Jeff Murphy

From Boston University and BU Alumni Relations welcome to Proud to BU: Around the World. I'm your host, Jeff Murphy, and this season, we're taking the podcast on the road to meet some of our most interesting and accomplished alumni navigating life and careers in cities across the globe. My guest today is Bill Cohen. Bill graduated from the Questrom School of Business in the class of 1974. Since leaving BU he's worked in several industries, including hospitality, financial services and state government. Bill went on to launch what he calls his encore career as a caregiving support consultant and he now provides Alzheimer's support and care advice to families nationwide. In this episode of the podcast Bill, and I talked about how he built such a multifaceted career and the personal journey that inspired him to pursue the work he's doing today. Bill Cohen, thank you so much for joining us on the Proud to BU podcast.

Bill Cohen

Thanks, Jeff. I'm really excited. I've been looking forward to this.

Jeff Murphy

I'm speaking to you, you're in Portland, Oregon today, right?

Bill Cohen

Yes, a southwest suburb called Tualatin.

Jeff Murphy

Are you originally from the northwest or where'd you grow up?

Bill Cohen

I am originally from the Hartford Connecticut area.

Jeff Murphy

Okay, interesting.

Bill Cohen

I still say I am a New Englander because I was raised in the Hartford area, went to school in Boston, and mostly vacationed in Vermont.

Jeff Murphy

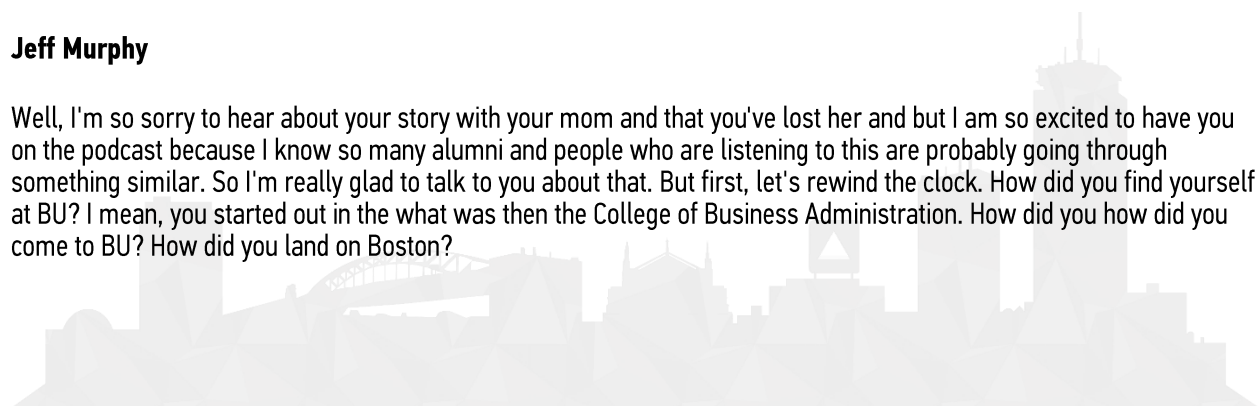
Okay. Well tell us a little bit about the work that you're doing now. You have a really interesting career story that I want to drill down on. But shortly tell us what your job is right now.

Bill Cohen

I was my late mother's caregiver, she had Alzheimer's. I was on a 10 year journey with her. She passed away seven years ago at the age of 83. And skipping a few aspects of this but I am an advisor or guide to family caregivers, so they can help take care of their person their loved one living with dementia with advice, guidance. support resources and referrals, and helps to reduce their stress and their time, etc.

Jeff Murphy

Well, I'm so sorry to hear about your story with your mom and that you've lost her and but I am so excited to have you on the podcast because I know so many alumni and people who are listening to this are probably going through something similar. So I'm really glad to talk to you about that. But first, let's rewind the clock. How did you find yourself at BU? I mean, you started out in the what was then the College of Business Administration. How did you how did you come to BU? How did you land on Boston?



Bill Cohen

So I was looking at a few schools like most people do, I was going to go into a business program. Originally, I was heading towards my father's property casualty insurance, business and the determining factor between the schools was the energy and the excitement on campus. It just felt right as opposed to some other colleges and I've never had any regrets about that decision. And the education was, of course appropriate as well, except I got deterred or detoured into another area, the hospitality management field.

Jeff Murphy

Well, let's keep talking about BU. Tell me more. I'm so glad to hear that you had that great experience. Where did, tell me some of the things about like, where did you live on campus? And where were you hanging out outside of class?

Bill Cohen

Sounds like some of the questions I like to ask other alumni at our events.

Jeff Murphy

That's why I'm asking you because everybody has such a unified experience to draw on, you know,

Bill Cohen

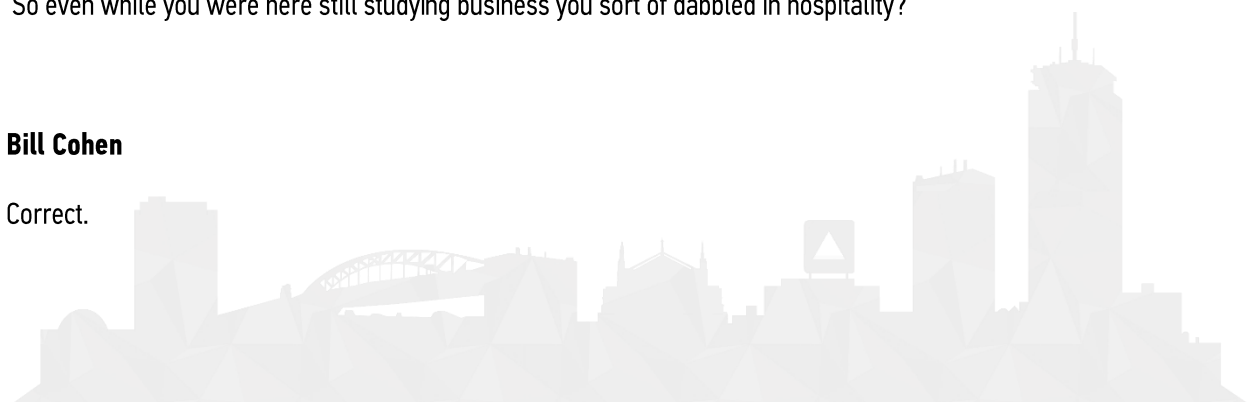
Exactly. So my first two years were at West Campus on the 13th floor overlooking Nickerson field towards Charles River. And then I was one year on Bay State Road which became it was called Boyd Hall at the time it became I believe, the trustee dorm, or trustee scholars dorm. And then I was about the last year and a half in Boston, I lived on Beacon Hill right up the street from Mass General because I was working at the Sonesta hotel across the river,

Jeff Murphy

So even while you were here still studying business you sort of dabbled in hospitality?

Bill Cohen

Correct.



Jeff Murphy

Okay, interesting. Now tell me more about the academic side. Were there classes that you remember that really stood out to you people that you know, professors or otherwise people that when you look back you think had a real big impact on you while you were here on campus?

Bill Cohen

I think what comes to mind first is because I was moving increasingly towards the hospitality field, which was a which, of course, is a people-oriented industry. I was taking organizational developed behavioral science classes the most. And I remember a couple of classes, including a seminar with Professor George Labovitz. And that just resonated with me and it seemed most applicable to the hospitality industry. And I remember one seminar we did in particular, we did a study at one of the nearby community, well, I think was Lincoln Sudbury if I'm not mistaken, and did a study of their organization and communication, all that stuff. And that was a very memorable experience. And he was a great professor. I think he passed away not that long ago.

Jeff Murphy

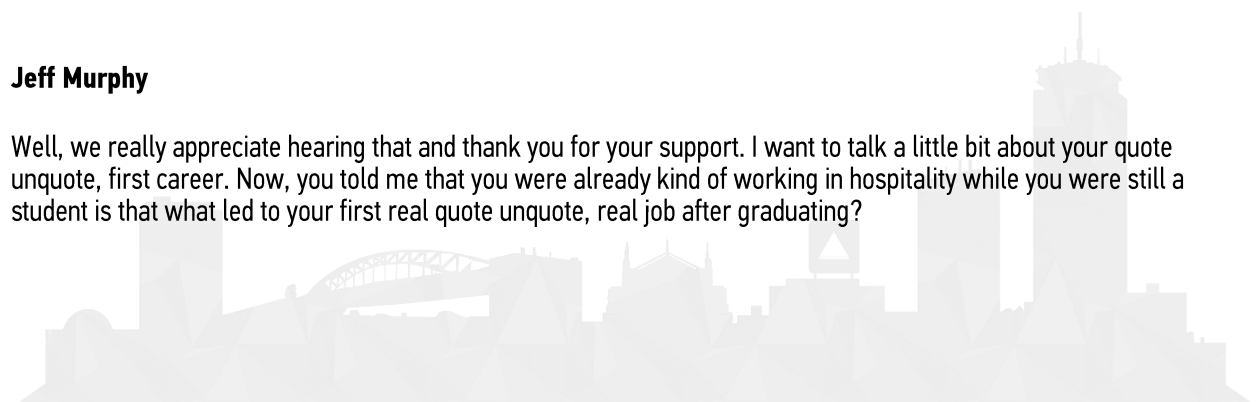
Well, I know, you know it's great to hear you tell us more about how even you know in all the years later, you've when you look back at BU that you don't have any regrets. I know that you actually are a member of our Claflin Society. And that means that you actually have Boston University in your will, first of all, thank you. I'm hoping you could tell us a little bit more about what inspired you to do that.

Bill Cohen

Well, I think like most alumni, it's a combination of the academics. It's the life on campus, it's having Boston as your extended campus. I was involved with a ski club, the fact I helped start one back then in the 70s. Can you believe that there wasn't one before then? And all those experiences, it changed my life. If I had gone to school, let's say in Connecticut, I don't think I ever would have left Connecticut. But by having that diversity and exposure to so many different influences at BU and Boston itself, it changed my life and made move around the country a bit and continue to enjoy new experiences. So it broadened my horizons. I think that's one of the main things and we know that over the years, BU has been traditionally one of the most diverse and internationally representative universities. And so that whole experience when I started doing my estate planning, BU, you know, rose to the top right as a beginning, along with any other planning that I did, it was number one.

Jeff Murphy

Well, we really appreciate hearing that and thank you for your support. I want to talk a little bit about your quote unquote, first career. Now, you told me that you were already kind of working in hospitality while you were still a student is that what led to your first real quote unquote, real job after graduating?



Bill Cohen

Yes, exactly. I was, I did various positions, actually it is a series of hotels in the in the area first summer at the Hartford. Sonesta, it no longer exists. It used to be a, it was one of the hotels at the airport. And then I started working at the Cambridge Sonesta, and I did everything from busboy to cook to cashier to server, you name it, I did it. And it was, it gave me a wide range of experience while doing a lot of my papers there at the hotel, because it was a wonderful lab, shall we say? I drew from that the interrelationships, the interactions among the employees. And as I was getting close to graduation, a little side note, I got interested, I get tired of the New England ice skating and I wanted to try skiing in Utah, had gone there once and I ended up moving out there and became first an assistant banquet manager and then a banquet manager, later on, it became a 14 year career.

Jeff Murphy

So Boston to Connecticut to Utah. And I know if you know, I obviously spent some time checking out your LinkedIn profile. If my notes are correct, you then made a pretty big change and went back towards the world of business and became a financial planner and an investment advisor, how what, what inspired me to change courses like that?

Bill Cohen

Well, I guess I was getting a little burned out in the long hours and other factors about the hospitality industry. It'd be it can be rewarding, but it can be hard work.

Jeff Murphy

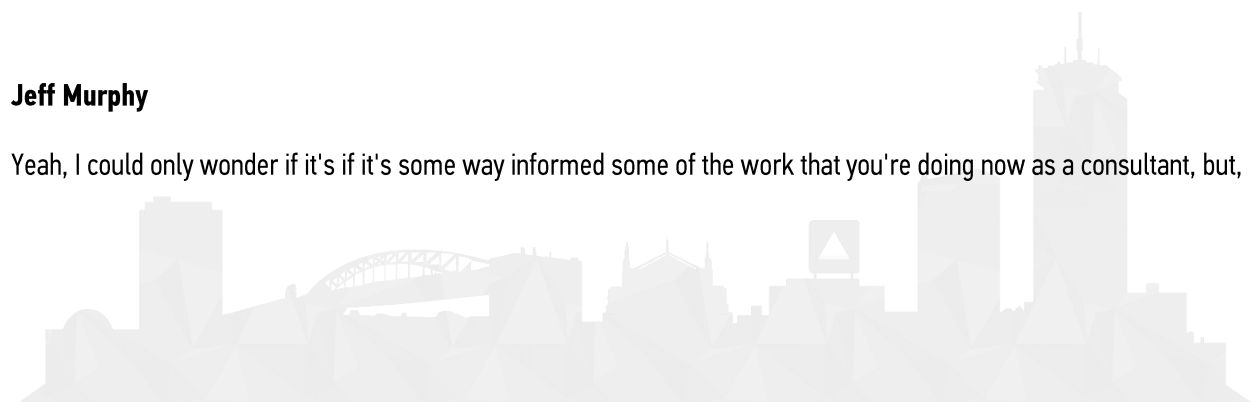
Sure

Bill Cohen

And I thought I'd look back at financial services, my original goal and getting trained at New England Mutual that is no longer around. And then went towards investments and financial planning and that was a 10 year career. Yea, it was rewarding, it just didn't work out shall we say. It can be a demanding field and turned out, it also wasn't right for me long-term.

Jeff Murphy

Yeah, I could only wonder if it's if it's some way informed some of the work that you're doing now as a consultant, but,



Bill Cohen

Absolutely,

Jeff Murphy

Yeah, we'll get there. How did you make your way out to Oregon? When did that happen?

Bill Cohen

After Utah, I was also in New Orleans, and then Sarasota, Florida, moved around where I wanted to move in the hotel business. Met my wife along the way, got married along the way, but we were looking we were in Sarasota, working at Longboat Key, even though it's a beautiful place, a place more like New England, if not New England itself with change of seasons etc. And I was still in the hospitality industry. And I applied for jobs in Vermont and Boston, then Utah, Colorado, etc. But we eventually moved out to Oregon sight unseen, because we had heard so many wonderful things about it. And it's actually exceeded our expectations. There's a lot of similarities between Portland and New England and I felt right at home immediately. I should add that I did almost get hired back at the Cambridge Sonesta, at that time. Unfortunately, I didn't get the position. But it would have been interesting to be back in Boston as in a working environment rather than academic.

Jeff Murphy

So in Oregon, you had what looks to me to be the bulk of your career within one organization, seemingly from the outside, maybe not so much related to what you studied or even what you'd been doing in hospitality. Tell us about that job.

Bill Cohen

So everybody's favorite agency, DMV, except for maybe your IRS, I, towards the last 10-12 years. I was, I guess how we put it, the boring version of it is a regulatory compliance inspector, third party inspector to be a little more interesting, if you notice CDL is the commercial driver license. I was able to travel all over Oregon, it's a pretty big state and make sure that people giving the test to drive those big trucks and those buses, make sure they were doing their job, right. And the best part of it was, I was building relationships, I was helping people do their job better, I was helping make our roads and our communities safer. And I got to see parts of the state that I never would have seen otherwise. And I had a sense of autonomy while I was doing it, because while I was out there, I didn't have anybody looking over my shoulder, I was able to do my job, do it well, but do it the way I felt it should be done. As long as it was within the parameters of my job description. I did. I have no problem with that. But it also became a spark later for I think I'd like to be an entrepreneur again.

Jeff Murphy

So, you and I have talked before today, and one of the things I appreciate about your story is that it just sounds like BU, even though you've lived all over the country, you've had these seemingly disparate career pieces, but it seems like BU has been a constant in your life. You lived in Oregon for a long, long time. Portland is something like our I think it's our number 23 alumni city, we think we have roughly 2,000 alumni living in the Greater Portland area. And over the years, you have actually hosted for us dozens of networking events in Portland. What, what inspired you to want to do that? And why did you, you know, want to get involved in helping BU alumni connect with each other in Oregon?

Bill Cohen

Well, at first, I had a little bit of an ulterior motive being that I was new to the financial services industry. And I don't know if you know, the term natural market. I did not know anybody. So I wanted to connect with people that I had commonality with, my university and a lot of other alumni, my friends, my cultural background, things like that, and that's where I had to work. But I immediately started finding out that, and it was a lot smaller alumni at the time, I think it's grown by about four times, based on the figure you mentioned, many wonderful alumni in the area, prominent government, nonprofit and private sector, leaders and citizens, anywhere from the Museum of Science to the house majority leader in the, in the legislature, people like that just all over and made some wonderful relationships over the years, who are friends to this day. And that's been remarkable over 30 years. I just enjoyed that. But there was no alumni chapter at the time, we're talking in the late 80s. And it's been very rewarding.

Jeff Murphy

Did it help with your business at the end of the day? Did you accomplish your goal of you know, getting some clients?

Bill Cohen

A little bit indirectly. I mean, again, I don't think anybody in the industry directly says "Hi, I'm Bill, I'm a BU alum and please buy from me." You're building relationships and if they get to know, like and trust you, they will do business with you. And that carries over to today. It goes along with the work that I'm doing now, though, so those were skills that I was able to develop at that time.

Jeff Murphy

So the thing that I'm most excited to talk about is your quote unquote, second act career you and I have, I think, use that term together when we talked previously.

Bill Cohen

Or encore career.



Jeff Murphy

Yes, thank you, encore. We just have so many alumni, I think, like you who have these remarkable careers, who in thinking about, you know, starting to wind down, maybe just aren't done yet and feel like they've got more to accomplish and, and certainly, unfortunately, in a lot of cases, you know, it can be a financial decision that keeps people in the workforce longer than they thought but I was just so glad to have a chance to talk with you about your encore and kind of how that came about. Now, certainly you told us about a very personal story. You know, the experience that you had with your mom. At what point did you think that you could turn this painful personal story into a job that was helpful to others?

Bill Cohen

Let's take one little step back when I think back 15 years, about the time I was starting the journey with my mom, if somebody had told me, I've been doing what I'm doing now, I'd say "you're crazy". You couldn't write that scenario. It's just too unfathomable. What I didn't mention earlier that my mom lost her home to Hurricane Katrina in Biloxi, Mississippi. And of course, she went really downhill after that the trauma etc. So that whole event changed my life. Because I was working full time and I was a caregiver. After she passed away, most people don't want to have anything to do with it. I've done my caregiving. I'm finished. I'm done. But I became, I had been attending a support group. I became the facilitator. I started doing fundraising and awareness. Many alumni have probably participated in the walk to end Alzheimer's, whether they've been affected directly or indirectly by the disease, I became, I got involved with other fundraising with advocacy, I go to the capitol and talk to our legislature, etc. But as I was approaching retirement, knowing that, okay, I'm gonna have a pension, I'm gonna have social security, finance, is not the main reason, but I'm gonna probably want to do more of this. And I thought, a year before I retired and became aware of this concept of a caregiving support consultant, because there aren't that many people doing it. And I looked into it, I said, hey, this is something I can do. I've gone through this experience it's something that I'm passionate about, I basically turned my personal loss and my pain into my passion and my encore career, and it just seemed like a natural thing to do. I'm not doing this so much for the money because it's not necessary. Some people do continue with, as you alluded to, when they retire, quote unquote, may need to do continue to work for financial reasons. I'm doing it to help people. I'm doing it for the customer service aspect. And whatever I make on top of it, it's kind of like Sriracha on the pad thai. So it's something I really enjoyed doing, but it really doesn't feel like work. And between the balance of the actual client work, the volunteering, the networking, getting out, meet people have fun. It doesn't feel like work, it just, I totally enjoy it.

Jeff Murphy

Yeah. So you started Cohen Caregiving Support Consultants in 2017. Right? And so it's been just about three years?

Bill Cohen

Yes, correct.

Jeff Murphy



Tell me about, I mean, I'm glad to hear that it's not work. But tell me about the work that went into launching this business. I'm curious to know from you sort of concept to actually sort of hanging your shingle out and what that process was like the paperwork, you know, the tax identification, those kinds of things. What should people know about starting their own business?

Bill Cohen

I think even before that, when you mentioned about concept, I know a lot of alumni are on LinkedIn. And I used to be using it for possible job searching. I ended up turning those skills about using the profile and groups and second connections, etc, etc. To find whoever I could find across the country who was in senior care dementia care, caregiving, who I could find out what do they do? How do they get paid? How do they market themselves, and that became my basis first for this is what I'm going to do. Now I'm going to be able to start marketing it and develop my business and my in my clientele and let people know who I am and what I'm doing because I was basically greenfield, greenspace because nobody knew who I was in that field except for people in the Alzheimer's Association. So once I started then it was becoming licensed with our state for what I do, there is no, like, regulatory body, but I had to become licensed to the state. And I had to obtain liability insurance. Because I wanted to protect myself. And then with the various things like website, getting a domain, for my name, marketing materials, etc, and went from there.

Jeff Murphy

Yeah. So three years in, you know, I know that you've, you've done some good work. When you look back, is there anything that you would have done differently or things you know, now that you wish you knew in 2017?

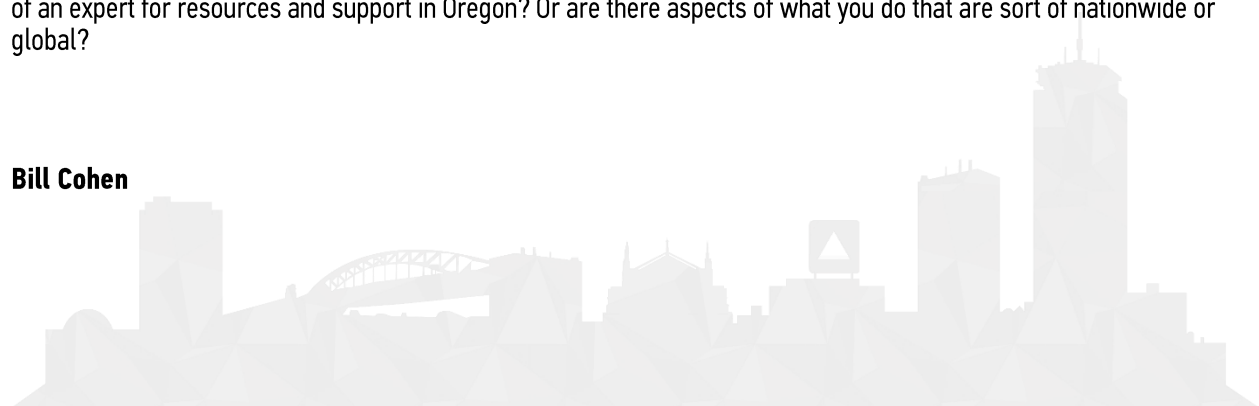
Bill Cohen

That's a good question. I really don't think there's anything in particular, it would be more fine tuning. Maybe some organizations I would not have relied upon or become affiliated with. Maybe looked other approaches, but one of the first things I joined was my local Chamber of Commerce. We had a reputation for being a warm, inviting, friendly organization. And it's been that way for the beginning. And I've seen the benefits or the fruits of it. Right from the first month, because I was the only person doing it, and they saw me coming in and getting involved participating, volunteering, and I started getting business right away. And that was that was really gratifying.

Jeff Murphy

That's great. So I'm curious in terms of the work that you're doing and senior care and consulting. Are you really more of an expert for resources and support in Oregon? Or are there aspects of what you do that are sort of nationwide or global?

Bill Cohen



Good question. Most of my practice, or my service is in the Pacific Northwest and the Greater Portland area including Vancouver and Washington. But I have helped people nationwide that either the family member who has dementia is out of the area, and their family is here, or vice versa. Yeah, and I can, if I don't know somebody of those other areas, I know how to find them. Because I'm looking for similar people that I collaborate with here, including, as I mentioned, one of my, my certification is Certified Senior Advisor. And those are people who have had training, education on the whole range of topics that you need to know in order to advise people who are aging, or more specifically with dementia or Alzheimer's. And that's a good example of the kind of people that I look for because they're going to be certified. They've gone through a very stringent curriculum to obtain that certification. So I can I can help them find resources, I've been from DC to Florida, California, just we're everywhere in between.

Jeff Murphy

So where can people read more about your business? Cohen Caregiving Support Consultants, do you have a website that people should read up on? Or?

Bill Cohen

Yep, you have pretty much said it right there, cohencaresupport.com And I also have my Facebook group, which is open to anybody who is a caregiver or professional provider. And it's pretty easy to find, because it's called dementia support group for caregivers, with Bill Cohen. And it's growing. Just in a few months, we have almost 300 members, and it's International.

Jeff Murphy

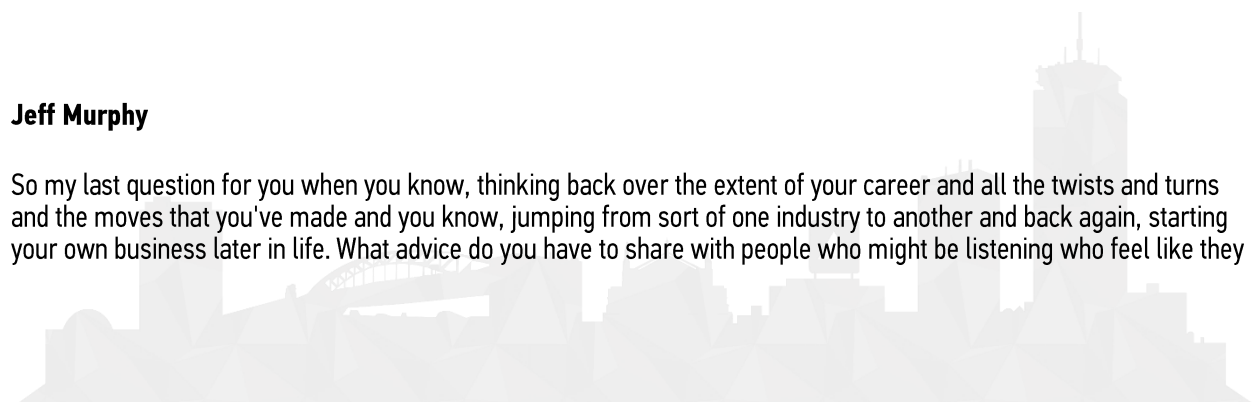
Bill, as we talked about, you've had so many different chapters in your career is this. Would you say this is sort of like the perfect calling for you at obviously at this stage in your life? And I'm curious to know what you you know, how much longer you see yourself doing this? What do you hope to accomplish in the next five years or so?

Bill Cohen

I'm just gonna keep doing what I'm doing. I can do this the rest of my life. Yeah, again, to the extent that it doesn't feel like work, it's gratifying, I can do it as much or as little as I want. I like to use the analogy of somebody at my local gym who's really retired. He's like 75 he says, "I'm the self-scheduler", Well, that's what I am too, I could do it as much as I want, and doesn't like, it doesn't feel like work. It may become where I do less with the business aspect, and it becomes more of the ongoing volunteer work. You know, like it's facilitating the support group.

Jeff Murphy

So my last question for you when you know, thinking back over the extent of your career and all the twists and turns and the moves that you've made and you know, jumping from sort of one industry to another and back again, starting your own business later in life. What advice do you have to share with people who might be listening who feel like they



just want to make a change, but don't really know how, what advice would you share with folks in order to help them get unstuck?

Bill Cohen

Follow a strong interest or passion, most of us are doing things for the money for the salary for the benefits for the used to be for the pension, that's it's a different situation now, but to find something that you really can throw yourself into that you're passionate about, and do the research. As I said, I talked to a lot of people like when people are looking for a care, a position, you do an informational interview, right? Do the same thing for looking at a different career or for starting a business, talking to people that are doing similar, but maybe find something that's your own niche. And as I like to say, around here, nobody else is doing what I'm doing. Unfortunately, for the past three years, I've had to explain to them because they don't know what the heck I'm doing until I can tell them.

Jeff Murphy

Well Bill between putting BU in your will, you know being a member of the Claflin Society, and the countless number of networking events that you hosted for BU in Portland. I've known you for, I've known of you for a long time and I'm really, really glad I had a chance to be able to sit down and chat with you and hear more about your story. Thank you for everything that you've done for BU and thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Bill Cohen

Hey, I appreciate it, it was a lot of fun.

Jeff Murphy

Thanks again to Bill for joining me on the podcast. To learn more about Bill's consulting practice or to join the caregiving support Facebook group he mentioned, you can find the links in the show notes of today's episode. And I'd like to take one more moment to thank Bill and all of our Claflin Society members who've made the generous decision to include BU in their estate plans. If you'd like to learn more about the Claflin Society visit bulegacy.org. On behalf of everyone on the BU Alumni Relations team, thanks so much for listening to Proud to BU. If you enjoyed this episode, please be sure to subscribe, rate and review our podcast wherever you find your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be proud to BU. The Proud to BU you 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.

