

**Interview with Jessica Van Tuyl**  
**Executive Director, Oasis For Girls**

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**MW** Introduction: This interview is between **Megan Wilson (MW)**, artist and writer, and **Jessica Van Tuyl (JVT)**, Executive Director, Oasis For Girls.

**MW:** How have the current changes in the Bay Area affected Oasis For Girls?

**JVT:** We like many other small non-profits and girl-serving non-profits in particular, when the economy tanked in 2008, were pretty severely impacted. We had previously done very well with foundation funding and were starting to expand during that period of time and unfortunately we didn't adjust quickly enough to the economy. We really didn't have enough foresight to see where it was going.

So we were expanding when things were starting to tank and then had to really shrink quite a bit. We had had a staff of six and ended up reducing to a staff of three. We were offering a variety of programming - middle school programming, high-school based programming, and scholarship programming. We had to really consolidate. However, I think there was something positive that came out of that. We were really forced to focus on our greatest needs and our strongest programs - what we do best. So we did a lot of consolidation and I ended up being the only staff member for about eight months of the organization's history. I was running the program and being the ED, which I know has happened before as well, so I am not the only one. We were really fortunate that we were partnering with Girl Source, which is another girl serving organization here in San Francisco who also had some financial challenges. We had been refereeing girls back and forth to be able to engage girls over a longer period of time. They had to close and then approached us to absorb their flagship program. The Technology and Leadership Program. It had funding through the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, and the Mayor's Office of Housing. We were very fortunate to absorb that program. It was a huge honor to continue their work. They were an amazing organization. We absorbed that program and negotiated a trial period with DCYF for the funding and

met all the goals and objectives for that trial period and were awarded the full contract. So we were able to build back quite a bit. We hired two staff to run our Rise Life Skills and Education Program and what is now our Vision in College and Career Program, that is what our Leadership in Technology program became. We have since then - early 2011 - been focusing on building sustainability in the organization. Those two programs have been running three times a year, serving 15 girls each cycle, for a total of 45 girls a year. This is really amazing for us. We used to have a program called Arts Apprenticeship, which we have transformed into a program called Create. We are really fortunate to partner with WritersCorps out of the San Francisco Arts Commission. We have a writer in residence in that program who staffs the program in the fall and in the spring, teaching the girls creative writing. We have been able to through mergers and through creative resourcing be able to stabilize the organization and to get in a stronger place. But we saw a significant decrease in funding. A lot of our historical foundational funders were realigning their funding priorities. Really focusing on safety net services. Focusing on food, on shelter, on healthcare - all really important. Our services are really important as well, but just didn't fit into those safety net services. So we were seeing a lot of our historical funders changing their funding priorities so a significant decrease in foundational giving. What has been a huge help to us is government funding. That has become the cornerstone of our funding. Which is wonderful. But we are working on how to diversify those funds.

**MW:** That sounds very familiar. I think much of what has happened with the reduction of funding in the foundation world is the result of Citizens United. I think a lot of that money that we should be seeing in increased giving has been reallocated to shadow funds, that don't have to be explicitly reported - because it is right in time with that ruling in 2010. The economy had a lot to do with it, but all those foundations are invested in the market and since then the market has been doing better than ever. Yet we haven't seen it come back.

In this period, what have you observed as the effects on the communities that Oasis for Girls serves?

**JVT:** We have seen a lot. We have seen a huge need, again, for safety net services. We've seen girls that are having to move out of the city, and so are looking for housing in other parts of the Bay. A lot of girls are moving to Daly City. Girls moving to the far East Bay like Pinole, Richmond, Antioch, and areas like that – But are trying to stay in San Francisco schools. Girls making a huge commute to just go back and forth from school.

**MW:** Do you have any statistics on that? As far as keeping track...

**JVT:** I am sure they exist, but we don't. We have seen a lot of family flight. We've seen parents getting laid off from jobs.

**MW:** If you were to guess, what percentage of the Oasis community is experiencing this?

**JVT:** I'd say twenty percent. Which make it more difficult for girls to access our services, because it takes them an hour to get home and our programs go after school, so from 4:30 – 6:30 and the parents are really nervous about girls getting home at 7:30 -8:00. Especially when it's dark out. That has been really challenging. And we have seen more parents losing their jobs, so parents that are already working two jobs have to pick up additional jobs to make ends meet. Kids are being left home alone. A lot of girls are taking care of younger siblings and can't come to the program because they have real adult responsibilities that they have to deal with. And a lot of the girls are having pressure to bring income into the family. There is no extra money to go around so we have a stipend for all of our programs and the stipend has been a huge draw for the girls. And our stipends are really nominal too. Between three and five hundred dollars, which isn't huge. It's huge to them when you are trying to put food on the table. But in the grand scheme of things, it's not that much money. We have seen an incredible number of people uninsured, having a hard time accessing health care. A lot of use of the emergency room for routine checkups. Just a lack of access to the basics like food, adequate clothing, things like that. And I think a lot of anxiety. We have girls coming in that really just bare the weight of the world. Their families have been evicted and they are trying to help their families find a place to live. Younger siblings with behavior problems because

of all the transition that is happening in their family and they are trying to figure out how to keep them in school. A lot of stressors.

**MW:** The program areas that are receiving more funding are the technology, skills and education - the arts not as much?

**JVT:** The arts program has been the hardest to fund, by far. I can't speak to previous years, but during my tenure, that has always been the most vulnerable program and therefore has been the most inconsistent program. There have been a couple of cycles since 2011, when we really rebounded, were we weren't able to offer the program because we didn't have funding for it. Our most stable funding is DCYF and they don't fund the arts program. We have applied for three cycles in a row and they don't support it.

**MW:** What about the Arts Commission. You have received funding from them in the past.

**JVT:** We did. However, the challenge with them is that they are focused on arts organizations and not focused on youth development organizations. Because we offer these other programs, they really see us as a youth development organization. We have also applied as a youth development organization that is partnering with an arts organization, but have not been able to receive support that way. They are looking to fund arts organizations. That has been much harder. Our Vision in College and Career program is the easiest program to fund and for people to get excited about because it is so tangible. Rise, our life skills and education program is second to that.

**MW:** That's so disheartening since they are all valid and deserve equitable funding across the board.

One of the impacts of the current real estate boom in the area is that there has been more funding and opportunities being allotted for artists and art projects. However these opportunities and monies are often tied to the developers and redevelopment interests with gentrifying impacts on neighborhoods and displacing the communities such as Oasis for Girls serves. What are your thoughts on this?

**JVT:** It has been challenging to negotiate. We have tried to be very diligent in taking advantage of the opportunities out there as a result of the development while staying true to who we are and the community we are based in and the girls that we serve. That proves very challenging from a values standpoint. And I can't say we always negotiate that perfectly, we certainly don't, but we have tried. We have not had that much luck from a real estate stand point on taking advantage of those opportunities, again because a lot of those have gone to arts organizations, and a lot of people see us as a youth development organization that does arts programming, so we have not been able to qualify for those or the projects going on from an arts based perspective in the mid market area that are still in development and we were looking for real estate in the last year and a half so they weren't far enough along for us to take advantage so we just had to move. So that has not worked out for us. We have done is something a little different with this second tech boom and we have partnered with some of these local tech companies like Twitter, Salesforce, and Square.

**MW:** Do you feel they have been responsive? Have they given their fair share based on what they have gotten in return with these huge tax breaks, do you feel they are being responsive and equitable up to the community?

**JVT:** I can't speak for their work as a whole, I don't know enough about their community giving as a whole to really say. I think with us they have been very generous and very receptive and great partners across the board. We have done different things with each one. We partnered with Salesforce to do a couple of job site visits. We took the girls over there and helped them understand the product and we did a scavenger hunt of their office building and we met with women working at different levels of the company. And they also hosted a fundraiser for us, which they are going to do again.

**MW:** It seems like Salesforce has been one of the most responsive companies to address community needs.

**JVT:** Yeah. They have been really phenomenal. And they actually went with me to speak on a panel about corporate partnerships. But again, that partnership is very much in its infancy and we have been working with them for a year and a half. Twitter is also very new. They approached us, to their credit because we are so close and wanted to strike up a partnership with us. They had a specific thing in mind that didn't work for us so we sat down and discussed other possibilities. They have outfitted us with used Macbook Pros. So we overhauled all of our lab computers and all of our staff computers, which is amazing and which we didn't have in the budget for, so it made a huge difference. And they also sponsored our annual fundraiser back in November. So Twitter too has been an amazing partner. There has been some staff transition there, so they don't have someone working in community benefits right now so we have need to reconnect with them. We have had very good relationships. Could they do more, I'm sure they could. Yes they can. But so far they have been very generous to us.

**MW:** I have heard from artists and others that we should have more dialogue with the tech companies and developers to find solutions. What are your thoughts on this?

**JVT:** I think we definitely should. I think from an organization like us the challenge is capacity. My experience is we go in and meet with some of these developers and some of the tech companies and they have their own ideas, which is great, we want to build partnerships, we want to get new ideas to the table and develop things together. However, we are in a place where we are trying to figure out how to sustain what we currently have. I think it is sometimes hard for some people to get on board with that. And that is what we really need. So we need more resources. We need for people to figure out how to get more resources. I think that if tech companies and developers were willing to come in and say, "why don't you tell me what you guys need and we will figure out how to do it" I think then there could be some room for developing some additional programming. But for most of them, that is not where they are at right now.

**MW:** Being in the community that I am and doing the work that I do, that is what I get told over and over. That these corporations should be approaching the communities that they are moving into and asking what is needed of them to support the

organizations and residents who are already there. I know several non-profits in the SoMa who have made meeting with these new tech corporations and when they attend, the execs aren't listening rather they are on their Blackberries. They give the face time, in a sense, but then offer nothing. It seems what folks do need it serious resources in the form of cold hard cash to fund what you do. And your budgets are so low that it really would be nothing for most of these companies to pay their fare share. It's been years of slow decline of a commitment to funding. It is very telling and it is about culture change.

**JVT:** I think we need to spend some time educating them about the community, who lives here, and who has been pushed out and doesn't live here anymore, and what the community really needs and how they can help. It has to be a partnership. We can't expect them to come here and know who's here and what they need and what they need to do. We need to be part of the education of that. The challenge is our capacity and their ability to listen and wanting to make the change.

**MW:** Agreed. I think that it is critical to educate them and hopefully they can see the value in contributing their fair share to be responsible members of the community.

I do want to ask you about an experience that I heard about came through Patricia Rodriguez. Patricia had told me that she was hired as the arts print instructor for Oasis For Girls and that it was also a partnership with Intersection for the Arts, whom I have a long history with. I understand that it moved from Oasis to the Tech Shop and another young woman was hired and brought on to be another instructor in it and Intersection had a team of videographers come in to do a video project with Reallocate. Patricia relayed that during the filming she was moved outside of the frame so that she would not appear in the video at all. She felt marginalized because she wasn't respected or recognized as being the instructor of the program. This other young woman had somehow come on to be the public face for what turned out to be a marketing campaign.

**JVT:** Was this other young woman from Intersection?

**MW:** It wasn't clear if the young woman was from Intersection or not. Reallocate was the team that did the video. So I wanted to hear what that was about and what your experience with it was.

**JVT:** I'm really sorry to hear Patricia had that experience. We have a lot of respect for her. She is a very talented artist. We enjoyed working with her. The set up of the collaboration was a little complicated and probably not ideal. I wouldn't necessarily do it that way again. It was an experiment. It connects back to the difficulty of finding arts funding. We were trying to figure out how to run our arts program and we didn't have the money to hire somebody. We were trying to build this collaboration with WritersCorps. If I remember this correctly, the way we started with WritersCorps is they didn't have enough staff to have an artist with us for the full three days a week that our program operates. So we built a three-way collaboration where we had an artist from WritersCorps teaching a couple days a week and we worked with Intersection and Intersection had hired Patricia. So Patricia was also teaching a couple of days a week. Part of the program was about creative writing, which was supposed to inform the screen-printing that Patricia was teaching the girls how to do. I was not there. I was not running the program so I was not there for the actual sessions so I don't know what happened with regards to the Reallocate situation. We were trying to put together a program with a lot of cooks in the kitchen. The WritersCorps editors we were working with had very little time to collaborate with Patricia. It just ended up being a challenging collaboration. We really respected Patricia and enjoyed working with her and our WritersCorps person did as well. So I don't know what happened with that.

**MW:** The other artist brought in was Liz Conley.

**JVT:** I don't know who that is. I was not privy to this.

**MW:** Have you seen the video?

**JVT:** No, I didn't even know that there was a video.

**MW:** I'll send it to you.

**JVT:** I would love to see it. Part of the challenge too that we have experienced is that we work with a lot of arts organizations because our model is that we bring in working artists to teach art programs. We have worked with Intersection, we have worked with Highway Productions, and we have worked with Anne Bluethenthal. We are getting ready to work with ACT this summer. There are a lot of amazing arts organizations out there, but not all of them know how to work with youth. Those two things are not synonymous. A lot of times those collaborations are challenging because people are amazing phenomenal artists, but they don't know how to teach that to youth. We know that is a separate skill set. So sometimes the partnerships are challenging.

**MW:** It is interesting to know you didn't know that was even going on. Patricia did not feel that Oasis for Girls had done anything negative to her, but she felt very strange about the Reallocate part of it and this video that was made and the fact that they made a point to make sure she wasn't in the shots.

**JVT:** That is very strange.

**MW:** There is a piece of the video where you actually see her on the side.

**JVT:** Did she think that it was about age or was it about race?

**MW:** It's difficult to say, however, what it communicates to the girls is about age and race. When you see the video, you'll get a sense. It's very much about this hip, cool, new tech community and marketing in that style.

**JVT:** Well Patricia is pretty hip.

**MW:** Yes, she is amazing.

**JVT:** Patricia is amazing. That's too bad. I am sorry she had that experience.

- MW:** I was sorry to hear about it too and she did make it clear that it was a weird amalgamation of projects going on, but that the main contention was that there was this new person brought on who really didn't respect her. Here she has had this huge amount of experience and the woman who was brought in as the lead instructor was much less experienced.
- JVT:** Both as an artist and a community organizer. She does have this amazing history.
- MW:** It was strange too because the Intersection I know doesn't operate like that. So that was also bizarre. It seemed like they weren't so hands on, but it was Techshop and Reallocate, which I believe are very much 5M. I think that one of the greatest disappointments has been seeing the cooption of these amazing long-term organizations and groups, because we as community organizers and artists give the people the benefit of the doubt. We want to believe that folks are good and have good intentions. It's really shocking when you do partner with somebody and you realize that they ultimately don't have your best interest in mind.
- JVT:** Sometimes, and I am sure everyone has had this experience. We are all just trying to stay afloat. Sometimes you don't have the luxury of being able to make those decisions. We try to make good decisions about whom we partner with but at the end of the day we are just trying to run this program.
- MW:** I think you're right. It's true. It is a luxury. It's a luxury to be able to say yes and no. I think that comes down to more organizing amongst all of us. My dream is we become more solid as organizers. I think SOMCAN is amazing. They were approached by Intersection/5M to do an arts project and Angelica stipulated that the youth would have say over the content. And they wouldn't go for that.
- JVT:** Intersection wouldn't go for that?
- MW:** Intersection - 5M. For me it's become a fine line as to where Intersection ends and 5M starts at this point. So Angelica said no to that. I think it's this greater vision of long term organizations like SOMCAN, Oasis for Girls, and even Intersection coming together and saying, like you said about the education, 'this is what we need

and this is who we are as a community' and putting that forth to the city as well as these other stakeholders. To say, 'this isn't respectful.'

Do you have any thoughts on how the City has handled the new development, the influx of residents, the displacements, etc.? What changes, if any, do you think need to be made in City governance and policy to address the impact that these forces are having, especially low income communities of color?

**JVT:** I'm not going to say anything that's unique, but, I think we have seen a huge exodus of families from this neighborhood and I feel part of the challenge is that people don't know see this as a place where families live. Or if they do, they don't care about the families that live here, to be really honest. So, I think we would all like to see the City prioritize this as a neighborhood and know that families live here and continue to support families to live here. To figure out a way to do that and to really invest in the organizations here to support that work and to see us as real partners. We all have something to offer. We all have experience with this neighborhood and with this community and could be good partners in that process and I think that isn't always happening. I know the City has capacity issues too, there are always reasons for all of this, but I think having a real partner-based approach would be transformational in a lot of ways.

One of the challenges for us is, as you well know, we were founded here in the SoMa and used to serve a huge population of SoMa girls, but over the course of the organization's history, as families have moved out of this neighborhood, and because there is no high school here, we are now citywide. Trying to find those girls that live in the SoMa, and get them through our doors, is really challenging. This means, what we do is go to the high schools and ask the wellness centers and the counselors to pull all the girls with 94103 zip codes. Then we target those girls and try to get them to apply and get them here, but they are all going to school all around the city. It's very challenging. We would love to be able to focus on SoMa girls, but it really hard to do because of this high school piece. When working with elementary school girls or middle school girls, because we have Bessie Carmichael, it's a little bit easier, but that part has been challenging for us. I think as a result of that it's harder for us to stay engaged in all the community organizing efforts that

are happening around this neighborhood because they are all focused on elementary and middle school students and that is not population we serve. We would very much like to be involved with this community and are present as much as we can be, but it's not the age range we serve so it's challenging.

**MW:** I remember that transition. Do you have the Capacity Building Plan from back in 2005 that was done?

**JVT:** Probably somewhere, yes.

**MW:** Those documents were pretty helpful and important for showing this transformation of Oasis, and that period of going from working with primarily elementary and middle school girls to then serving girls in high school. It is a huge challenge and it is heartbreaking to see this neighborhood transform. To see longtime Filipino families who have lived here for generations now moving down to Daly City or completely out of the area.

What do you see as solutions? What have you observed to be the most effective strategies in making changes or supporting changes?

**JVT:** Around which components of this?

**MW:** What's going to keep Oasis for Girls sustainable? What's going to keep families in the neighborhood? What's going to keep the girls still engaged in organizations like Oasis For Girls? Really, what's going to make a healthy community that isn't living in crisis and on edge?

**JVT:** I think from an organizational standpoint, obviously, stable funding is key. We are not able to keep the doors open without it. Government funding has been huge for us. To be able to reauthorize the Children's Amendment that's coming up will really be key. We would not be here without DCYF funding. That has been crucial. I think DCYF has been a smart funder. They have not only given us financial resources, but the training they provide for our staff has been amazing. All of our staff has gone through their training cohorts. So I think from a professional development

standpoint, for a small organization that doesn't have professional development money that has been huge. They also have done coaching work with specific organizations, and we were lucky enough to be selected. Now we have been able to work on some of these larger challenges for us with a professional coach. Their support has been transformational. Their program officers have done the work themselves, so they know what it is like to do this work. When they come for site visits, they are able to troubleshoot and brainstorm with us and come up with solutions that are realistic. They help us make connections with organizations we can partner with. They are the ones who made the Twitter introduction. Helping us to connect with other funders and other organizations has been helpful. Stable funding is one solution and needs to come from the City but it also needs to be coming from all these Tech companies and developers moving in. They all have Community Benefits Agreements. The challenge is figuring out how to access them. I can't just cold call these places and try to connect with them. So it's a matter of how, and who can help us make those introductions.

**MW:** Well it really comes down also to how community benefit agreements are negotiated and enacted. They can't just be about a lump sum of money, which ends up being a payoff. They need to include far more in the way of commitments to communities, including financial support.

I am a huge supporter of DCYF as well. I did the Anchor Institution Plan for Portola Family Connections and have done a lot of funding for Family Resource centers with them. I think they are a huge benefit and what is sad is not seeing these large corporations moving in and being taxed to have to pay more into these funds. Those City funders are key and they need to be kept separate. The taxation process is great. It's this clean clear process. It goes into these funds and you don't have these crazy ties where you are working with them.

**JVT:** To answer the other part of your question, I think to have families stay here, the most key thing, they have to have affordable housing. That is one of the biggest things. Also, they have to have a safe community. All of this work that has been done in this community around safer streets, and SOMCAN has been doing a lot of that work. Getting safer streets, trying to get a safer community, focusing on

supporting 6<sup>th</sup> Street is really important because families want their kids to be safe here and they should. For keeping the girls here, again, it's about having enough money to keep the program going. We have had times when the money was more challenging, so we were not able to offer a program, and that creates instability. Or we have staff transitions because of funding challenges, and that creates further instability for the girls. Being able to have that organizational stability is what keeps them coming back and having the financial incentive is huge. 60 – 70% of girls would not be here without that. They would be working at Burger King.

**MW:** Yep. That is where I worked through high school – Burger King. Although a lot of those fast food jobs are now staffed by folks who are much older.

**JVT:** We want them to have the same opportunities that their peers have access to.

**MW:** Oasis For Girls is a critical resource in this community and needs to be supported. Hopefully more of a consortium will come together to be a force that says look we are the foundations here.

**JVT:** The gender portion of it too is important. Girls need really types of specific support in their development. Our girls are struggling with things that boys aren't struggling with. That is not to say boys don't have their own challenges, they do. Our girls are struggling with a lot of self-esteem issues and confidence issues. Struggling to learn how their bodies are developing. And they may have parents who culturally it isn't ok to talk about that. So girls have nowhere to go to talk about what's happening in their lives. They are not getting that at school because it had been cut out of the curriculum and they need all of that. And I am surprised about how many girls who come to us have no access to thinking about what they want to do when they grow up. Our girls are just trying to survive. They don't have the opportunity to think about who they could be. Or what their options for them are out there. Often times we are the only place where they get to dream a little bit and be exposed to the variety of options there are out there. When we partner with Twitter or Salesforce, we are always asking, 'what kind of opportunities do you have for our girls?'

**MW:** Like what paid internships that they can offer.

**JVT:** Knowing that our girls are not the girls you would get from a private high school. But, they have a lot of things to offer. But there will be challenges, like teaching them how to communicate professionally. You are going to have to help them understand what to wear. You are going to have to help them understand what punctuality means. They need support, but they have so much to offer. So, figuring out how to build those partnerships with tech companies that also have benefits for the girls.

**MW:** And, like you said, have it also be an education to the company of the culture and the community. We are all part of this community together and it is not just about people who have privilege and access.

Any other thoughts or anything I haven't covered?

**JVT:** The only thing I would say is we would like to be involved more in the community organizing efforts that are happening here in this community. The challenge for us is that we are a staff of three. We have two program coordinators and I am the ED, so we have limited capacity to be able to engage in that work. I think that if there were also some opportunities for additional funding that would specifically support that kind of work, so we could have time to be involved. It's not from lack of desire on our part, its just lack of capacity. There are a lot of amazing things going on that we would like to participate in and everyone needs support in doing that work and if we had that support we could come up with more amazing things.

**MW:** It makes me think there has to be a very wealthy angel funder out there who could come to the table and provide funding specifically for organizations to have that opportunity to be able to be stakeholders in the policy making with the city and the new companies moving in. That is something that has become clear in the process of doing research for this article.

**JVT:** During the last DCYF RFP cycle our funding was cut so we ended up having to do this huge campaign to try to get the funding reinstated, and we were very lucky to be successful. When we were figuring out how to do that the feedback we kept

getting was you have to be involved, you have to advocate, you have to go to the Board of Supes, you have to do a lot of additional advocacy. I felt like I would love to be able to do all that, but I'm too busy trying to keep this organization afloat. I don't have time to fight this hard. I'm just trying to keep this organization alive. It's not that I don't care. It's not that I don't want to know what's going on. It's not that I don't know what is going on. It's just we don't have time. I think that is what was indicated to me that there is a lack of awareness of what non-profit organizations are shouldering right now, what it's like to do this work and run these organizations on a day-to-day basis. It's challenging. When these companies come to partner with us, they say 'Can't you get your admin staff to do that, and I say I am the admin staff.'

**MW:** For me that is part of that culture education. People can be unaware of how others operate. The reality is a lot of the new folks at these companies are right out of school and don't have real world experience or know what it is to be a part of an adult community. They don't know and you can't fault them for that. And it is not as though those companies they work for are offering an adult community either. That is part of the problem I see too. The companies themselves have to act as a role models and not come in with a position of entitlement – as in 'you owe us these tax breaks' – no, if they're going to be a part of the community, they need to pay their fair share. So, it is part of a larger cultural shift that has to happen. They need to demonstrate how to operate in a community in a healthy way.

**JVT:** I wonder if there are models that other cities have?

**MW:** My friend Diane Coward, who worked at the Asian Pacific Islander American Health Forum and at PolicyLink is working with Portland to develop a more equitable approach. It sounds pretty groundbreaking what they are working on.

Thank you again for taking the time to talk today.

**JVT:** Yes, it's great to finally connect.

\*\*\*(END OF INTERVIEW)\*\*\*