

# When it Mattered

## Episode 29: Helene Johnson

Chitra Ragavan: Helene Johnson was just six years old when she asked her father, a Holocaust survivor, to tell her exactly what he had been through during five years in Nazi captivity. Her dad took her request seriously. He told her everything that had happened to him and his family. It may not have been a very wise move, either for her to ask him or for him to tell her at that young age. His story had a harsh impact on her childhood, and in fact, her whole life. Johnson spent much of her adulthood as a second generation Holocaust Survivor, captive in her own shadow of fear and self-doubt, all the while building an impressive career in government contracting.

Chitra Ragavan: Hello everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan and this is When It Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative.

Chitra Ragavan: Recently, after Helene Johnson's beloved dad passed away, she noticed a gradual change in herself. It's a change that has given her new life, soul and spirit. Here to tell us more about what happened is Helene Johnson. She's president and CEO of Bid2Win, a Washington D.C. area consulting firm that's helping companies bid for and win federal contracts. Helene, welcome to the podcast.

Helene Johnson: Hi, thank you. It's nice to be here.

Chitra Ragavan: You were born in Baltimore, Maryland and you were the youngest of three kids. You were raised in a culturally Jewish family, you attended public schools, and you had a tough time. Tell me a little bit about those days.

Helene Johnson: Yes, it was tough. When I was in elementary school, I was teased a lot. Actually, bullied, and it was for two things. One, I had an unusually large nose and I was teased a lot about ... They called me all these names like schnoz or big nose or hook nose or banana nose, and they really butchered my self-esteem. I also had a form of childhood epilepsy that would give me seizures, and the seizures would be such that it seemed like everybody was talking really fast yet the world was moving slow around me. I had to call my mother, and my mother was the only one that knew how to talk in such a

way to slow my mind down so it could catch up with everything else. Because of that, if I would have one of these seizures in school, they would call me ... I'd have to leave the class, and everybody knew that Helene was weird and she was retarded, they would say.

Helene Johnson: Also because of that, I had to go to the counselor, the school counselor, and that brought attention to me. And also, they put me in very slow classes because they thought that I was special education. In seventh grade, when I got to junior high, I met a teacher, a math teacher, and she was a young woman. I'll never forget her. She knew that I wasn't retarded and I wasn't needing special ed. She actually found that I was very smart. She believed in me and she gave me confidence, and she pushed me and convinced them instead of being in the slowest class, I should be in the most advanced class.

Helene Johnson: And then, when I got to 10th grade, I couldn't take the teasing anymore. I got my surgery. I had a nose job, which was the most painful thing back then I could imagine. I still remember what it was like. So the teasing stopped, but that's about all that stopped. I never really felt like I belonged anywhere and I had absolutely zero confidence. The only confidence I had is in myself in the area of math.

Chitra Ragavan: What kind of damage did all of the teasing do to your self-esteem for your life?

Helene Johnson: I've always been afraid that I've said or done the wrong thing. Always. And I've always second guessed myself. The other day someone told me that ... When I was about 40 years old I was a deputy CIO in the government, and I was told that I scared people because I was so tough. I just said what I thought. It was my way or no way. I remember telling my staff, "Don't drop a ball. Whatever you do, don't drop a ball." I mean, I was intense and I was scary. And the reason I was intense and scary is because I had complete doubt in myself. I've always been this way and I've always second guessed myself.

Chitra Ragavan: What about your physical self-esteem? Did you ever get over it?

Helene Johnson: No. When I look in the mirror I see a woman, because I'm all grown now, with a big nose.

Chitra Ragavan: Which is not the case.

Helene Johnson: Well, it's not the case, but I see it. I look at myself as the way I looked when I was in seventh and eighth grade and I was teased and I was picked on. I don't see the new me. People tell me, "Oh, you're such an attractive woman." I don't see it. I see the Helene that I saw when I was young.

Chitra Ragavan: Now, how did your parents help you deal with this? Especially your dad. I'm sure he thought you were beautiful. You were daddy's little girl. How did he help you?

Helene Johnson: He had unconditional love for me. My dad would look at me with stars in his eyes and he always told me he was proud of me, always told me I was beautiful. He believed in me and he just kept ... He always told me that I was his baby and I was special. We had Friday nights where we would go to synagogue together and we would sing Fiddler On The Roof songs and we would have our date, and he was so handsome. My dad was so handsome. I looked like my dad, so I always thought, "Well, I can't be that bad looking because I look like my dad and he's pretty handsome." So he just gave me unconditional love and he always believed in me, and I was always in his eyes, til the day he died, I was his baby, and I was his little girl. I miss that a lot.

Chitra Ragavan: Your dad met your mom here in the U.S. but he was originally a Holocaust survivor. Tell me his name and tell me a little bit about him and his family, and what they went through during the Holocaust.

Helene Johnson: My dad's name is Rubin Sztajer. He is very famous in the Baltimore area. He's all over the Internet and he has spoken to Shoah. He's on video and DVDs. My dad was just amazing. His family. He was the middle child of five children. His brother Sam is still alive and he lives in Miami, or actually Fort Lauderdale maybe. He's probably 97 or 98, and his health is impacted now. But he looks a lot like my dad and when I hear him on the phone, it just brings back my dad.

Chitra Ragavan: Your dad was from Poland.

Helene Johnson: Yes, my dad was from Poland. From Klobutz Poland, which is a fishing town. He had a sister, Gussy who actually found him in the camps and saved his life.

Chitra Ragavan: How many kids?

Helene Johnson: How many kids does-

Chitra Ragavan: were they.

Helene Johnson: There were five. The youngest son and the youngest two girls, they were killed by the Germans. I think his brother was taken and his sisters were hidden by nuns, and the nuns turned them in so they were killed, and of course his parents were killed by the Germans. He was in school until sixth grade, so my dad had very little formal education. He had an amazing mind when it came to math. He was very strong in math, very strong in the stock exchange and finance and all of that.

Chitra Ragavan: How old was he when he was taken?

Helene Johnson: He was 11 when he was taken and he was liberated, I think 17. So it was like four or five years of being in forced labor camps.

Chitra Ragavan: How did your sister find him? His sister.

Helene Johnson: His sister. The last camp he was in was when the British came in and liberated the camps, and my aunt was actually in that camp. He was almost dead. I mean he had typhus or tuberculosis, I think it's typhus. He weighed probably 50 pounds, and he was close to dead. One of her friends was out and recognized my dad and told his sister. They went and got my father and they hid him in the women's camp. They would just surround him with their bodies so that when ... no one would find him, because they would let people like that die because my dad was almost dead. And so basically they nursed him as well as they could back to health, and then when the British came they put him in a hospital and brought him back to life.

Chitra Ragavan: How did he come to the U.S.?

Helene Johnson: His brother and his sister both got married in Germany after the war, and then his brother was able to get him passage to America. He lied about his birthday. We've never known really how old my dad is, nor do we know really what his birthday was because he had three birthdays. A lot of folks that came from Europe had many birthdays because they made their age whatever would work for them, because there was no birth certificates or anything like that back then. The Germans made sure to get rid of all of that.

Chitra Ragavan: He made a life for himself here, what did he do and how did he recover from the trauma of being in Nazi captivity throughout the war?

Helene Johnson: When he came here, he didn't know any English and he didn't have any money. The Associated Jewish Charities in Baltimore would take care of Holocaust survivors and they helped him find his first job, which was sweeping floors at a textile company. My father was a self-made man. He did not believe in charity. As a matter of fact, he got to a point where he would have gotten more money if he would have just taken the money from the charity versus sweeping the floors of the textile company. And he said, "I'm not taking charity." So he started sweeping floors, and in the end of his career he was the top salesman for that same company. He was amazing at selling textiles, and sheets and towels and stuff.

Helene Johnson: You asked how he recovered from being in the Holocaust. I don't know that my father ever recovered from being in the Holocaust. There are two types of survivors. There are those that say nothing and there are those that don't stop talking about it. His idea was to not stop talking about it. Because he believed, and he's right, that it can happen again. And if you don't talk about it and you don't keep reminding people and teaching people about it, then the same thing can happen again. We can get another Hitler, they can try to kill us off again. Because that was the whole idea, Hitler wanted to exterminate the Jewish race.

Helene Johnson: He also very much believed in the state of Israel because he felt that if the state of Israel does not exist, then we have no place to run. If it happens again, we need to go somewhere where we're safe, and the safest place to go for the Jewish people is Israel. And there's no way to hide that you're Jewish. I used to try to hide that I was Jewish, and you can't hide it. There's just no way. He never really got over it. As a matter of fact, in his later days, he really had a hard time with it because he was struggling with dementia, but he was also struggling with the fact that he knew he wasn't going to live much longer and he wanted to make sure that it wouldn't be forgotten.

Chitra Ragavan: Now, when you were six, you decided to ask him what had happened to him. Why did you make the decision, and what did you say to him and what did he say to you? Tell me that story.

Helene Johnson: My dad was hurting. Even at six years old, we're pretty intuitive. Kids are intuitive, and I could tell that he was hurting. I could tell that he was upset and he was angry. He had a temper to him and that ... he was just totally wasn't happy. He wasn't a happy man, if you will. I remember sitting down with him saying one day, "Well, why don't you ever talk about it?" And he said, "Nobody wants to hear about it." And I said, "I want to hear about it," and he told me

about it. He told me, unfortunately, the details that maybe you don't need to tell a six year old. My clearest memory is him telling me how they would line up the Jewish children in the street and just shoot them down. Or they would throw babies up in the air and use them for target practice, and he saw all that.

Helene Johnson: And so, I was afraid that myself and my siblings would be lined up in the street and shot. And even when I was a young mother, I was really scared that I couldn't protect my children from antisemitism. Their last name was Epstein, which is very Jewish name, and I couldn't protect them. If it would happen again, how would I be able to keep them from being lined up and shot? I could not get over this. I could not get over the fear and the anger that I had to be different from everybody else and my kids had to be different from everybody else because they were Jewish.

Chitra Ragavan: Looking back, do you wish you had not asked him at that young an age?

Helene Johnson: Yes and no. Yes, I wish I hadn't of asked him because I probably didn't need that amount of detail, but no, because he had to get it out. And then, once he started talking about it, then he didn't stop talking about it for the next 60 years. For 50 years, he didn't stop talking about it, and that's okay. I'm glad he talked about it. And it turned out that he used his experiences not to relive the story of the Holocaust over and over, that's not what he talked about. He talked about his message, which was, if he could survive with having nothing, the kids today who have everything, can do anything they want to do. That was his message all the time, to all children. It didn't matter your race. It didn't matter your background. It didn't matter your religion. He would say, "If I can do it, you can do it."

Helene Johnson: And because of that, my dad was a hero in so many people's eyes. We had hundreds and hundreds of letters that were written to my father. Children that were ready to commit suicide, that said that after they met him they started a new life, a new hope. My dad gave hope to so many people, mainly children. He loved to talk to children. But even adults, he would bring them to tears because he was happy, he was outgoing, he was positive, and his favorite saying was, "Have no fear, Rubin's here," and that would just make people laugh and feel better.

Chitra Ragavan: What were his views towards Germans and Nazis? Looking back on his life and what he had been through, what they had put him through.

Helene Johnson: I would say for the 30 years, maybe even 40 years since I was born, my dad had some rules. You could not buy a German car. You could not buy German products. He really didn't like Germans. And then he went to Germany. He went back with my mom a few times to Poland and Germany. And I remember him telling me that he looked around and saw that the people that are there now are not the German Nazis that killed his family. They can't be held responsible for what their ancestors did. I remember him telling me that it was like this freedom that he had, that he no longer hated Germans. He hated the Nazis, but he did not hate the German people. And then we were allowed to buy German cars and German food. He stopped being ... He didn't hate.

Helene Johnson: Now, he did feel that ... The one thing he did is he had a Jewish faith while I was growing up. He had us go to Hebrew school. He had his bar and bat mitzva. He really went to synagogue and he really did relate to the faith because he was an Orthodox Jew growing up. But then, once we all graduated and we all finished with our studies, he told us that he really didn't believe in God, and he really didn't want to be religious anymore. So I would say the last 30 or 40 years of my life, dad slowly stopped going to synagogue and slowly stopped being faithful and talking as much about God. But he did have this ... he did have faith. He was actually a Kohen, which is a high level Jew, there are different levels of Judaism. And so he did keep some of the rules, like Kohen's aren't allowed to go to cemeteries unless it's for your family. When a baby boy is born, Kohen's could do a ceremony, which was called Pidyon haben, and he did those.

Helene Johnson: So he did still have Judaism and he would still pray, like sing the songs of our prayers, but he really had a hard time. Mostly with Passover, because Passover tells the story of when the Jews were exiled out of Egypt. He had a really hard time with that holiday because every year he'd say it, "They should have a part in there about the Holocaust. They should be talking about the Holocaust, not what happened back in Egypt." He would always talk about that. And we would always say, "Okay dad, we know. You don't like this a holiday. We got it." And he'd go, "No." He wouldn't let it go.

Helene Johnson: I'd say the older he got, the less religious he was, but he was still traditionally Jewish. He still knew Yiddish and he still knew Hebrew, and he still ... He was a zayde, which is a Jewish grandfather. He still had a lot of Judaism in him, but he did question the existence of God. Because he said, "If there was a God, how could God let this happen?" And as he got older, he just couldn't let that go. No matter what anyone said, he would argue with them the same story,

"Why would God let innocent children be killed just because they were Jewish?"

Chitra Ragavan: Now, his story kept a weight on you, for many, many decades even. Talk about the impact on your life and on your career, and who you were as a person and how it kind of darkened your life.

Helene Johnson: Yeah. I have a lot of fears. Mainly, a fear of it happening again. And fear of terrorism. When 9/11 happened it was terribly scary for everybody, but I had little children and I had to be brave for them. But in my heart of hearts, it made me extremely afraid to be in crowds. I'm afraid to go on the Metro, which would have been nice today for work, but I just can't do it. I can't take being closed in and not having any chance to escape. When I go into stadiums or concerts or even the movie theater, I have to look for the exit and I have to know that there's a way to escape. So I think what it's done for me is it's always giving me that fear of the need to know that I can escape.

Helene Johnson: To this day, I cannot go into a synagogue on the Jewish holidays. I did when my kids were little and I was freaked out, totally, every time. And my ex husband, their father, would know that and he would just try to keep me calm. Now, I've accepted my fear and his synagogue now has a live streaming. And so this year was the first year I got to participate in the Jewish holidays. I did it in my family room and it was amazing. I'm just so grateful that they had that because I could feel part of it and I didn't have to hide from the holidays, and now I know that I can always participate. But it's given me many fears and those fears are not gone. I'm not going to lie to you and say that since he's passed, I now can go to things. But the one fear that I've had is the fear of being in crowds, and for my field that is detrimental.

Chitra Ragavan: Tell us a little bit about what you do and how that's impacted what you do.

Helene Johnson: Well, I am a consultant and I'm a strategist, and I help people win new business in the federal market. Well, to do that, it's all about two things. One is being strategic and having intuition, and knowing your competition and how you can make the company that you're supporting stand out. So it's all about branding and strategy. But the other thing is it's all about relationships. You have to have those relationships both in industry and in the government. Well, the only way to get those relationships is to be around the people. And the only way to be around the people is to be where they are. Well, you can do one-on-one lunches and gain a lot of weight, or you can go



to these networking things. Networking things are parties or they are meetings or they are conferences, and I just hated it. I did it. I went, but I stood against a wall.

Helene Johnson: I had friends who knew about my fears of crowds and my insecurities about just going over and making small talk, and they would go with me to conferences and they would just ... I would trail them. Most people didn't know it, but I knew it. Now, I can't build a company and grow my company without having relationships, and I couldn't do it well through one-on-one because it's too hard to do that. And some of my friends are no longer in business, so I don't have those brave people that would run point for me in the front. So I have to do it myself. And that's where I was up until I lost my father.

Chitra Ragavan: Which was when?

Helene Johnson: We lost my dad in March of this year.

Chitra Ragavan: How old was he?

Helene Johnson: He was 94, or he was 93, or 92, we really don't know.

Chitra Ragavan: ...depending on his date of birth.

Helene Johnson: I'm going to just average about 93.

Chitra Ragavan: 90s.

Helene Johnson: He had dementia, and that was hard for him because he's such a smart person. But I think the hardest part for him was he's so social. Everybody loved Rubin. Everybody loved being around Rubin. He could still be around people, but he wouldn't remember anybody's name, and it would really frustrate him and embarrass him. And also, he always worked out, he was very physically in shape. As his last six months to a year, he lost a lot of his strength and he couldn't work out because he couldn't remember how to work out or where to go to workout. So we lost him. He had broken his hip and they just said with his dementia and his other health issues, they just told us to put him in hospice and let him go, and we did. It's been since March and it's horrible, but something has happened in me, which is what's bringing me here to talk to you, and I can tell you what happened.

Chitra Ragavan: What happened?

Helene Johnson: I have become my dad. With him gone ... Look, I'm getting choked up. With him gone, I know the way he was, he was brave. I know that dad had doubts about himself too because he would tell me, especially as he got more and more with dementia, and we would spend more and more time talking to each other and just cuddling and just talking, and he would tell me, he said, "I never thought I was smart enough. No woman would marry me." I hear the same shticks that I have, the same insecurities. And I said, "I would have never known this." And he said, "Nobody did, and nobody needed to because my job was to save as many children as I could, and my job was to make people happy, and my job was to take care of things. I always felt ..." this is him talking, "... that if you need something, I'll fix it. I can handle it. I'll take it. Don't worry, I've got it."

Helene Johnson: Well, now that he's gone, I've got it. One of the things he wanted very much was for someone to write a book. No one can make money off his story. He doesn't want the book sold. He just wants a book written. And he wants the book written to children, and he wants his message to live on. I promised him when he was gone and when I could, I would write that book. I'm going to write the book. Unfortunately, a lot of the letters that he got, we can't find anymore, so it's going to be hard for me to put all the letters that children wrote in, but I can still find snippets of it. But I'm going to write ... There was enough written about him, about his speeches, that I'm going to be able to write a book. It's going to be a short book because it's going to be a book written to kids, for kids. I don't mean kids that are five. I'm talking about the 14 year olds that are struggling. They're the ones that I'm going we're going to give this book out to.

Helene Johnson: So I promised him that ... He was afraid to die because he was afraid to leave me, and afraid to leave my brother and sister, and my mom. I told him that we were ready, that we could carry on. He did his job and that it's time for him to go. But that I would make sure that that book is written and that his story is told, and I will do everything in my abilities to make sure there was never going to be another Holocaust. So I would fight for the state of Israel. I wouldn't hide that I was a Jew. I would make sure that I kept my family safe, but I would not ever let a Hitler come again, and I would do what I could do. Now, I can't stop a Hitler from coming, but I sure can speak up, and I sure can fight against it. And so I promised him those two things.

Helene Johnson: Well, now that he's gone, the book I will write. I'm not ready yet because I'm still too busy crying and I miss him too much, but I will.

I'll write it. I just have to make sure that I'm ready. But it's going to be within a year I'm going to write it, there's no doubt in my mind. But I also am now ready to put some of my fears aside. They're not gone, but they're checked. I have them in check, and now, I go to things.

Helene Johnson: I go to seminars, I go to conferences, I go to networking parties. I'm out there, I'm working the room, I take a deep breath. I have a few people that know my fears. They're funny because they show up at these things too and they'll give me a hug when I'm walking by or give me a thumbs up, or just a smile, and they know that this is hard for me but I'm doing it. And I'm going to go to the theater, and I'm going to do things. I'm doing what I need to do in order to put my fears aside because dad had fears, but he still was out there and he still did what he needed to do. And if he can do it, I can do it.

Chitra Ragavan: Aside from the fear, you also had a loss of trust in people because of what he went through. Do you think you're starting to get that back or is that still a struggle?

Helene Johnson: I am maybe getting it back a little bit. I think what's happening is I trusted too easily and many people took advantage of that through my career. I was kind of silly in that I would trust the wrong people or I would trust what they said, but I didn't try to figure out what they needed and what their motives were. Well, I don't know whether it's because my dad's gone or maybe because I'm now going to be a grandmother and I'm in a new phase in my life, but now my feeling is, if somebody has an ulterior motive, that's their problem. I'm going to do everything that I'm comfortable to do. I'm going to help as many people as I can, whether it be with their career, I love to mentor, or whether it be with their life or whether it be ... if they're in a financial situation, I will do whatever I can for people. And if they really have an ulterior motive, they have to live with it. I'm not as paranoid.

Helene Johnson: Dad was like that. He would just kind of go out and just do for people. If he found out that people really were mean to his family or they had bad reasons for doing it, he would just say ... Well, I won't tell you what he would say. But he would say, "Oh gosh, it's okay." But he wouldn't say that. I'm like that now, too. I am who I am. I'm not mean. I'm not as tough on people. I love people. I love helping young people and I love helping people my age and older people. And you know what? If they take advantage of me, well, bad on them.

Helene Johnson: I guess I got that from my dad and I'm willing to take the risk, and sometimes I get hurt and I just have to check that off for their problem not my problem. And now I like myself, I like who I am. I really do, for the first time in my life. I think some of that has to do with dad leaving me and now I have to keep going on my life, but I really do like who I've turned out to be. And what I really like is that I've turned out to be a whole lot like my dad, and I love that.

Chitra Ragavan: Looking back, starting from the age of six, do you ever look back and think, "I took all this weight off of him and I carried it throughout my life so that he could be inspiring to people, he could help people"? Do you think you consciously or unconsciously just took that weight off of him and carried it for him?

Helene Johnson: Absolutely. I took as much as I could off of him. I couldn't take it all off of him, but I knew that when he got older the last five years or so, I was his tackler. I would defend him no matter what he did. Even when he went the wrong way down one way streets and I knew we had to take his license away. I did what I could to keep him protected. And that's what you do for people that you love, you protect them. And if it meant taking hits for him, then I would take them. I would have done anything and everything for that man. I adored him and I still do.

Chitra Ragavan: Was there any one moment, when you look back, you remember that change when you became him?

Helene Johnson: Well, it happens almost every day. When I went to a recent event ... and this was an event that I remember for years I would go to and I just was scared out of my wits to be there. I would go against a wall and my husband would bring people to me instead of me going to them. I went this year, and I didn't even have a ticket to get in and I just went, and the first thing I did is I went to a pre-party and I had a drink. I don't really drink very much, so that helped me.

Helene Johnson: And then I went to this party and I was talking to my dad as I was walking up there. I said, "All right dad, I'm going to do four laps around this thing, because this is a huge room at the Ritz, so I'm going to go four laps. And in those four laps, I'm going to talk to as many people as I can. After those four laps, I'm going to get out of Dodge, but I'll do those four laps." That equated to about two hours. And I did it. When I was walking out I went, "Oh, I so did it. If you were here you'd give me one of those huge smiles of yours. You'd hug me and tell me how proud of me you were."

Helene Johnson: And I was, I was dad there. I was walking around talking to people, just making people laugh, because that's all dad ever did, he made everybody laugh, and I was just cutting it up there. I had pictures taken of me with people that ... goofy pictures, and I was laughing and I was smiling. And the whole time that I was there I wasn't scared. I wasn't nervous, I wasn't insecure, because I was comfortable. I was being the way my dad was.

Helene Johnson: Very recently, I had lunch with a friend. We went to a restaurant and I started joking around with the people who work there. I said, "Oh, I really like your wreath. Where'd you get it?" I'm just having a blast with the people that work there. They smiled and laughed and they felt good. That's what my dad used to do. He would just joke around with everybody. The first thing he'd say when they came up to him later in his years is, "Can I get you a drink?" And he'd say, "I want a bucket of water." But he had a strong Polish accent so they never understood what he meant, but they would laugh anyway.

Helene Johnson: Or he would flirt. My dad was a big flirt. He would flirt with all the women and he would joke with all the guys. I'm doing that now. It was funny because when he would do it I'd be like, "Oh dad, would you stop?" And now I'm doing it and I kind of could see why he liked it, because it loosens everybody up and it makes light of life. There's not one thing that's happening, but it's happening more and more. I'm taking more and more risks. Taking more and more opportunities to get out of my comfort zone. When I'm doing that I'm just the kind of person that dad would be, just full of life and happiness and just making everybody at ease and smile. That's what dad was like and that's what I'm doing now. And you know what? It's really fun. And it really takes a lot of the pressure off of life.

Chitra Ragavan: Looking back, what would you say to your former self? That six year old girl who asked her father to tell her his story, or that girl who got teased in school about her nose and the young professional making headway in her career, and now the seasoned leader looking back on life.

Helene Johnson: What would I tell myself? I would say give myself a break. Stop beating yourself up so much. Stop feeling so bad about yourself that you make everybody around you feel bad about themselves. Stop putting people down and make yourself feel better because it doesn't make you feel better. Just because you're insecure and then you beat people down, that doesn't help you. That actually makes them afraid of you. I don't know what I would tell my six year old self because it's been a long time since I've been six. I think I

would have done the same thing because I love my dad and he was hurting. Maybe I wish I hadn't heard such detail, but it is what it is, you can't undo that. But now, when I have my grandchildren, I'm not going to burden them with this heavy stuff. I'm not going to sit my six year old granddaughter down and say, "Your grandfather, your great zayde was in the Holocaust, and you could be in the Holocaust." I won't do that. There's no reason for that.

Helene Johnson: We are adults. We have to protect our family, our children, and we should not burden our children with the heavy burdens of life. I guess I'm looking at it now saying, "I can't undo what happened to me." I can't change the fact that I did. I had a big nose and I looked like I was eating it. It was a big nose and I'm glad I got it fixed at 15. Shoot, I would like to get it fixed now, just because I can't breathe out of it. But I'm not doing it because it was a very painful surgery. Now I look in the mirror and I'm okay. I think I look pretty good for my age and I got a husband who looks at me and just melts, so I must be doing okay there. And I have three of the most amazing daughters in the world, and two ... one son-in-law to be and one son-in-law, and I am just over the top lucky.

Chitra Ragavan: Ready for life.

Helene Johnson: I am ready for life. And I am ready for that little granddaughter of mine to come and start my new life of being a bubbe, which is Yiddish for grandma.

Chitra Ragavan: Helene, wonderful conversation. Thank you so much for joining me.

Helene Johnson: You're welcome. I really enjoyed it.

Chitra Ragavan: Helene Johnson is a second generation Holocaust survivor. She's President and CEO of Bid2Win, a Washington D.C. area consulting firm, helping clients bid for and win federal contracts. This is When It Mattered, and I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan: Thank you for listening to When It Mattered. Don't forget to subscribe on Apple Podcasts or your preferred podcast platform. If you like the show, please rate it five stars, leave a review, and do recommend it to your friends, family, and colleagues. When It Mattered is a weekly leadership podcast produced by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. For questions, comments, and transcripts please visit our website at [goodstory.io](http://goodstory.io). Or send us an email at [podcast@goodstory.io](mailto:podcast@goodstory.io). Our producer is Jeremy Corr, Founder and CEO of Executive Podcasting Solutions. Our theme song is composed by Jack

Yeagerline. Join us next week for another edition of When It Mattered. I'll see you then.