

# Jeff Hornstein, Economy League of Greater Philadelphia

Cameron Miller 27 March 2019

Sometimes when you look back at a career, it might look more intentional than it actually was. That may be the case for Jeff Hornstein, Executive Director of the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, who described to me the randomness that existed in the path of his career so far. While that may be true, looking back you can see consistency and behavior and a mentality that helped him to get to where he is today. He's created success by following a sense of purpose, seizing opportunities, and building alliances.

As the executive director of the Economy League, one of the three organizations that Samuel Fels founded more than 100 years ago (along with the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania and the Committee of Seventy), Jeff is driving the nonprofit think tank towards a position where they are best situated to promote inclusive economic development in the region. "You can't have economic growth [across society] if the economic situations of those at the bottom aren't strong," said Jeff Hornstein. It's an ambitious and progressive mentality for the executive director, who is little more than

half way through his first year, but his sense of purpose is palpable. A graduate of MIT, Jeff recalled sitting in a lecture with Noam Chomsky, who noted that the vast majority of Americans would never have the opportunities experienced by those in the room. But what people of talent and means choose to do with those gifts and opportunities -- that's really what matters.

Jeff went on to continue his studies, both at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Maryland. But as he worked to finish his PhD and find jobs in academia, an unconventional opportunity arose that would enable him to have a different kind of impact. During his time at the University of Maryland, Jeff had been involved in efforts to unionize graduate students. It became a point of passion for him and overindulging in a conversation on the topic during an interview he ended up tanking his chance at an academic position. He would later learn that he had been the top candidate. Instead of wallowing in the rejection, he seized the insight underneath the disappointment and found his way into the labor movement full-time, organizing, bargaining, leading, consulting, and making a very different kind of impact than he had originally envisioned. Some opportunities lasted longer than others, while some seemed like opportunities but never panned out. But with hindsight, recurring themes seem clear: Jeff followed his passions, his sense of purpose, and was willing to follow unexpected opportunities.

Eventually Jeff came to see Philadelphia as home, and he

made an ambitious run at City Council. Despite his lack of success, the campaign helped him to increase his profile and solidify a network of valued advisors. Having the right structure of alliances, Jeff reflects, is critical to success. Following the campaign, opportunities came and went, and he ultimately found himself leading policy efforts for the City Controller, being a leader within government in a different way than he had expected during his run for elected office. Equipped with his varied experience and a large network attained through studying, organizing, and politics, he successfully led the office through impactful initiatives for five years. But, inevitably, new opportunities presented themselves and his situations evolved. The changing leadership of the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia presented a major opportunity for Jeff to take the helm of an organization and promote economic success for both the region generally and for those in society who need it most. Like Noam Chomsky taught -- for those who have been gifted with talent and opportunity, there is a responsibility to serve those who have not been afforded such good fortune.

Now Jeff is in the most autonomous position that he's been able to create for himself so far, with a staff -- recently moved into a new, more cost-effective space in Center City -- ready to do high-quality research and ensure that decision makers in the region are prepared with the evidence and data needed to make the best decisions for all people living in the Philadelphia region.

Jeff embodies a kind of organic leadership that's forged through experience. He's fought in the trenches for workers' rights; he's worked within, and around the system; he's initiated change; and turned disappointment into opportunity. Union organizers are often known for being combative, and onlookers often wonder how Jeff's roster of donors and allies is filled with former adversaries. The key, Jeff reflected, is to know both how to fight and how to settle. No matter what role others play, whether it's ally or rival, you have to be able to prove aligned interests. That's all that matters. You have to make sure that all parties understand that they are better off involved than out of the loop. As Jeff leads the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia into the future, it will be exciting to see how his organization can prove the aligned interests of stakeholders and decision makers, and how he continues to take new opportunities and forge new alliances.