

# WE ARE ETH – Episode 2

## With Jennifer Giroux, ETH Alumni, social researcher and strategy consultant

[Listen to Podcast](#)

[00:00:00] **Jennifer Giroux:** When I was leaving and going through the immigration at Zurich airport, and he looks at my green card type of thing or whatever that I had, he looks at it and he goes, wow, you were here for a long time. And I said, yeah. And he goes, was it a great experience for you? I said, life-changing!

[00:00:19] **Susan Kish:** Welcome. I'm Susan Kish host of the We are ETH series. And thank you for joining. Today, I am really looking forward to a conversation with Jennifer Giroux. She is a social research and strategy consultant focusing on the social impact space and is joining us from Corktown in downtown Detroit, Jennifer welcome.

[00:00:43] **Jennifer Giroux:** Oh, Susan, wonderful to be here and join everybody.

[00:00:47] **Susan Kish:** We're so happy to have you. So Jennifer, I would love to start with asking, what are you doing in Detroit? It's an exciting city. It's changing a lot. So what's, what's on your plate right now?

[00:01:00] **Jennifer Giroux:** So we moved from DC last year in November. It was election day actually. We moved here and to Detroit and this is where my family's originally from.

[00:01:13] Um, and I haven't lived here in 25 years. In fact, when I left, I really didn't know if I'd be able to come back, but Detroit is like the sort of city... It's kind of like the, I don't know, maybe people say this about all

their native land Susan, but it's sort of a city though, that kind of calls you back and draws you back.

[00:01:30] It's always in, in your mind. And what we really came here, my husband and I, and our two black cats from actually who were born in Switzerland, but we, when we lived there, um, we came here to be part of this uniquely singular moment in the, in the city's history to reimagine it, right, to be part of the rebuilding redesigning, and, and truly that is what is happening here.

[00:01:51] And there's no, you know, as somebody who's grown and lived in so many different cities and the cities are just sort of built for you. But Detroit has so much space and it's a really unique opportunity to be part of community. And to be part of, as somebody who's studied resilience, social resilience, urban resilience is really an opportunity to be here and be part of the decisions that are being made in your neighborhood around how is it going to be designed.

[00:02:16] And I think that's really unique and also living in cities where there's been a lot of inequity where we even my husband and I have had challenges, finding a home that we could afford. That we could even afford as a renter. Um, and a lot of these cities grapple with that because these decisions tend to just be made on a real estate level, rather than on a level of how does the government want to truly create an equitable city.

[00:02:37] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:02:37] **Jennifer Giroux:** And I think Detroit has this unique opportunity because there's so much land because so many homes were demolished literally by neglect. There's so much land that the city owns and that city can work with to do different. And also to create a lot more parks and spaces and just to work with space and a lot of different ways that a city like New York or even Zurich, which are beautiful cities, but they're built.

[00:02:59] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:02:59] **Jennifer Giroux:** You know, and they can't really, they're having to adjust and redesign our infrastructure to adapt to things like climate change. Whereas Detroit, it literally has to build new. And so it has this unique singular opportunity and we wanted to be a part of that.

[00:03:12] **Susan Kish:** It's wonderful in many ways to see it come back, but it is the embodiment of grit of resilience.

[00:03:19] **Jennifer Giroux:** Yeah. And creativity. I mean, I think a lot of people, you know, it is grit. I mean, you know, literally you see all these murals and, and, um, you know, there is a sort of feeling of, you know, we rise from the ashes, which has historical connotations because the city did experience a great fire in the 18 hundreds.

[00:03:35] And so there's this aspect of it is a city that rises. Um, but I think the other thing about Detroit is it's incredibly creative. And it's just like the art and the music. Like I think the part of it too, is when you're dealing with so much space, Susan, and like you, you have people here who are makers, world builders, and then everybody, if you come here, you literally, I think, have a responsibility to do.

[00:04:02] And if you're someone who come here and expects everything to be done for you. Then it's probably not the place for you. We need people here who are literally going to embrace what it, yeah. Literally embrace. What, how are they going to make their community better?

[00:04:16] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:04:16] **Jennifer Giroux:** And how are they going to make the community maybe next to them better?

[00:04:19] And you end up seeing these wonderful creative displays of maker ship every day and that's, what's going to make it great again.

[00:04:29] **Susan Kish:** Well, it has the opportunity to make a difference in this next century. Which is really fascinating, but help me, help me connect the dots. You lived in Zurich for seven years at the ETH center for security studies.

[00:04:42] And if I read correctly, you were part of the center around risk and resilience.

[00:04:46] **Jennifer Giroux:** Correct.

[00:04:47] **Susan Kish:** So can you help connect the dots between that work that you did on resilience and Nigerian terrorism and energy

infrastructure and ICT and disasters. I mean, you took a lot of really interesting work. How does that inform and connect with the work that you're doing now?

[00:05:07] **Jennifer Giroux:** You know, as somebody is um, and I think this is, you know, just going to ETH for a second. As a social researcher, we don't really talk about ETH. Right? When I was living in California and going to graduate school, I hung out with a lot of mathematicians and people in the physics department and we go hiking together and I told him, I said, hey, I got a, you know, a senior researcher or researcher job at, at ETH.

[00:05:29] And they all looked at me and they're like, what, what? That's amazing. Yeah. Yeah. It, yeah. Is it okay? No. And I was like, yeah, the, the university is like amazing, but they knew, they knew, like you just landed on the most amazing opportunity. And I have no idea. And truly they were right. Because when I came and I worked for the center with, uh, it's headed by Andy Wenger, he's wonderful.

[00:05:54] And I was really focused on at that time, really that relationship between people and their environment.

[00:06:00] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:06:00] **Jennifer Giroux:** And specifically, how does your environment, how does the place in which, where you live impact your life and how does that express, how does that maybe express through violence? Right. You know, somebody actually being propelled, motivated, agitated to carry out acts of violence because of their conditions.

[00:06:19] And so this relationship, you know, just kind of connected. I looked at when I was there for seven years, I worked with a wonderful team. And for me, one of the areas I looked on was like the target behaviors of violent groups, you know, how did they leverage their terrain? How did their environment, both agitate them because of inequities, um, because of abuses and then how do they leverage that to actually destabilize another actor, a business, uh, uh, sector.

[00:06:44] Uh, so I'm really, I've always been very interested in that sort of dynamic. And I've also always been interested in the role of non-state actors like myself, like a civilian who have tremendous power. And, and

so it's this whole world, uh, Susan of, I'd say ETH really gave me, they gave me a canvas and they gave me the best paints in the world.

[00:07:03] And they said paint what you want. And as a creative, in terms of thinking, writing, seeing, interpreting, analyzing, it gave me this license to dance across a couple of different domains that were all about our environment and our interplay with our environment. And how do we manage risk in that space? How do we adapt and recover in that space? How do we disrupt that space?

[00:07:27] And so for me, the link as I come here now to Detroit, where it's all about me and space. Right. How am I going to be part of shaping a space? And so I can see how that now starts to mobilize me. And it's now my job to channel that energy in a more productive way, but I've worked a lot for many years in environments where people dealt with something very similar in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, they, they dealt with that aspect of seeing their lands be abused by oil and gas activities. They dealt with seeing their livelihoods deteriorate because of oil and gas activities. They saw the lack of benefiting from those oil and gas activities, and many of them mobilized against those oil and gas companies and the government.

[00:08:11] So I can see how you're that's, that's the link really for me. And now I'm so excited because I have this theoretical, I have the theoretical background and the principles in me from my work at ETH to actually apply that while I work here and live here.

[00:08:28] Does that make sense? Did I connect the dots?

[00:08:33] **Susan Kish:** It's a lifelong challenge, but it sounds like what ETH gave you was, was a framework and a discipline and other sort of case studies of applications, completely different environments, but there were common elements. What you described this concept of there should be something and there isn't also sounds like what happens in places that have been struck by disaster or by war and where you look at it, you go that just it's, there's a jarring sense and a desire to fill in the gap to reconnect those dots. And it sounds like in Detroit, you have a chance to do it possibly in a, a better way.

[00:09:13] **Jennifer Giroux:** Yeah. I mean, right now I'm not doing anything. We were just being citizens here. So we spent the last year, I mean, I'm working as an international consultant right now. I have a

couple of great clients. My work is still outside of Detroit. And what I'm learning about here is how to be a citizen of Detroit. So we spent the last year participating in city council meetings, organizing, being involved in our neighborhood association.

[00:09:34] So, you know, I'm just being an active citizen and utilizing my background, all that stuff that I know about what can help make a great city and be, try to be part of that and bring that to the table of right now, I just got to learn to be, what is it like to be just a citizen? I understand in a way that I've never been before in any other city I lived.

[00:09:52] **Susan Kish:** So, how did you get from lake Orion, which you have to understand is sort of a little bit at the middle of nowhere, it's sort of north of Detroit and on the way to Flint. Right. But can you just tell us how that journey went from there to, if I were understand you went to undergrad in Boulder, Colorado, but there's some steps along the way that got you to Basel and got you to Zurich.

[00:10:18] **Jennifer Giroux:** Well, so for our listeners, right? Lake Orion is directly north 45 minutes of Detroit. So we got lake Orion, it's like 5,000 maybe it's more now it's growing. Um, but it's, it's a lake community and it's actually there used to be a train that went from Detroit to lake Orion. And that's where everybody went to go holiday.

[00:10:35] Um, you know, back in the, the origins of lake Orion was, yeah, it was all these little cottages around the lake and people, you know, the people that lived in the city would take their trains up and it was their summer homes. So I grew up in this small community. You know, my grandfather, I loved his national geographics.

[00:10:50] He had a national geographic subscription and I was like, I just remember, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents and I was young and I just remembered looking through those pictures and being I want to do that. And what was that? I want to be in the world. That's what I wanted to do. I want to, I want to be out there.

[00:11:08] I didn't know what I wanted to do. You know, I wasn't, one of those kids was like, I'm going to be a lawyer. I knew I wanted to be in the world with people. That's what I knew.

[00:11:15] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:11:15] **Jennifer Giroux:** And so my whole, like being in lake Orion, I knew that I'd eventually leave because that world it's a beautiful community. Lovely. The slogan there is "where living is a vacation." Everyone's kind of like, you know, it's this beautiful lake everyone hangs out. It's great. But I just knew that I would be somebody that when the opportunity strikes, um, came to me and the first opportunity was college. And, um, and I remember Susan, I was playing, soccer at that time, uh, which is, uh, football for our European listening audience, you know, you know, the Americans, we always...

[00:11:48] **Susan Kish:** Got to have our own framework. Yep.

[00:11:51] **Jennifer Giroux:** We got our own frameworks, really little silly. But I was playing soccer and I was looking at different schools where I play soccer, but I really didn't want to play in college. And I didn't know how to tell my parents that. And so I heard somebody on a soccer team say, I'm going to go to university of Colorado Boulder.

[00:12:07] And this was in 1996. And, I was like, okay, that sounds far away. Let me apply there. And I didn't tell anybody. And I said to myself, I'm gonna apply. And if I get in I'm going, nobody knew. I literally went on the website. This was like, when the websites first started coming out and I saw like the mountains there and I was like, that looks perfect I'll go there.

[00:12:27] And fortunately it worked out because, I mean, honestly it was that silly. So I, I applied, I got in and my mom was like, you applied to Colorado. Why are you going? You know, and, and it was exciting, but that was it. And I also, in terms of my major, cause then they said you have to have a major.

[00:12:43] A major? Like literally no one talked to me about this stuff. So I remember going into the library when we still had those and opening up a book on college majors and it was A to Z college majors, A to Z. So I was like, okay, I'll start at A, and fortunately anthropology is like, starts with the letter A like, so yeah, it starts with the A and I find I get to it.

[00:13:07] You know, study of cultures and people, I believe I'm like that. I want to do that. And so literally it was that sort of stumbling. You know, some people are like laser sharp. I stumble, I sort of...

[00:13:17] **Susan Kish:** It's not stumbling, it's serendipity.



[00:13:20] **Jennifer Giroux:** Serendipity. Yes. It's a more precise way. It's a serendipitous. It's an openness. Like I hear the call. And then I'm like, okay, I look for the signals. And just in a way it feels like I sort of fall into, but there's a pull and then I just try to be open to whatever's going to meet me on the other side, you know, it's, there's that wonderful quote by Rumi and it says "Whatever you're seeking is seeking you".

[00:13:41] And I think a lot of what has transpired what got me out of lake Orion onto Colorado, then New York, etc...

[00:13:50] **Susan Kish:** But then how did you end up in Zurich? Which in many ways is the antithesis of either, you know, where you grew up or, or Detroit?

[00:14:03] **Jennifer Giroux:** Um, so again, it's this whole sort of the serendipity, right? Um, and I'm studying anthropology and. And I have struggled the first few years. Cause you know, it's a big university just trying to adapt and figure out I had this really amazing opportunity to go and spend a summer in Senegal called operation crossroads Africa and operations crossroads Africa was created just before the peace corps was created in the US as sort of a pre peace corps.

[00:14:33] It was kind of like a testing ground. Um, so it was this way for the government, I don't even know if it was like the government that in terms of its historical origins, but it was a way for us to experiment with, all right if we send some American kids, um, you know, so that like the sort of cultural exposure out to, you know, different African countries to volunteer for summer, what would that be like?

[00:14:55] So I had the chance in my junior year to do that. And that really, I was in Senegal, in a village called Keur Momar Sarr, which is about an hour and a half south of the Mauritania border. So it's West Africa.

[00:15:08] That was such again, these like little moments, right? Because I was placed in a community in which there was an anthropologist, um, actually doing her work, her doctoral dissertation work. And so I had this chance to actually see what it was like, I mean, it was, it's like, you know, you have your anthropology professors who is sharing their work with you, but I actually was in a village where an anthropologist was actually doing the work.



[00:15:30] So I could actually see, is this something that I would like to do? It was from that experience that inspired me to have, after I graduated, go back to west Africa, spent some time in Ghana. I lived there for about six months and then I, you know, came out of that experience. And I had a boyfriend at the time who was like, um, well, I'm going to New York city.

[00:15:49] And that was August of 2001. And so what happened in September, 2001?

[00:15:55] **Susan Kish:** 9/11.

[00:15:56] **Jennifer Giroux:** So we moved there – 9/11. Um, and I experienced, I actually sat and watched. We lived in a part of Brooklyn right along the river. I'll never forget. The first plane had hit and I was watching the smoke come out. It was terrifying.

[00:16:12] And then it was moments later that I think the first tower crumbled, I just... Sorry, I just... it was, it was really wild, but I shared that with you, Susan, because it was that experience, that got me interested in terrorism and crisis. And that aspect of how people, how do they recover from that?

[00:16:33] And also what had motivated those people, those individuals that flew that plane into those buildings, right? There were so many aspects of that day. Again, it was like one of those singular moments for me that I needed to understand this. And so I made a point to go back to school, do my masters and it was really that trajectory when I went and did my masters in California.

[00:16:54] And I got, um, I really chose that school because they had a very strong international security program. I mean, it was post 9/11, you know, in the early day of that in America. So there was a lot of funding going into terrorism research. And so I was involved in building like the first global terrorism database. That's still around today. It's the largest on terrorism in the world, that then led me to Zurich.

[00:17:16] I wanted to keep advancing my studies in 2003, 4, 5, 6. So at that period, really, the funding was all about Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism. That's all you like, literally, like there was no other option.

[00:17:28] **Susan Kish:** I remember that.

[00:17:29] **Jennifer Giroux:** I was looking for opportunities to, for someone to get me a license, to look at other things that I didn't have to look at just one group. And honestly, when I got the job at ETH at the center for security studies, I knew that that was going to be my opportunity, that I could have a greater creative license to look at other sorts of violent phenomenon. And it didn't just have to be one type of group or one specific group within a type of groups.

[00:17:55] **Susan Kish:** So Jennifer. As we think about the path that you've followed and the dots that you're talking about connecting, what is the role that ETH still plays in your life now that you're in Detroit?

[00:18:08] **Jennifer Giroux:** Oh, that's an awesome question. So I pride myself. I'm a collaborator. I love to connect. I love to connect with people. I love to collaborate and being at a place like ETH, you have so many different departments, so many different interests, but also people from all over the world. And there's this convergence there of creative, ambitious minds. And what that really tapped into me was that it branched me out into other disciplines. For me really allowed me to establish that sort of bold partnership and not staying in my lane.

[00:18:44] And I saw that in practice there quite a bit. And I think that's why you have such great, innovative ideas that come out of there. Cause you just, you know, you have a lot of synergies happening across, um, both types of people, but also, uh, types of thinking and different domains. And then when you have that, those things come together, you, you have magic, you have magic.

[00:19:04] And so what ETH really allowed and established for me was that boldness, like, I can go up to somebody with a more technical background, you know, and talk to them and say, hey, maybe we can think about doing something. It gave me that place to practice that.

[00:19:19] **Susan Kish:** It gave you courage.

[00:19:20] **Jennifer Giroux:** It gave me courage. Yeah. That still plays out in my life today.

[00:19:24] **Susan Kish:** So you were there from 2009 ish to 2014, 15, 16 ish. Um, when you look back on your days in Zurich, what did you like about Zurich? What was different about Zurich?

[00:19:38] **Jennifer Giroux:** You know, there's, there's a couple of countries so far in my life so far that have had a really big impact on me. And I really never knew that Switzerland would be one of those places. And honestly, it is when you say, when you go back to that time, living in Zurich, there's a part of it that feels like home. And I think because of. Just as I said, home, a little kitty came into my lap for our listeners. He's here, he's joined us. We acquired him in Zurich.

[00:20:04] Um, well, so when you say that, you know, I think about building our family there. I think about, I got involved with a hiking group and that was such a great thing because every Saturday we would go out, it was Thomas Widmer and he worked at one of the papers and I got wonderfully luckily brought into his beautiful group and he would plan these hikes every Saturday. And I would go out with them.

[00:20:25] And that exposed me to all the wonderful communities. One that exposed me, the vastness of the public infrastructure, the public transportation infrastructure in Switzerland.

[00:20:33] **Susan Kish:** You can get anywhere in Switzerland.

[00:20:34] **Jennifer Giroux:** Anywhere! Mobility, right? Like mobility changes your life. And the other thing is, is like I saw how nurtured the land is. I always joked with my friends that I think at night, when everyone's sleeping in Switzerland, there's a huge vacuum cleaner that covers the country and it cleans and it, it, it grooms all the land. And then when everyone wakes up, everything's like prestige.

[00:20:57] **Susan Kish:** It picks up all the individual leaves.

[00:21:00] **Jennifer Giroux:** Yes. But I, you know what I think about when I think about Switzerland and Zurich, because I think about...

[00:21:06] It's you know, this aspect of caring for each other. And you said, as expressed through, we've invested in our infrastructure, we're investing in taking care of our land. It's that sort of like caring together.

[00:21:17] And I remember when I was leaving and going through the immigration at Zurich airport, and he looks at my green card type of thing or whatever that I had, he looks and goes, wow, you were here for a long time. And I said, yeah. And he goes, was it a great experience? I said life-changing! And then I walked through.

[00:21:34] And it's a place that's still very much a part of my life. And I embrace that and I want to do everything in my power, like being on this podcast or being with the ETH circle to support that and to elevate that. I love it. I feel very grateful. I feel very, very grateful.

[00:21:50] **Susan Kish:** Jennifer. Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today. Great conversation and those images of a little girl reading her grandfather's national geographic, and then coming to live that life as you've described. That's great. So thank you. Thanks again for your time.

[00:22:10] I'm Susan Kish, host of the We are ETH series. Please join us and subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'd like to thank and to credit our producers at the ETH circle and Ellie Media. Take care and stay safe.