

Inside Citywide Podcast Transcript Episode 9

Michael Santos: You are listening to the Inside Citywide Podcast brought to you by the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services. Inside Citywide provides you with a behind the scenes look at some of the work we do to serve the people of New York City.

Nick Benson: Welcome to Inside Citywide. I'm Nick Benson. I'm the executive director of communications and public affairs at DCAS. And I'm joined, as always, by my colleague Belinda French.

Belinda French: Hi, I'm Belinda French, and I'm the diversity and EEO officer for the DCAS.

Nick Benson: I'm excited to introduce our guest for this episode. Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine. Mark Levine was elected borough president in 2021 after serving four terms on the New York City Council representing the Seventh District spanning West Harlem, Morningside Heights, and parts of the Upper West Side in Washington Heights. In a historic first for the nation, Mark passed legislation guaranteeing a right to counsel for tenants facing eviction in housing courts.

Nick Benson: As chair of the City Council Health Committee, he rose to national prominence as a leader in the fight against COVID19. At the start of his career, Mark taught bilingual math and science at Junior High School 149 in District Seven in the South Bronx. He went on to found Neighborhood Trust Federal Credit Union, a community development financial institution, which has made \$25 million in small loans to low income families and small businesses in northern Manhattan.

Nick Benson: Mark earned a B.A. in physics from Haverford College and a master's in public policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. I'm pleased to welcome Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine to the podcast. Thank you for joining us.

Mark Levine: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you.

Nick Benson: So one of the goals of our podcast is to let listeners really get to know our guests. I'd like listeners to walk away today feeling they have a better sense of Mark Levine the person. So, I want you to start with your early life. You were born in Chicago. You grew up in Maryland. And you said that growing up you were influenced by your parents' political activism.

Nick Benson: Tell me about some of those formative years and how you think your parents helped inspire your interest in politics and public service.

Mark Levine: Well, I think I'm kind of an amalgam of my parents. That's common, isn't it? My father was a doctor, a physician, really focused on epidemiology and public health and had a very scientific view of the world. My mother trained in mental health. Founded a mental health clinic on the south side of Chicago. And was an industry social activist for her entire adult life, including marching at Selma with Dr. King.

Mark Levine: And I inherited, I think, pieces of both of their personalities, social activism from my mom and a scientific worldview from my father. I feel very, very lucky to have received both those strains that made me who I am today.

Nick Benson: So that explains a little bit why you studied physics when you were in college and you went on to become the chair of the health committee on the council. So makes a lot of sense.

Mark Levine: Yes. And my father had passed away before, right before I entered the city council. So he wasn't around for my time as health committee chair or for the pandemic. And throughout that entire period, I missed him terribly. Because he would have been such an incredible guide for me. But, no doubt I carried his influence throughout my tenure as health committee chair and through that crisis.

Mark Levine: And it served me in really innumerable ways.

Nick Benson: And I'm sure through a lot of your parents activism that really you had a lot of conversations around the dinner table about politics and current events. I'm sure that was something that was regular for you guys.

Mark Levine: Absolutely. My first political memory was when Nixon resigned, and I think I was like five or something or four. And I was crying because we were talking about it around the dinner table. And I thought America had no president. I did not understand that there was a vice president who took over.

Mark Levine: So from a very young age, the current events were part of my family life.

Belinda French: So, let's transition. After college, you were in Teach for America, spent two years teaching in the South Bronx. What made you want to do Teach for America, and what did you learn from that experience?

Mark Levine: Well, I had studied physics in college, and I love and still do love physics and science. But by the time I graduated, I knew I didn't want to spend my life in a lab. I wanted to be more engaged in social activism. And teaching was a wonderful way to meld together my love of science with the opportunity to be out in the real world hopefully having an impact.

Mark Levine: I became a science teacher in the South Bronx in 1991. And I was part of a program that you referenced, Teach for America, which kind of expedited your entrance into the workforce without some of the usual delays or bureaucratic obstacles. It turned out that the year I entered what used to be called the Board of Education, there were two shortage areas that they were desperate to hire and they were science and Spanish speaking bilingual.

Mark Levine: They were doing very little hiring that year, but because I checked both of those boxes, I was immediately offered a job in the South Bronx at Junior High School 149, which is in district seven on 149th Street, actually 146 Street and Willis Avenue. And it was a difficult and beautiful and in some ways life changing experience.

Nick Benson: Following your time in Teach for America, you started the Neighborhood Trust Federal Credit Union to serve lower income families in Upper Manhattan. Why did you decide to transition to starting a credit union in your mid-twenties? That's something you don't hear every day.

Mark Levine: When I was a teacher in the South Bronx in my early twenties, I spent a lot of time with my students and their families getting to know them and the needs of the community and the challenges that so many of the families faced and so many of the families had no connection to the financial system, no bank account, no credit card.

Mark Levine: For them, credit might come in a rent to own store or worse, from a loan shark or a *prestamista* in Spanish and charging interest rates of 5%, 10% per week with the threat of violence if they didn't repay. And so even during my time teaching, I was really aware of the way lack of access to financial services was holding back these families from a decent life.

Mark Levine: And I actually started while teaching to volunteer in the after-school hours at a local nonprofit that worked on economic development the South Bronx Economic Development Corporation known as S O B R O. I started to get more and more interested in kind of the community economics in the neighborhood, and so much so that I decided to go back to graduate school and study public policy but with the focus on urban economic development and got my master's in public policy.

Mark Levine: And while in school, started to work on a project that would help solve this problem by giving families access and control over financial services. And this was a time in the mid-nineties when there was a really high-profile community development credit union in central Brooklyn that had been started by two incredibly charismatic leaders, one of which is Errol Louis.

Mark Levine: You might now know from New York One. And another is someone who's still an incredibly important activist, Mark Winston Griffith, and he's still based in Brooklyn. And I was so inspired by their example, starting the Central Brooklyn Federal Credit Union, that's what it was called, that I started to work with a bunch of fellow teachers to create a credit union for uptown Manhattan, where none had existed and

where there was just enormous need, particularly in Washington Heights, where there was a large population of immigrant families who were not connected to the banking system.

Mark Levine: And so, while I was still in grad school, we started to work informally. We created a nonprofit, started to raise money, and eventually got a charter from the federal government, were able to get a hold of an old, abandoned bank branch that *Chase* had closed and some merger or another years prior behind the George Washington Bridge bus terminal at Fort Washington.

Mark Levine: And then in 1997 we were able to open Neighborhood Trust Federal Credit Union right there in the heart of Washington Heights.

Nick Benson: and that's outstanding. And I know it's so hard for people to even begin to build credit if they don't have access to a credit card or to be able to take out a loan. And then you mention the kind of fees that people have to pay just to cash a check, for example, if they go to a bank and they don't have an account there.

Nick Benson: So that's definitely something I'm sure made a big difference in Washington Heights.

Mark Levine: Yeah, the credit union grew quickly to over 5,000 members, most of whom had not had a bank account before, so. Literally people were bringing money in out from shoeboxes because that's where they were keeping their savings, which is not ideal. But I think the most important impact of the credit unions probably over time has been the lending.

Mark Levine: And it's now made tens of millions of dollars. Last estimate, I think it was over 30 million and in small loans, microloans, helping people buy their first home computer, pay for education, start a small business, a home-based business, even ultimately get a mortgage. And the repayment rate on those loans is 98%. So it's just a reminder that if you give people an opportunity in life, they'll seize it.

Mark Levine: And I'm very proud of the impact credit has had over the years.

Nick Benson: As outstanding.

Belinda French: So I just, you know, even continuing this, I just love to hear about what your parents instilled in you and then you actually took that activism and helped as New Yorkers in the community. I just love hearing about this, and I actually didn't realize that when you first ran for city council, I think it was 2001. Yeah, you were only 32 years old.

Belinda French: What made you take that leap into running for office?

Mark Levine: Well, so I told you I'd mentioned I'd been a teacher, and it was a very frustrating time in the schools there was a lot of corruption that had been uncovered in

some of the school boards, which ultimately were disbanded. That was true in district seven as well. And then I moved into economic development, as we've been talking about, and I was very frustrated by what I felt was the city ignoring community economic development in that time.

Mark Levine: And term limits took effect for the first time ever in 2001 and I had lived in a district where the councilmember who was wonderful, the guy by the name of Stanley Michels, had been in office for a quarter century and so I decided that instead of just being mad about all these policies, which I felt were not being carried out properly by the city, I would get into the arena and do something.

Mark Levine: And so, as a total novice, I really didn't know what I was getting into. I ran for city council, and it was a wild 10-way primary. Primary day was on September 11th of 2001. Now people forget that was an Election Day and I was standing outside of a poll site that morning, and someone had a car radio playing ten ten wins, and they said an airplane had hit the first tower.

Mark Levine: And we looked up and it was clear, and we figured at first it was thought to be a small like, you know, four-seater type private plane. And later we learned it was much bigger than that. And but we kept campaigning because it was one plane. It was sort of shocking. But we had an election and then when the second plane hit, I was still at the same site and there was the same car radio. At that point, we realized this election was not going to proceed.

Mark Levine: And went back to the campaign headquarters there. It was a little bit hard. A lot of folks didn't have cell phones at that point. Actually, the cell phones stopped working at one point in the day. And so we had well over a hundred volunteers out. We had to spend the rest of the day trying to track down and identify our volunteers, while some of us were getting news that we had family or loved ones or people we knew in the towers.

Mark Levine: And at one point that morning, it's hard to remember, but there were early estimates that the number of deaths would be 50,000. Thank God it ended up being fewer than that. But the election was canceled by 11 something in the morning and it was scheduled for two weeks later.

Mark Levine: We had to run. We had to get ourselves back into action after the trauma of 9/11. Those were the hardest two weeks of my life, I think, in that while I was processing the loss and the devastation of the attack, as every one of us was, I had to remount the whole campaign and motivate our volunteers and have a message. What is the message even going to be at that point?

Mark Levine: We came in, I didn't win. I came in second place to someone who ended up being a very good friend, Robert Jackson. And I was really bummed out after that because I didn't win, and I was 32 and I put my heart and soul into it then. And the next

morning my phone started to ring, and it was one person after another saying congratulations, and it was quite confused by that.

Mark Levine: But people said, what are you talking about? You're a kid, you ran a great race, you know, you got a bunch of votes, you raised some money, you got some endorsements, if you want, you got a future in this. And it took a while. But eventually I truly understood that you can lose an election, and if you run hard and you do well, you can still push your career forward and boy, did I have to learn that because I ran and lost again in another race in 2010, an even bigger and tougher election for state senate. I have a pattern here of losing to people who I've later become friends with.

Mark Levine: In this case, it was an Assembly member named Adriano Espaillat who's now obviously a prominent congressmember and a very close friend. But the truth is, I never would have been a city council member. There's no way I would have won in 2013 if I hadn't done the work of running those two elections where I learned so much, I grew so much.

Mark Levine: I built relationships, thousands of relationships, and that then prepared me to run a very strong race when it mattered in 2013. And so when I talk to young candidates and I say run hard, but know that if you don't win you could still advance your career and doors will open for you. And that certainly was the case for me.

Belinda French: Such great guidance.

Nick Benson: Yeah. And that was something I was going to ask. Sometimes you learn more from losing than from winning and it sounds like that was the case for you and it did position you for the success that you've had since. Was there a particular lesson that you learned or something you did differently in future campaigns? Or the way you approached your work based on that experience?

Mark Levine: Oh gosh. I learned so much from each of those elections. And in my election sense, for sure, I think at the end of the day, it's that people move people and that, you know, mail's an important part of campaigning communications if you're able to afford TV, that is too. But when a neighbor tells the person who lives next door to them that there's this candidate that they really believe in and that they should vote for, it changes everything, and when the candidate themselves shows up at that voter's door, that's even more impactful.

Mark Levine: And I've really tried to build that in my later campaigns, build a campaign where neighbors are talking to neighbors, where parents at schools are talking to other parents at that school, where people who walk their dogs together in the parks are talking to each other. And it's the most impactful way to to build excitement and momentum in the campaign.

Mark Levine: And I learned that, too, through my losses for sure.

Nick Benson: Yeah. I've been a field organizer and field director on some political campaigns. And it is so important that a lot of people overlook it. But, yeah, that the person to person contact and engagement means so much more. I had someone I worked with one time, she said that TV advertising is like a sponge. You can pour as much water on to it as you want, but at a certain point it can't absorb any more.

Nick Benson: And the people just can't listen to this stuff and it's less impactful. But those direct person to person conversations really do matter.

Mark Levine: Good analogy. I'm going to use that on the next podcast.

Belinda French: So we talked about you losing. I want to talk about that that win in 2013 right city council. You went on to serve four terms representing portions of Washington Heights with Harlem Upper West Side. After that initial excitement of winning were off. How did you feel taking on that role and those responsibilities?

Mark Levine: You know, there's a truism in the world of psychology that when an obsessive achieves the object of their obsession, they're always let down, you know, like a love interest you're pursuing. And then finally you, you know, you hook up and you're like, wait a minute, what was I what was I thinking?

Mark Levine: And definitely because it took me 12 years to get there, I had in my mind this thought that after all this, am I going to get there and feel like I what was I thinking? I have to tell you that I never experienced that. Being in the city council was everything I hoped it would be and more. I just I loved it. I've actually liked my current job even better, which maybe we'll talk about, but I, I just felt for me, it was, it was a dream come true to be able to put my passion for the future of the city, for the community building, for the operation of government into action.

Mark Levine: There's just so much opportunity as a city council member I wasn't bored for one day of those eight years, and I also grew and learned so much because it's a big, complicated city and I'm still learning. But it was I really cherish those years where I got to represent the seventh council district in the City Council.

Nick Benson: And so one of the really big challenges that you face in the latter part of your time on the council is when the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, you were in the unique position serving as the chair of the City Council's Health Committee. I'm sure throughout your time in that position you dealt with a lot of complex issues, but it had to be dwarfed by what came your way during the pandemic.

Nick Benson: I'm just curious, was there a moment when you saw this coming? We heard about it in China first, and then it started to come to the United States. Was there a moment when this really sank into you, how serious this was going to be and the impact it had on our city? And then what was something you were really proud of in your own response efforts?

Nick Benson: Because I know people called you the Dr. Fauci of New York City, and you were very outspoken in advocating for people staying safe.

Mark Levine: You know, I became chair of the health committee in January of 2018, so well before the start of the pandemic. And you know, when you become the chair of a committee, you sit down with the committee staff and they said, “Don't worry, Mr. Chair, the worst crisis you face, your face is going to be an outbreak of Legionnaires disease.”

Mark Levine: Boy, were they wrong. And boy, boy, boy did I not expect what was coming, but because I did have over a year as the Health Committee chair before the storm hit, I was able to build some relationships of trust within the public health community, within the city health department people who I believed in, who I think had enough confidence in me to speak plainly.

Mark Levine: And so, when they started to become alarmed, I started to hear it immediately. And I started to have conversations there was a real shift the first week of March where the people who I believed in and trusted were becoming increasingly alarmed and I remember by the time I walked into a city council hearing on I think it was March 13th in the parks committee, something unrelated to COVID by that point, it was all I could think about.

Mark Levine: And, you know, in retrospect, I think there was a woman front row was coughing throughout the hearing. You know, we didn't think that that was the kind of thing you had to shut down at that point. But in retrospect, I think there might have been some COVID spread at that hearing.

Mark Levine: You know, what am I proud of? I think that that I was able to play a role of channeling the wisdom of the people on the front lines, public health people, public health professionals, frontline doctors and nurses, frontline EMS workers, who I think started to see that I had a platform and saw me as a way to get messages out that otherwise were not being heard.

Mark Levine: And you know what? We're all contemplating now, the demise of Twitter because of you and Elon Musk's antics. But for me, Twitter was a way to get that information out, information I was getting from emergency rooms, from public health labs, from ambulance drivers. And it had to be done quickly. These are messages that had to be immediately put out because we needed people to change their behavior, not in the month, not of the week, but today.

Mark Levine: And it's kind of a simple thing in retrospect just to talk to smart people and echo what they say. But because I had a title as chair of the health committee and I had a platform, I was able to put those relationships and that knowledge to use. And I'm really grateful I had a role to play during that time of crisis.

Nick Benson: And I think your commitment to following the science and the fact that you were so outspoken, it really made a difference. So, I just want to say thanks for everything you did during that time.

Mark Levine: I appreciate you saying that.

Belinda French: Before we leave your time on the council, aside from COVID or the COVID response, is there any other difficult challenges that you can recall that occurred during that time, how you faced it, what you learned from it.

Mark Levine: During the period of the pandemic?

Belinda French: Or even aside from that, just your time on city council.

Mark Levine: We actually had a number of public health crisis in my city council district while I was in the council of the Ebola case in 2014 was in West Harlem. The patient was a doctor who had been in West Africa who rose to prominence, but I'll never forget leaving City Hall one afternoon and I got a call from a City Hall official telling me there was an Ebola case in my district.

Mark Levine: I couldn't believe it. I thought it might be a prank or something and I became the only thing I worked on for the better part of a week. I don't know if you remember the hysteria in the city, in the district, in the block, in the neighborhood about whether Ebola would spread. This doctor ended up I mean, he's one of my personal heroes.

Mark Levine: His name is Dr. Craig Spencer ended up becoming one of the most important voices during COVID because he was an emergency room doctor at New York Presbyterian in Washington Heights. So, he was front line there during the entire really the first two years of the pandemic. And so, we're good friends that we connected actually after the Ebola incident.

Mark Levine: So there was also one of one of the worst Legionnaires outbreaks. I joked about what I was told when I took the job, but ended up being in Hamilton Heights as well, centered around a building on 150 fifth in Saint Nick and there were some fatalities. I was there. So you know, when you're in the city council you're kind of an emergency responder and you know we had some horrible fires in my district and that's on the council member probably more than any other elected official to be there to help the families who are homeless to help them get emergency accommodation to help them replace their clothing which might be lost.

Mark Levine: To do the long work of getting them back in the building and it's one of the reasons why it's a 24 seven job because it's really more than any other elected official. The council member needs to be on the ground because they have ties into all the city agencies, to the FDNY, to the connections to the Red Cross. And I had a

number of incidents like that where people were turning to me, and I had to be there on the ground.

Mark Levine: I love that about the job but it's very hard to get balance in this profession. And that's one of the reasons because you just never know when the next crisis will hit.

Nick Benson: So you are winding down your first year as Manhattan borough president. Sure, it's a much different role than just representing, you know, one council district, you have the entire borough. What have you enjoyed the most about this first year in this position and what are you looking forward to for 2023?

Mark Levine: It's been an intense year for Manhattan in New York City. And therefore, in an intense year for me in my role. It seems like kind of a disproportionate number of the crises impacting the city and the country have been happening in Manhattan. I've just loved the job and I really did enjoy my time in the council as I was saying.

Mark Levine: And I miss a lot about it. I sorely missed a lot of friends in the council but it's great to be totally independent. You're essentially an independent executive and in the role of borough president, you have your own resources, you have your own budget, you have your own executive functions. And it's a job that you need to define and you get to define and you get to do it the way you want to do it.

Mark Levine: There's just fewer constraints than most other jobs in government and I've loved that. I've continued to work on public health even in my current role. The day I took office, January 1st was the peak of the Omicron Wave.

Nick Benson: That's right.

Mark Levine: And when I came in, we're sitting in one Central Street right now. When I came into one central street, it was like a moonscape because nobody was coming into the office on New Year's Day of the peak of the Omicron stage, as I'm sure you all experienced the same thing. And there was a sense that we kind of had to give the city a little bit of confidence at that point.

Mark Levine: Omicron, we kind of hit the apex of Omicron, and it started to decline about a week or two after that. But then there's been multiple other crises. We've had some horrific murders, shootings. We had Michelle Go being pushed off a subway platform. It felt like for a while I was at the vigil or a funeral multiple times a week, and that also has defined the job.

Mark Levine: But Manhattan is a very big borough. It's kind of like 100 small towns and traveling the borough and getting to know the local players and the leaders has been just incredibly fulfilling, endlessly exciting and you never stop learning about this borough and about the different communities. And that's also made it really a wonderful and exciting year.

Mark Levine: But also intense, no less intense than the city council for the reasons that I mentioned.

Nick Benson: So what's ahead for 2023 for you?

Mark Levine: I am really worried about the affordable housing crisis in Manhattan, and in New York City, Manhattan particular is in danger of becoming a place where if you're not a millionaire, you're not going to be able to afford to rent or buy here. The market rate rent is now averaging over \$5,000 a month in Manhattan or that we have the average market rate rent for an apartment, a rental apartment in Manhattan, the average sale price for an apartment in Manhattan I think is at \$1.2 or \$1.3 million.

Mark Levine: This is out of reach, not just of a low-income New Yorker, but we're in danger of really being out of reach of a middle-class New Yorker at these prices. So, we're going to make creating more housing and particularly affordable housing in Manhattan a major focus in 2023. It's something that my office actually has I think the ability to impact because we have such a role in the land use process so many appointments and all the relative relevant bodies ranging from community boards to the city planning commission.

Mark Levine: So stay tuned folks. Our office is going to be extremely active on expanding the production of housing and affordable housing in the world of Manhattan in 2023.

Belinda French: Over the past few months, your office has partnered with DCAS on a donation drive for asylum seekers arriving to New York. Can you tell us about how that's been going and also just what do you think it says about New Yorkers that so many have come to the aid of these asylum seekers?

Mark Levine: You know, I am really proud of how New Yorkers have reacted to the arrival of what I think is approaching 30,000 asylum seekers and the contrast to how Governor Abbott and Governor Distances have used human beings as political pawns is so stark and New York has done what we've always done that our best moments embraced these migrants and it's really the way regular New Yorkers have reacted that's most inspiring the flood of donations.

Mark Levine: It's been so great to partner with DCAS on this. Commissioner Pinnock has been wonderful to partner with on this and thanks to what you guys have made possible, our office here in One Centre Street has been a massive collection site for donations and we have just had almost more than we can manage contributed good problem to have, by the way, but we've had a flood of individual New Yorkers coming in with clothing and baby care products and personal care items.

Mark Levine: And also, school groups and church groups. And, we've needed the DCAS partnership just to make it work inside of this building with all of what that means for the facility and moving things and equipment, we've needed to move stuff and the

vehicles we've need needed to get it to its ultimate destination. We've needed DCAS as a partner.

Mark Levine: You guys have been great. I'm proud of New Yorkers and very proud of our partnership with your agency.

Nick Benson: As we wind down our interview, we want to ask you a few lighthearted questions. So I know, like me, you're clearly a political junkie. You probably love history. So, who is your favorite historical political figure and why?

Mark Levine: There are so many. But I'm going to I'm going to keep this one within the borough president family. And I'm going to go for Constance Baker Motley who was a trendsetter in so many ways. She was the first woman of color to serve as Manhattan Borough President, she was the first African American woman to serve as a state senator from Manhattan.

Mark Levine: But she really is historically renowned for being the first African American woman to be a federal judge and a figure that I wish more New Yorkers knew about. But part of the incredible panoply of figures who have served in the role of Manhattan Borough President ranging from Percy Sutton, whose granddaughter, by the way, Keisha James is my deputy borough president now. Figures like David Dinkins obviously went on to be mayor.

Mark Levine: Incredible figures like Ruth Messinger and my wonderful immediate predecessor, Gale Brewer, who's also not a historic figure, but an amazing leader. So, I feel a lot of pressure to perform considering the incredible line of predecessors I have.

Nick Benson: That's great. That's great. You've given me some homework now.

Mark Levine: All right!

Nick Benson: I have to study a little bit now!

Belinda French: So, I know as borough president, you obviously have a very hectic schedule. But what do you like to do outside of work? Just to relax and decompress?

Mark Levine: Well, I'm a geek. I love I love geek-dom. I have I'm obsessed with the Game of Thrones books. So, I've read all five of the books, each one of which is like a thousand pages I've read the whole series three times and probably will start the fourth reread soon. Of course, I love the TV shows as well.

Mark Levine: Loved House of the Dragon, I highly recommend it to your listeners. I'm also a language geek. I am obsessed with languages. You have some people like do the crossword puzzle to relax. I'll sit and like do flashcards of whatever language I'm studying that day.

Belinda French: That's awesome.

Mark Levine: It takes me to another world.

Mark Levine: You need to have something you can do that takes you from thinking about, I don't know, whatever piece of legislation you're crafting or whatever budget item you're fighting about. And these are things that kind of take me to another world. And so, I'm grateful when I have time for them, which is never as much as I would like.

Mark Levine: But balance is always elusive in this career, sadly. But I do love those moments when I can travel to another world.

Nick Benson: So, one other question I wanted to ask you. You mentioned TV a little bit, but if you were to pull out your phone and open your favorite music app, what would be on there? What do you listen to it? What do you enjoy?

Mark Levine: I have very eclectic taste in music. I happen to love salsa music. And if any of you like your listeners know, kind of classic salsa, there's a guy named Rey Ruiz who I just adore. He's got a classic album called *Mi Media Mitad*. So, if any of you want to now go on to Spotify, or your favorite music app, call up some Rey Ruiz, you're not going to be disappointed.

Nick Benson: I that would be a first for me. I'll have to list.

Belinda French: OK, I don't know whether you like to travel or even have the chance to travel much, but what is the place that you've traveled that is special to you or just made a lasting impression?

Mark Levine: Well, I just love traveling. Almost every trip I've taken has changed my life in some ways. That definitely shaped me. I lived in Spain when I was in college. I was a student in the physics department at the university of Seville, which is in the south of Spain. And so, it's very easy to get to Morocco from the south of Spain.

Mark Levine: It's just kind of a short ferry across the Straits of Gibraltar. And so, I went to Morocco a number of times and fell in love with the country, went down into the Sahara and did an overnight trip on camelback with the buddy and guide. And we don't have time on this podcast, but got separated from the guide and had, you know, what probably could be called a near-death experience, but lived to come back to be on this podcast, thank goodness, all these years later.

Belinda French: Thank goodness.

Mark Levine: But I love Morocco and hope to go back soon one day.

Nick Benson: I have really enjoyed our conversation today. I feel like I have learned a lot and it's been a real delight to talk to you, so we really appreciate it, Borough President Mark Levine, thanks for being with us.

Mark Levine: Thank you both. It's really been a wonderful conversation.

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