The following interview is with Joan Prittie, Executive Director of Project Safe. The interview took place on April 25th, 2018 at the Sloppy Floyd building in downtown Atlanta. Project Safe is a nonprofit in Athens, Georgia that works to end domestic violence through supportive services. Joan discusses her background, the genesis of Project Safe and how they've worked with Georgia Tech on a crisis intervention text line for teens and young adults.

So the following interview is being conducted as a part of Georgia Institute of Technology's Everyday Georgia Interview Project. Today is April 25th, 2018. The interview is taking place at the Sloppy Floyd building, which has proved to be quite challenging. The interviewer is Alison Valk. And if you could state your name?

Joan Prittie: Joan Prittie.

Alison Valk: Great. Um, thank you for participating in the project. Maybe you could just start out by just talking about your background? Maybe what brought you to Georgia, how you got started in your career, that kind of thing.

Joan Prittie: Sure. So I was raised in Louisville, Kentucky. And what brought me to Georgia actually was law school and a, a growing panic. Uh, I had sent my deposit, was all set to go to George Washington University, was going to do a dual degree, international studies, that had been my major undergraduate, and law, and I just began to have this growing sense of doom about how much I was needing to borrow after my assistantship and scholarships and how expensive it would be to live in Washington. And I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do, but I knew it was going to involve poor people and just was thinking that was not a good fit. And so I uh, started, uh, looking for alternatives and you know, if you plotted in terms of law school, good on one axis and cheap on the other, Georgia graphs very well. And so I came down here, sight unseen, and I fell in love with Athens and then I fell in love with my partner, and what 28 years later.

Alison Valk: Nice. So what are your interests and hobbies? Obviously, you know, you're very involved in this organization. Is there anything that you do sort of outside of, of work that sort of really enriches you?

Joan Prittie: Right. So it, it, it feels sometimes, like my interests and hobbies are Project Safe and intimate partner violence. But honestly, in a town like Athens, teaching can be a hobby, and I teach part time at the university. Mainly classes and fundraising and grant proposal writing, and I, I really enjoy doing that. I would teach for free, they have to pay me to grade. Um, but other than that I love travel. Um, we are headed very soon to the Galapagos Islands and Ecuador and then, later on this year, to South Africa. So I'm very good at unplugging from work and going to very interesting places. So we've been able to go around the world and I, uh, I love that. So long anticipated and planned for. Uh, we also, um, do a lot of dog rescue and the last, I would say eight, nine years we've been focusing mainly on pitbulls oh. And uh, so we have three now and just adore them and um, and are just, you know, like crazy stupid pitbull moms. Um, but
yeah, we love that. And I loved cheering on the Georgia Bulldogs. And then, you know, I have other interests that I, these are my deferred hobbies. I have visions of later on when I maybe am pulling back from career some, then. I love to cook. I love photography, I love being outside and in nature. And so those are the, you know, I've got a vision for a garden.

Alison Valk: Nature is so enriching. I have a vegetable garden and I find it's a form of therapy.

Joan Prittie: Absolutely oh, it's wonderful. And it just being out outside and we're, we're very fortunate in, in Athens to be able to live quite close to downtown but still have a nice size yard and lots of mature trees and that sort of thing. And, well I read an article and it talked about ecotherapy, and it took me a minute, but it's like, huh? Oh yeah, that's going outside. It's like we've really fancied it up, but it's basically, you know, if you spend time outside and look at green things and look at trees, you, your mood will improve. And it's like, yeah, it's kinda like what mom always said.

Alison Valk: Exactly. Georgia is such a great state for that too, so many hiking opportunities and things like that.

Joan Prittie: Well, I think that's one of the things I love, especially about Athens, is the proximity to the, you're an hour away from the tip of the mountains there and just an hour and a half from the big city and four from the ocean. So lots of variety. Easy to get to.

Alison Valk: Pleases everyone. So can you describe a significant person or event that influenced who you are today? And it can be a person, an event, a situation. Just anything you'd like to share with anyone.

Joan Prittie: I think it's, it's hard to pick a single person or a concise, a anecdote about influential people, but I think in terms of events and certainly in terms of my career, it was being asked as a very young attorney in the wake of the passage of Georgia's Family Violence Act, it was being asked by my boss to look into the situation of, of survivors of domestic violence imprisoned in Georgia for killing their abusive partners and, uh, to, to prepare clemency petitions for those individuals. And I was already doing post-conviction relief work representing indigent inmates in the state and I, I hadn't really thought about domestic violence. Uh, it came up from time to time. I represented men who had killed their wives or girlfriends, but I hadn't, I hadn't thought of it. It hasn't really affected my life in any meaningful way. That project became, over time, this almost second full time job in terms of a pro bono project and we worked on it for many years and it's what opened my eyes up to the issue. It's what led me ultimately to come than lead Project Safe and the work we've done there and ultimately the work on the, on the text line to deal with dating violence. But I think the, if you had asked me what are your, what are your issues that you're interested in, the top 20 of the top 50, dating violence, domestic violence would not have made the list. But once I got in there and I saw the need and I saw that
match between something I could do to help remedy and injustice, that was very inspiring and very exciting. And to be able to, when match of skills and need to come together, uh, I think that that's an incredible thing. And so that was certainly something that just opened wide all the doors and windows in terms of the direction of my career.

Alison Valk: The dominoes started falling.

Joan Prittie: Exactly.

Alison Valk: Sure, sure. Thank you. Well, can you describe how you initially became involved with Georgia Tech and the research? The sort of, how it, the synergy that's there.

Joan Prittie: Right. So I've, I've been at the helm of Project Safe since 1999, and our mission is, is working to end domestic violence in a variety of ways. And so we've been exploring and adding onto kind of the menu, I guess of services and programs that was initially on offer, and trying to find new things and always kind of on the lookout for what are the, what are the trends. And so in, in 2012, the CDC had published a report about dating violence, and in it a Georgia was a named number one in the country. And I just remember reading this, this article and the ranking was based on a incidence or prevalence as much as they could determine, because it's under-reported like everything else we deal with, but also in terms of lack of resources, addressing it, lack of any programs or services and that our laws and policies here are not designed with teens in mind. And that just got the conversation going with us at Project Safe and, and here we are in a college town, not just UGA, but other universities are located there plus all of the high schools around. And we realized that we weren't really hearing from very many young people what I would consider kind of the, the hot zone of say 14 to 24, that age range. And we don't ask people when they call the hotline how old they are, that sort of thing. But just, you know, and we weren't hearing and we kept thinking about how we could try to do that. And so we were working on getting into the schools more, but we were also thinking about ways that this age group communicates and it's texting rather than calling. And so we, we were thinking about, we need to create a path and texting makes sense. So we've started uh, our text line and initially it was copied effort, just our internal on call system where we take turns being responsible for after-hours emergencies, just on our cell phones. We started really just passing around a cell phone and we utilized our interns. We gave them special training, uh, to respond to texts. And, and initially it was okay. We weren't getting very many texts, and it was okay. As the text lines started to take off though and get utilized more, we ran into both the, uh, just inconvenience of the hand off, but also the unevenness of the distribution of the texts, that one person wouldn't get very many in her week, and then the next intern would have it the week we had a presentation at a high school or something and would just be drowning. So one of our former board members, who at the time was on our board of directors, is Margaret Dahl and she, uh, is there at Georgia Tech and she was the one who pointed us to the Institute for People and Technology and thought that
there could be some sort of software solution to what we were dealing with. And so through her, I met Jeremy and we began talking and thinking about what could be done and he's the one that created the SafeLine software, the system that we use. And so the beauty of it is that it allows our interns to log in from any of their own mobile device and then receive texts that are distributed by the server. And when they received the text, it's assigned a case number so they don't actually see the name or the telephone number of individual. So it's anonymous in that way too. As we know all young people tend to do, they give their passwords to their roommate or their boyfriend or girlfriend or they, you know, share phones. And we don't want them to be able to see identifying information from someone else. And so it has just made it convenient, it's been scalable, it's allowed us to a process just a greater number of texts. It also allows our manager, so we have um, a couple of part time folks who are on staff who schedule the text line and also monitor it for quality control. They can hop into, to a text conversation if it's getting intense or complicated.

Alison Valk: There's a channel for intervention there.

Joan Prittie: Absolutely and, and so it just gives us a lot of tools to deal with the project. And so we launched December of 2012. I wish I could remember exactly when we got started with Georgia Tech. It was a couple of years in, so I feel like it was maybe 2015? '14 or '15. Uh, and uh, we then were able to by about a year ago about March of 2017, we were able to go statewide with the text line and so offer it across the state, advertise it that way and continue to offer it as a, as a resource.

Alison Valk: Very nice. I really liked the feature when I was reading about it where not one, any one person doesn't get overburdened. That's kind of, you know, it would feel like that would be very important.

Joan Prittie: Like a lot of things we do at Project Safe, we're trying to approach our issue from a lot of different ways, a lot of different perspectives and so there's certainly the service component of providing the outlet for, particularly a teen or a young person, to be able to confidentially ask questions about their relationship and figure stuff out, but what we're also doing with our interns who sign up for this is giving them a chance to have an even deeper experience as an intern, to act as this really smart, very well trained big brother or big sister.

Alison Valk: That makes sense.

Joan Prittie: Looking out for someone, it also gives them the practical experience, the practice. Most of them are social work majors, not all of them, of what it's like to be on call, of what it's like to not be at your designated place of work, but still have work to do. If there, so that they said that they have those experiences too, of being the helpful person, being the sounding board or the provider of that information. And so the text line allows that to happen in a way that's um, uh manageable. And it has an auto response initially that says, thanks for contacting us, a volunteer that will be with you shortly. So they get an
immediate response that also indicates that a live person is going to be helping you in, in just a second. And that way of the students in class, they can slip out real quick and just say, Hey, I'm in class, I'll be done in 45 minutes and then I'll text you back, or so that they don't have to drop everything they're doing. They carry out their lives, but it just is the perfect marriage of technology, but still a human touch.

Alison Valk: I'd imagine it's a really great growth experience for the people participate.

Joan Prittie: Exactly. And you know, not all the students like it, they don't always like that aspect of being on call. And we say, well then this is a good learning opportunity for you, that you realize that maybe that's not the sort of job you will want to have in the future, but so many of social work or health or law enforcement or any kinds of those things require it. So this is a safe place to do it.

Alison Valk: So how have your interactions with these technologies or research initiatives affected your work or personal life? Or has it sort of made you think about, I guess other issues on a larger scale?

Joan Prittie: I think one aspect, and it's not so much technology, I'll move to that, but certainly that we've always known is how important connection and relationships are. And that, um, when we, when we run up against something that's hard or when we're faced with a, a barrier or a challenge, if we only try to think about it ourselves, whether that's individually or in a closed group as an organization with what we know how to do, we're going to be limited in what we can do.

Alison Valk: Oh, very true.

Joan Prittie: And so in this specific instance, it was, it was about finding a technology solution that for someone like Jeremy is not hard, but for someone like us is totally out of bounds for what we can do, right. Um, and so it's that connection, and that came through Margaret, our board member, but that connection, that sort of the openness to say were puzzling over this and when we don't know how to do it and who knows someone maybe who can. And I think that, that I think about that I'm on lots of levels in lots of ways. I certainly think of it from a, um, as a Christian, from a religious standpoint, that if I think about what I have to do rather than thinking about, um, my, my faith and belief in God, that, that again, that's limiting for me. If I think of it as my responsibility. When we think about, again, individually, organizationally, as a single community, you have to be open to say, I don't know how to do this, but I bet somebody does.

Alison Valk: That is so important. I think that's just, I think it's so important not to work, whatever you're in, in silos and...

Joan Prittie: Right, right, and to be open that it's not a failing to say I've identified something that I don't know how to fix.
Alison Valk: The importance of collaboration.

Joan Prittie: Exactly. And, and I think that's been one of the rewarding things where, I think for us we're like, oh this is so cool. But I think for the students that helped Jeremy create this and for, for him too, he has said that it's been very gratifying for him to think of the very real and personal ways, and as a father of daughters particularly, although we hear from guys to on the text line, and I think that's maybe reduced some of the stigma that a, that a boy would have with questions about his own relationship and whether he's being treated well or not. I think the, um, the quality of the text line and that it's not so obvious right away opens that door.

Alison Valk: So is there any other ways you envision technology might benefit or impact your work or everyday life in general in the future?

Joan Prittie: Well, I imagine so, I just don't know what. I don't know quite what, what it will be exactly, but I’m sure that there will be. It's interesting and I'm going on a tangent now, but I'm, I'm slated to teach my classes at the University of Georgia online next year for the first time, and in fact I'm working on creating my fundraising class online, and I'm really struggling with it because I feel like a lot of the aspects about teaching that I really enjoy are the very personal interactions with the students that I have in class. That I'm wondering how I might have them online. And so I'm trying to do it with an open heart, but I'm also sort of lamenting that it's not gonna be as good.

Alison Valk: It does, it takes a real important piece out of it. I mean, yeah.

Joan Prittie: And so it's interesting that, that I think like many of us, I have sort of that love-hate relationship with a lot of aspects of technology, that it certainly makes our lives better and easier in many ways, uh, and then in other ways, perhaps a little, a little less. So we've certainly seen in our movement, it's easy for us to focus on the ways that technology has made it easier for abusers to harm their victims. Using technology to stalk, to monitor, intimidate people, has just, we can't keep up with all of the ways that people can be terrorized, through technology and, and that is very frightening. And, and so I think for a lot of us in this movement, that kind of tempers with how we view technology.

Alison Valk: That's a good point.

Joan Prittie: I'm not sure we found as many ways to use it the other way, you know, to play offense on our team with it. I'm not sure we've opened up as many doors with that quite as um, as abusers have figured out how to use it to, to harm their, their victims. But I think we just keep on exploring and I think the, we're so fortunate, Project Safe, to be in a university town even though we did come over to Atlanta to work with Georgia Tech for this project. But I think the more too that we can inspire and encourage students who are pursuing careers in technologies to understand the ways that it can help people beyond just "ooh
this is cool", this is a thing that, that does something more efficiently. That, that
if we can encourage people to get involved, to join the boards of organizations
that are working on issues that they care about, to volunteer for those
organizations and then they can be the one that has the, the light bulb over
their head about "I bet I know a way that we could make this work better for
you" or um, I think that would be a wonderful way then to, to discover the
things we can't imagine quite yet.

Alison Valk: Right, right. Thank you. So I guess just to sort of wrap up and conclude, are
there any further experiences or anything you'd like to share related to this
project? Something that's, I guess, made an impact on you or anything that
stands out that you think is worth sharing?

Joan Prittie: I feel like we're still in the early phase, even though we've been doing this now
for about five years, because it took us awhile to, to create the design and then
to find Georgia Tech and then to, to launch. And so I feel like we're really at the
kind of the jumping off place now, where we're beginning to get more
recognition across the state. We're beginning to have more organizations trust
that this is a real thing and share the number with young people when they
encounter. And so I'm very excited for what's coming up next, over the next two
years to see it getting utilized even more. And I'm excited for the scalability
possibilities that we have that, that we might not, who knows, maybe in my
teaching I will fall in love with online teaching and learning and maybe we will
start partnering and recruiting interns from Georgia Tech or from Georgia
Southern or other places and train them and have them be answering and, and
make it more regionalized or localized even. Who knows? Uh, so I think there's
lots of cool things on the horizon and I'm excited to keep moving forward. I
hope Jeremy's not going anywhere and I hope we'll, we'll deepen our
relationship with other folks at IPaT.

Alison Valk: Alright, well thank you very much Joan.

Joan Prittie: Thank you.