

The Maine Trust Project

“We need people in our lives with whom we can be as open as possible. To have real conversations with people may seem like such a simple, obvious suggestion, but it involves courage and risk,” wrote 18th-century Irish poet, singer and songwriter Thomas Moore.

In this mistrust-filled world full of political contention and both fake and devastating news, mustering such courage is challenging. Finding common ground and engaging in civil conversations about important issues facing our communities, our state, our country and our world can seem elusive, if not sadly impossible.

This concerning state of affairs prompted Pine Tree Watch to examine the concept of trust. And thus, we’re launching a new series called “The Maine Trust Project.” Each month, we’ll sit down with a Maine resident to discuss this precious commodity. We’ll see which people and institutions Mainers trust and how the concept of trust drives their thought processes and actions.

<https://pinetreewatch.org/the-maine-trust-project-joe-black-of-bath/>

With a zest for life and desire to connect with his community, Joe Black found that dreams do come true

By Stephanie Bouchard

Get to know Joe Black

Age: 42

Hometown: Bath

Religious affiliation: I do not have a religious affiliation, but I believe faith is beautiful. I think when somebody finds faith, it’s beautiful. When people find faith in whatever they find faith in, the heart opens up and they start to see things more openly. But when they bring religion into it, they completely ruin it and they stick it in people’s faces and everything that was beautiful about it goes away.

Political affiliation: None.

How he describes himself: Simple. I don’t require a whole lot. I’m not money driven. I believe in living in moments. I think that’s the key to happiness because you’re not going to be happy all the time. No way, shape or form. But if you live in moments, you can have bad moments and decide in the next moment to change it over. Plus, time runs differently when you live in moments. If you’re looking forward constantly to something a week, a month, even a year away, it’s just going to fly right by and you’re going to miss out on so much. Like I just saw a fish jumping out of the river. If I was thinking about something happening next week or if I was on my cell phone, I would have missed that.

How he defines trust: Giving everyone a chance to shine.

Joe Black is a man living his dream. With a light in his eyes, a quick smile and a sense of humor that invites you in, he stocks shelves and engages customers at Renys department store on Front Street in Bath. He's been doing his dream job for more than 20 years and says it's the perfect job for him.

"I'm a firm believer that there are different kinds of dreams," he said. "Some people want to be rock stars. Some people ... want to be president. These are big, huge dreams – and big, huge dreams are awesome – but there's nothing wrong with little dreams."

Black was introduced to his future in the late 1970s and 1980s at Grand City on Maine Street in Brunswick. For decades, the now-closed Grand City was a Midcoast icon, where you could find everything from penny candy to recliners and get a homestyle meal at the in-store restaurant. The atmosphere was relaxed and the staff friendly – many knew their customers by name.

"I remember seeing the employees and thinking about how cool you had to be to actually work there," he said.

What captivated Joe then and what still thrills him is how working in such a store could connect him to his community. "I see the community every day," he said. He sees himself as a kind of incarnation of Fred Rogers – a TV personality he considers a personal hero.

And like Mr. Rogers, he makes it his mission to not just help customers find what they're looking for but also to lend an ear to those who need someone to listen or offer encouragement – his Message of Awesomeness – that he posts every day on his Facebook profile.

All this results in a palpable connection to his community. Walking around town, he is greeted by people from all directions. "Hey! How's it going?" he yells across Bath's waterfront park to two women who've just hollered 'good mornings' to him. "Day off?" he calls across the sloping grass. "Loving it? Awesome! I'm doing fantastic! Sunshine, blue skies and flip-flops."

Q&A:

Pine Tree Watch: Who meets your definition of trust?

Joe: I start everybody off with a clean slate no matter what. Even someone walking by.

PTW: How about on a non-personal level? Do you trust local and national leaders?

Joe: I know some of the people in local politics and even state politics. It's easier to trust local politicians because they are the community and they love and care about the community. Take your city council members. They are residents of the town. Some of them work in town. They know people in town. They have an emotional investment in it. So, it's really easy to trust them because they have your wants, needs, etc., in mind. And you can go to the meetings and listen to them and actually walk up to them and talk to them.

As far as national politics goes, I try to stay out of it because, OK, personal belief: We really play no part in national politics as individuals. We really have no say. I don't trust a system that uses its people for their own means. Anyone who will allow someone to go hungry, to suffer – I have no trust for them. Those are people I haven't met, but I don't trust their system.

PTW: What breaks trust for you?

Joe: On a personal level, it's pretty much the classic stab-me-in-the-back kind of thing. And when people in a position where they're supposed to be helping people knowingly hurt them instead.

PTW: Can broken trust be healed?

Joe: Yeah, it can, but it would take a lot. Trust is sacred. Once my trust is broken, it's hard to get it back. I can't help it. I will totally forgive the person – no matter what, I will forgive the person – but it's always going to be there. I'm not going to forget it because I also know that they're capable of doing it again.

PTW: Has your definition of trust changed over the years?

Joe: Yes. There used to be a lot more communication. I blame cell phones. I really do. People use them to ignore others. They'll see somebody coming and they'll get on their phones so they won't have to talk to them. I think, culturally, as soon as technology really took over, that really pushed back trust. Because people don't have community. They don't have to be face to face. It really makes a difference – looking each other in the eye.

PTW: What worries you?

Joe: People suffering. Animals suffering.

PTW: What inspires you?

Joe: People! So many people inspire me with so many things. And just everyday things, too. You can find inspiration in everything. Good and bad. Because if there was something bad that happens, you can be inspired to help people so that it doesn't happen again.