

## Agency For Change Podcast : Sarita Reddy, Executive Director at Adeo

### **Announcer**

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change. And these are the people who show us how.

### **Lyn Wineman**

Hi there, this is Lyn Wineman from KidGlov and welcome to the Agency for Change podcast. Our guest today, Sarita Reddy PhD, has dedicated her professional career to helping individuals with disabilities. She is currently the executive director at Adeo, a multifaceted organization that supports people with disabilities, helping them lead connected interdependent lives. The services at Adeo include affordable and accessible housing, home health care, and outpatient physical therapy, as well as highly individualized residential services. For those with brain injuries, I know that the entire Adeo team takes pride in the way they change the world by providing services tailored to meet the needs of each individual they serve. Thank you for being with us today. And first I'd like to just start by having you tell me more about the work you're doing with Adeo.

### **Sarita Reddy**

As you pointed out, I'm here as the executive director. I've had this job for six years, but the organization itself has been here for more than four decades. And the entire impetus that started the organization was to ensure that people with disabilities didn't have to be shut away in nursing homes or state hospitals, which happened back then. And the question that our founder asked was, "What does a person with disabilities need in order to stay a part of the community?" Obviously the first thing they need is housing. They need a place to stay, and once you have that, then you also need some services. If you're a person with a significant disability, you might also need services just to get up and meet your day. They came up with this brilliant idea of marrying affordable, accessible housing with home health services. And then as time went on again, every time, the question was, "What does a person with disabilities need in our community?"

Physical therapy was a need for people with disabilities because not every organization knows how to treat people with disabilities. I don't care whether it's the medical profession or therapeutic services or whatever. And so, we've got a physical therapy clinic and attached to it, a warm water pool. So we can provide aquatic therapy, which is really, really helpful for folks with disabilities. And it's a heated pool, so even better. And then we, about 15 years ago, developed residential services for people with brain injuries and that's our most intensive set of services in the sense that it provides 24-7 support for people and they live together. We provide everything from housing to meals, to transportation, and then all of the care coordination needed for them to navigate life. So those are our four services.

Most recently, we stepped out into a different kind of space. And this is Adeo Fitness, which is a place for people with disabilities, alongside people without disabilities, to work on maintaining their health and well-being through exercise. We ran a pilot program a couple of years ago, funded by the Pinnacle Foundation, just to see what people with disabilities really benefit from regarding the kind of workout situations that we have access to, like personal training classes, that kind of thing. And we were going to do 10 people in the pilot program, but ended up doing 12 because word spread and people wanted to join it. And they just showed, over the course of a year, such amazing strides, in their physical, emotional, as well as mental health, that we thought we've got to do this. We now have a gym that is open for people with and without disabilities to come in and work out.

## **Lyn Wineman**

Serena, I love hearing your story and I love hearing the story of how your organization has grown to fill your mission and serve your audience. I also know that you are very passionate about what you do and I'm interested in what inspired you to care about the disabled in our community and the challenges that they face.

## **Sarita Reddy**

There's a personal answer. And then there's a professional answer as well. On the personal level, I feel like I'm paying it forward. I have two sisters. My youngest sister has an intellectual disability and she is now supported by others, after years of living at home and with my parents basically taking care of her. They have both passed away. And while my other sister and I are not living in India, my youngest sister lives in India.

We had to find a place that she could be supported to live her life. And she's supported by an amazing organization in India called Friends of Camp Hill India. I cannot tell you enough about what it means to me and to the rest of my family to know that Sunni, my, our youngest sister is well supported. She is cared for. She is loved. She is safe, she's healthy. She is, you know, she just has a really good life. And it makes sense to me to give other families the same level of confidence and the peace of mind that my family and I are afforded. So that's a very personal kind of an answer on the professional level.

I will tell you that I just feel very, very fortunate. I'm in a very unique position. In addition to my sister, I have always had disability as a part of my life. My grandmother was deaf. I didn't even know she was deaf. I just figured we communicated rather differently. That's all I knew. And then my sister, and now my son, my first-born child, has cerebral palsy. And so, I'm the mother of a child with a disability and have had to navigate that world alongside my son. And so, I was a family member first. I became an advocate, passionate advocate, for other parents who had children with disabilities and then moved over into the service provider world.

I feel like I'm in this very unique position of straddling two worlds. And so I have credibility with both groups. I can talk to families because I'm a family member and I know where they're coming from, but I can also talk to people in the provider world because I know the challenges there. Before I joined the provider world I didn't know how hard this work was. It's great. It's great work, but it's hard work. And so now I know the challenges of both sides. It would be almost criminal if I didn't use that.

## **Lyn Wineman**

Sarita, I just always feel the energy from you. And I think it probably makes sense now that I know your personal passion and your professional interest and opportunity for them to have come together. And I kind of wish everybody could experience that. That's got to make your work very satisfying. Now, another question for you. Generally, changemakers are thought of as people or organizations who are working together to make change for the greater good. How does that concept figure into the work you're doing for Adeo?

## **Sarita Reddy**

I have a couple of thoughts on that. The most obvious way in which we work for the greater good is by ensuring that people with disabilities have a safe home and the services they need. Just basic needs, because in the absence of these basic services, what you end up seeing is some real trauma, not only for the person with the disability, but also for the family members. Because you end up having families break apart relationships over the trauma of having a significant disability to deal with, or sometimes people have to give up their jobs and that kind of thing to become full-time caregivers, because there are no services, which means they go from being a taxpayer to a recipient of services. So, there's all kinds of impact that happens in the absence of good services for people with disabilities.

So that's just the most obvious way, because when a person has access to great services, family members and friends can be just that, you know, they can be family members and friends. And all of the, I don't even know how to say this, but the service provision is done by other people so you get to be who you are, you get to hold onto those relationships. But more importantly, I think that what we do is support people to be an integral part of their community. It's more than just the basic services.

They not only have access to all the resources of the community, providing all that we take for granted. But people with disabilities can also have the opportunity to contribute to the community, you know, share their gifts and talents with others in a way that wouldn't be possible if they were shut away in a nursing home or at home being supported by an exhausted family member who, all they can do is meet the basic needs, and there's nothing left over for some of this other work.

I think one of the things that we do a great job at, and the way we impact our community, is ensuring that the people we see, and saw, strengthen the fabric of the community by their very active presence and participation. If you look at the people we serve, you know...they vote, they volunteer, they participate on community boards, they are friends, teachers, advocates for people in their lives. They take on all the roles that you and I take for granted. And so, I think that's actually one of the ways that we, the most important way I think, that we make a difference.

## **Lyn Wineman**

That is fantastic, and it warms my heart. Now, I've had the opportunity to learn about the great work that you are doing firsthand when we did the brand advancement for Adeo. What is next for you and the organization?

## **Sarita Reddy**

You know, you've often said that we don't ever stop. I think that's true today. So, a couple of things that are happening right now. We just received a grant from the Weld Trust to expand our residential program for adults with brain injuries. Construction is on hold because of the coronavirus crisis, but we hope to be able to complete it by the end of next year. And there's a huge need for these services in northern Colorado. We're the only organization that provides them in this area. We will continue to look for opportunities to expand our impact in this particular area.

And then another space where we're stepping out, as I said, is creating an inclusive gym where people with and without disabilities can exercise side by side. We're fortunate, very fortunate, to have Kristin Mather as our fitness director. She has both the skills and the passion to lead this effort. She's been able to help so many people at all levels of ability and at various stages of their fitness journeys, from committed fitness nuts to people just starting out to achieve their goals. And I can speak to this personally because I'm a client of hers. I went from being a committed couch potato three years ago, to being someone who's maintained a fairly rigorous fitness regimen at home by myself while I have isolated during these last several months. And she's the person who really did help so many of the people we serve realize enormous gains through their participation in the pilot program. I feel very comfortable that we are filling a need, a niche, that is and has yet to be filled in the Greeley area.

## **Lyn Wineman**

You know, I think I need to give Kristin a call and I'm very serious about that. During the pandemic, maybe we could do this over Zoom.

## **Sarita Reddy**

I'm telling you what, both of my kids who live on the East coast have visited with her and consulted with her.

## **Lyn Wineman**

I'm going to check that out when we're done here. Sarita, what are the biggest challenges you face in your work with Adeo, but also as someone who leads change?

## **Sarita Reddy**

Adeo, as you know, is a nonprofit organization, and we're also in the space of healthcare, which is a dynamic changing environment in the best of times. Like everybody else, I think limited resources are always a challenge for us. You know, there's so much that we feel like we could do, we would do, if we had all the resources in the world. That's a very boring answer, but that's a real answer.

But then the other thing in terms of making change, we have been growing and evolving and changing, and we are an organization with a long history. And for some people, it sometimes feels uncomfortable and risky and even disrespectful to contemplate changing anything. And so that's a huge challenge that anyone who's trying to make change feels. But I honestly believe that any organization that does not embrace change and does not look to evolve will eventually die. You know, you can't stay relevant if you stay the same, regardless of what's going on around you. We're committed to making the change.

## **Lyn Wineman**

I've always heard the saying that you're either green and growing or you're ripe and rotting, right? And I think we always have to be on the lookout. And I know you in particular embrace making those changes.

Sarita, there are a lot of cynics in the world and they aren't wrong to say that you can never solve all the problems. Why do you choose to do this work? And can we ever get ahead of the challenges facing the disabled community?

## **Sarita Reddy**

Hmm. Can we ever get ahead of the challenges facing the disabled community? I honestly don't know. I don't even want to think about it because what's the point, the fight is a good fight and we're going to fight it. And as far as people who disagree, when they say we can't do it, or if they just don't see the point, I'm not someone who's going to allow people who don't want to be a part of the solution discourage me. You know, I'm a firm believer in always starting with the community of the willing and then building out from there. As far as disagreement, the end result is to come up with a stronger plan for moving forward. I'm all for it.

## **Lyn Wineman**

Fantastic! In the world today, with all the changes, leaders are coming forward in different ways to pave the way. I know you're a leader who's creating positive change for people facing extreme challenges, physically and mentally. What advice do you have for someone out there who aspires to lead positive change?

## **Sarita Reddy**

There are so many ways that you can create positive change. I mean, we all have the capacity. I'm thinking right now about two different areas in which I'm committed to making change. In working with people with disabilities, I play a supporting role. The leaders in that movement are people with disabilities themselves. I spend a lot of time listening to them. It's my job to figure out where I can use my skills, my influence, to support the change they want to see. I see that as my role.

Right now, I'm also trying to figure out my place in the fight for racial justice in this country as an immigrant woman of color. I feel like this is definitely my fight too, but I'm also extremely sensitive to the fact that I don't have the same lived experience as a Black American. And then the flip side of that is as someone who has a great deal of privilege and a significant sphere of influence, I feel a strong sense of responsibility to do what I can to create the community that I want to live in. Even in this space, it takes listening and learning before stepping out to act in any major way. And so, I guess I'm saying that in order to lead, you have to start by listening.

## **Lyn Wineman**

Wow. That is very prophetic. People always want to go out and make their mark, but if you're going to make your mark in the right way, you've got to start by listening and learning. That is very nice. So Sarita, bringing this all back full circle, how do you get the word out and amplify the great work that you're doing? How do you tell your story, the story of Adeo?

## **Sarita Reddy**

Oh, my goodness. We began this year with a whole host of plans for getting the word out about what we do as you well know, since you were one of our partners and helping us figure out how we do this. We had a 350 person gala planned. We had a blitz of talks to various community organizations planned. Now all kinds of things that seem so far away. It was a different world in which we were able to do those kinds of things, but with COVID-19 making its mark on the world, we had to throw all of those plans out and reset and regroup and think about what we do now.

So right now all of our plans, getting the word out and amplifying our work, is by the use of technology, connecting people through technology. We're currently planning our very first virtual fundraising event. It's actually become a signature event for us. It's a 2K or 5K Walk Run or Roll. We've always had that as an in-person event. And it's always served as a fundraiser, but also as a vehicle for us to get the word out about what we do. With the virtual platform, what I'm beginning to feel is we're going to be able to reach far more people with this format than we've ever been able to do with the in-person event. And then again, we're so much more active on social media than we have been before. So that's where we are in terms of getting the word out. What we do is really use technology to the best of our ability.

## **Lyn Wineman**

A lot of great organizations are really retooling. It's a different world than it was just even a few months ago. As a result of the pandemic now, Sarita, what would you say is the greatest impact that you are having?

## **Sarita Reddy**

You know, honestly, I think one of the most the important things we do, as I mentioned before, as we've been chatting, is that support for people with disabilities and their families, it's not always just the people we serve. Our impact is so much larger than that. It's all of the people in their lives that we impact by making sure that this one person has the services they need, has the support they need and so on. And then I also mentioned that the community itself is impacted. The community in which these folks live is impacted by having their gifts and talents offered up to the community.

But there is another very important thing in terms of my work personally, that I think is impactful. And that is, I am just so fortunate to be working with a really great group of people and included in this group, are a number of smart young women who have a real passion for their work. And this is really important to me as a woman. I love seeing young women that want to do more, want to bring their gifts and talents to the table to make change. And I really love seeing how the work we do together is creating the conditions for them to emerge as strong advocates for change in their own right. And so, I think there's all of that in terms of the impact of the work we're doing here.

## **Lyn Wineman**

That is a really brilliant point. I mean, as leaders, we not only are serving our audiences and fulfilling our mission, but we're also serving those who work on our teams and who see us as role models. And quite frankly, who we impact quite a lot every day by our interaction and our mentoring and constructive criticism, and so forth.

## **Sarita Reddy**

That's a really great point to make. And, you know, we all had great mentors. We had teachers. We didn't get to where we are today on our own. None of us did. And I remember when I was just starting out in this work, I had very small children. I was just starting out and still in grad school and my teachers, I would look at them and think, y'all can never go away. I mean, who would help us with all of this? And I remember one of them in particular, at one point said, "I'm getting tired. I've been doing this work for 30 years and I'm getting tired." And I was like, no, you can't, you can't get tired. You're not allowed. And that has sort of stuck with me. And I think we are foolish if we care about something and we don't develop the next generation of leaders. If we want the work to go on, we've got to do that. And my job gives me the opportunity to do just that. I couldn't be happier.

## **Lyn Wineman**

This is my last question Sarita. I personally love motivational and inspirational quotes. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration to those listening today?

## **Sarita Reddy**

I'm going to guess that the people who tune into this are people interested in change and making change and how to make change and that kind of thing. I guess what I would say is making change is never a comfortable thing to do. But now more than ever, we should all be leaning into it. We should all be doing what we can do to make the right kinds of change. I would say, "Figure it out your sphere of influence and get uncomfortable."

## **Lyn Wineman**

Very nice, very nice. I know that to be true myself, getting uncomfortable is an important part of reaching that next level and achieving the results that you might want. Sarita, if somebody is listening to this and they're very interested in your organization or in potentially donating to Adeo, how would they do that?

## **Sarita Reddy**

I would encourage people to do that and in fact, I have begged people, please go to our website. It is [www.AdeoCo.org](http://www.AdeoCo.org), and you'll be able to see a lot of what we do. It's a beautiful website developed by Lyn Wineman and team. They were the ones who put it together for us. I'm very grateful for that. So that will be the first place to go. And you can certainly donate to us there. You can also find all of our contact information for the various programs that we offer in our community and that kind of thing. So that's where I would direct folks. We are also on Facebook, by the way.

## **Lyn Wineman**

Fantastic, and I'm sure too, that'll be a great place to learn about all the new things that you will continue to do. So Sarita, sincerely, thank you so much for being with us today and sharing your story.

## **Sarita Reddy**

Thank you, Lyn. I've loved it. I always love talking to you.

## **Announcer**

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