

Agency For Change Podcast : Cheri Mastny, Executive Director at Dreamweaver Foundation

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, Cheri Mastny, is a true rock star in the nonprofit arena. She's currently the Executive Director at Dreamweaver Foundation, an organization that is dedicated to giving the gift of hope to seniors with terminal illness, by making their lifelong dreams come true. Cheri has dedicated her entire professional career to organizations that are committed to serving others. She's been making a difference and impacting positive change for many years. And my guess is, Cheri, that you'll continue doing it for many more. I've had the opportunity to work with Cheri on multiple occasions, and I know firsthand, she truly is a changemaker. Cheri, let's get started today. Will you tell me more about the work you're doing with Dreamweaver Foundation?

Cheri Mastny

Dreamweaver Foundation is a nonprofit based out of Omaha, Nebraska, and we fulfill dreams for seniors with terminal illnesses. You know, in the pre-COVID world, right? We did that by creating memorable experiences for the dreamers, fulfilling their lifelong dreams through experiences that they will never forget. Post-COVID, we are having to look at how we can serve seniors effectively. We're not able to be as close to seniors as we were before. So, we're coming up with and, you know, dreaming of new ways to serve seniors on a day-to-day basis. We've been around for about seven years, so we're fairly new in the arena. I always love the opportunity to talk about Dreamweaver and get our name out there a little bit more each and every single day. So, thanks for having me, Lyn.

Lyn Wineman

Absolutely, I share that. It's fantastic. I've heard people describe it as kind of like Make-A-Wish, but for seniors, right? Granting dreams to seniors and their families, so they have those great memories.

Cheri Mastny

Absolutely, absolutely.

Lyn Wineman

Tell me, Cheri, what inspired you to care about seniors in our community and the challenges they face today?

Cheri Mastny

Sure. So, for me, I've had a true passion for seniors my entire life. And I think that stemmed from my upbringing with my own mother. My mom is a retired hospice nurse, so she was around seniors, in her career and in our community. So, I think that just kind of trickled down to me and I can remember as a little kid, my mom calling out my name, you know, when you could just kind of play on the streets. And inevitably I was over at one of my neighbor's houses, helping them, whether it was washing windows or crawling in their deep freezes to get the food out of the bottom, I've always just really been attracted to our elder population. When I finished college and was kind of searching out, well, you know, what you want to do with your life, an opportunity with a long-term care company came up and I jumped on it. So I had been working with seniors for more than 15 years in a long-term care setting prior to coming over to Dreamweaver. To me, I just think our culture has kind of misplaced seniors. They're almost like a forgotten generation. I think that they're oftentimes the population of individuals that get missed. And for me, it comes down to a few things. Their great stories, their warm, welcoming personalities and their food. I've said, have you ever noticed that when you go over to your grandma's house, the first thing she offers you is a ham sandwich. So, I'm a foodie. Food is very much a tempter for me.

Lyn Wineman

Oh, Cheri. That is fantastic. I see the twinkle in your eye when you talk about working with seniors and I think that's fantastic. So generally, changemakers are thought of as people or organizations who are working together to make positive change for the greater good. How does that concept figure into your work with Dreamweaver Foundation?

Cheri Mastny

So, here's a great time to throw some facts out. The senior population is expected to double by 2050, it's a population that's growing. The 85-plus population will triple in that same timeframe. Seniors are actually the fastest growing population in the world. And I think sometimes we don't realize that. Again, it's a generation that often gets pushed to the side. The number of seniors will only continue to grow. Currently today, 11.3 million seniors are living alone without family, without a spouse, without anyone to have a daily conversation with. We're all experiencing social isolation through this global pandemic. This is something that seniors experience every single day and per the data, 11.3 million seniors are experiencing that today. Studies have shown that being alone is almost worse for your health than smoking. We all know the risks of smoking. There are huge billboards across the country. Yet you don't see one that says, "Hey, call your grandma. Loneliness is worse than smoking." I think that if we really look at how awful loneliness and isolation are for us as individuals, we can start to see why paying attention to this population is so important. I believe that communities who include seniors, a population that includes seniors, they have community support, they have family support, they have family involvement in senior's lives. I believe that those communities are going to be the way of our future. So, I believe that culture truly matters. Seniors who live in cultures that value and respect and integrate them, the seniors will have a better quality of life. They'll be happier, they'll be healthier, they'll live longer. And so, I think that's why it is so important to focus on seniors.

Lyn Wineman

That is an amazing set of facts. I didn't know a lot of that Cheri and I think it's amazing how our culture speaks often about millennials and generation z, and our seniors kind of are quietly in the background. That's heavy stuff.

Cheri Mastny

Could you imagine driving down the interstate back and forth from Lincoln to Omaha, instead of seeing the stop smoking sign you see the stop isolation sign. You literally stop, to call your grandma. I do see a world like that in our future. I see a world where we respect our elder generation.

Lyn Wineman

That's amazing. Maybe that's an offshoot for Dreamweaver. And I think too, that leads into our next question. I have had the joy of being able to see the great work you're doing firsthand because you and I get to work together, but what's next for you and Dreamweaver Foundation?

Cheri Mastny

I think all great businesses have a strategic plan that says, this is what's next for us. And I think all of us have thrown them out the window in 2020. No one could plan for what's in front of us today. COVID-19 has definitely challenged us to think outside of our little strategic plan boxes and find new ways to serve seniors. And I think that's what we are most focused on. In the state of Nebraska, it sounds as though visiting guidelines and some of those rules around visiting seniors in nursing homes, they are not changing through the rest of this year. So, you can imagine what that is going to do to the population especially that's living in a nursing home style environment, a nursing home facility. That means no visitors allowed around the holidays. No visitors around for Thanksgiving. No visitors coming in to trick or treat, which I know is sometimes the highlight of the year. Right now, we're really trying to wrap our hands around that and how we can serve those seniors differently and how we can connect seniors with their loved ones, even though they can't be together physically. That's really what's on the forefront for us. I think the other thing for us is just trying to expand our footprint. Last year, we were able to fulfill over 130 dreams for seniors. You think that's a huge number. And, it is considering that when I started, we were fulfilling a dozen dreams a year. So how do we serve more? How do we serve more seniors? How do we get people to know who Dreamweaver Foundation is and what we do? But also to know enough about us, that they want to join our cause and they want to join the fight against isolation and loneliness and help with dream fulfillment for seniors.

Lyn Wineman

Cheri, that is amazing. It's amazing to think about how many people you're impacting during the year, and what you said earlier about the pandemic made me think of a saying that I heard, "Pivot don't pause." I mean, it would be easy for an organization like yours to hit the pause button and go, "Oh, we can't do what we normally do. Let's just hit pause," but you have so much energy and momentum and your target audience needs you now more than ever. So, I love your energy around that. Tell me, Cheri, what are the biggest challenges that you face in your work, but also as someone who leads change.

Cheri Mastny

It's an interesting question, right? I've always been a person who viewed challenges as just opportunity for growth. So for Dreamweaver right now, my focus and passion towards bringing attention and knowledge to seniors' health and well-being and quality of life, part of that is, standing out as a nonprofit. I think it is a big challenge. Nebraska is incredibly blessed with a plethora of amazing nonprofits. We have coverage from birth to the elderly. So, we are, like I said and feel, truly blessed to be surrounded by individuals who literally are working every day to serve others. Nebraska is blessed. Here in our great state, standing out as a nonprofit is absolutely a challenge. Why should someone want to support Dreamweaver? Why should someone want to volunteer for Dreamweaver? Why is my organization different or better or more worthy than the next one, you know, down the street? I think standing out as an

organization and getting your mission out there is a challenge. And that's why we work with wonderful branding people, like KidGlov, to help us with that because it absolutely is a challenge. And in our state, it's a great challenge, but it is one we have. The other thing I think is a challenge for us is that we serve a population that's not commonly served. And I can't tell you how many times I run into individuals and they ask, "What do you do?" And I say, "Oh, well, I, you know I'm the CEO of Dreamweaver Foundation." And they're like, "What is that?" And as soon as I tell them, they're like, "Oh, well, that's really cool." But they have no idea that we even exist or that there's something out there that exists for seniors. And, oftentimes again, the senior population is kind of that forgotten generation, I have people that ask, "Why?" Why do we serve seniors? Why is it important to serve seniors? Especially for Dreamweaver, we serve terminally ill seniors. So, their life expectancy is not always long. So how does that, when their life expectancy is so short, how is serving them impacting the community and the culture and the areas we live in? I think that just getting people to wrap their hands and their minds around the value of serving a senior population is a challenge for Dreamweaver as well.

Lyn Wineman

Sherry, that's fantastic. And hey, thank you for that shout out for KidGlov earlier, too. I appreciate that. We love working with you, Cheri. Tell me this. There are a lot of cynics in the world and they aren't wrong to say that you can never solve all the problems or take care of all the seniors. I mean, you mentioned earlier how many seniors there are just in your regional area. So why do you do this work?

Cheri Mastny

So, to the cynic, I would graciously ask them to come fulfill a dream with me. Come join us, come join our cause. See the emotions in our dreamers' face. See the reactions of the families. Read some of the letters or the thank you notes that we get. Just simply thanking us for the simple acts that we're able to do. I understand that we may not be able to serve everyone, but you know, it only takes a few to make a change, right? So, like I said, I'd invite them to come join me. I think anyone that would sit here and say that would, after coming along to fulfill a dream, change their mind incredibly quick. So, I say, come join me.

Lyn Wineman

That would be an incredible experience. So, in the world today with all of the changes, I mean, this is an unprecedented year for changes, leaders are coming forward in different ways to pave the way. And I know you'd be a leader creating positive change for people facing extreme challenges. What advice do you have for others who aspire to lead positive change?

Cheri Mastny

I would tell them, and you know, I've taken some of this advice myself and am still working on it. But the first thing I would say is to be creative. Think outside of the box. The answers usually don't lie in the box. I would tell them to fail and then fail again and then fail again and then fail again and then get back up and succeed. Our successes lie in our failures. So, I would definitely promote - don't give up. And then the last thing I would say is to lean on others around you. And that is something I work hard towards. I am a person, you know, I can do it and do it right myself. But what I'm learning, especially in our nonprofit community is to lean on the others around me. There's no point in recreating the wheel. So, if it's already done, then include them in your success journey and include those around you in your success journey and rise together. When we all come together, we can truly create change quickly. That would be what I would say, what I would tell them.

Lyn Wineman

That is amazing. I think sometimes we're afraid to ask for help and we forget that asking someone for help is giving them an opportunity to be part of the success story. This helps the story as well. Sometimes the invitation to bring someone in, it's not a burden to them, but it's a light for them to come forward and do. That's great advice. So, Cheri, what would you say then, of all of these great things that you're doing, what would you say is the greatest impact that you and Dreamweaver Foundation are having?

Cheri Mastny

So I had to put a lot of thought into this question. I think that we have good impact, great impact, even on a daily basis. One dreamer at a time, we are changing the way people view aging. And I think one dream at a time maybe we are making a nursing home a little less scary or one dream at a time we are bringing a family joy or memories that will last a lifetime. So, I think there's every day, lots of great impact. But then I really thought back and said, "What's my greatest impact?" And when I think about that, I think it goes beyond Dreamweaver for me. As you know, I am a mother of three young kids, and I believe that change is going to truly come when our culture changes. I can start that now with my own three kids. And so, I've engaged my kids in dreams. Every time I can, every year, they participate in a couple, at least. I encourage them to bring their friends along. And eventually we have this circle of young, eager, excited kids, engaged in dreams. They're not afraid of nursing homes. They're not afraid of seniors. They're not afraid of wheelchairs. They're not afraid of oxygen tanks. You know, they're not afraid to be around some of those typical things that kids can find frightening a little bit. And they engage with seniors. I will never forget a dream that my son went on and it was a fishing trip, and he sat on the front of that boat for four hours and fished with the dreamer. And they had conversations about life experiences. And I was like, what? I don't know what a seven-year-old has to say here for life experiences, but the dreamer got the biggest joy from that conversation with my seven-year-old. And they literally didn't run out of words in four hours. So, I think that my greatest impact is the level of engagement I've encouraged in my kids to join on the journey with me through Dreamweaver and then talk about it. They talk about it all the time. They talk about it at school. And I think that that will be one of the greatest impacts for me.

Lyn Wineman

Cheri, I don't know if you realize it, but it brings this whole conversation back full circle. Because when we talked about what inspired you, you spoke of your childhood and your mother and your neighbors and that engagement. And really those of us that are parents or aunts and uncles, and have kids around us, you know, we really are setting a course for them. And sometimes you think they're three, they're four, they're seven, they're 12. They're not paying any attention, but they're paying more attention than we really think they are. Aren't they? That is really neat. So, here's a question I like to ask because I am in marketing and I love marketing. Cheri, how do you get the word out and amplify the great work that you're doing for the foundation?

Cheri Mastny

That's the magic question, right? For any nonprofit. So, for us we use every media channel that we can. We're on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and LinkedIn. And we have an amazing website that gets used a lot. We use mass emails, but I think the most powerful way to get our word out is some of that word of mouth or dreamer to senior referral, or it's just spreading the word about what we're doing. It's hard to read about a dream. It's really easy to hear about a dream. I have two amazing staff workers that work for Dreamweaver, two amazing individuals, Ashley and Lindsey. And when they tell me about dreams, I often even find myself getting emotional over them because I'm so engaged in what's going on.

And that is what I think is the most impactful way for us. So, telling our story of dreams and having individuals share those stories is probably one of the greatest ways for us to get the word out.

And then we're always trying to think outside the box, right? So being creative in ways that we serve seniors. We just started launching our Connecting Hope Campaign, which takes a Facebook Portal and puts it into the hands of the seniors so that they can contact their family or loved ones on their smartphone virtually. Face to face. So, we're doing that. I think there's lots of media going on around that, just because of the pandemic and what's going on. It's a great story. People want to see the work that's being done with seniors and connecting them to family members. So, we have that going on right now. And I think that, I just think that story immediately sparks feelings towards doing great work. So, I'm excited to see where all of this goes too.

Lyn Wineman

Motion is a powerful thing. Isn't it? It really is.

Cheri Mastny

Absolutely. Yes.

Lyn Wineman

So now Cheri, I love motivational quotes. They help fuel my positivity and get me through the day. Would you give us a few of your own words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration for others?

Cheri Mastny

So, my quote may sound a little cliché, right? Because of who I work with, but the truth is those that I've served have given me a lifetime of wealth and knowledge. And the one thing that they have taught me more than anything else is that you're never too old to dream. Never stop dreaming. I know I sit here every day and realize that dreams, your dreams change, right? So, when I was a little kid, I wanted to go to Disney. My 10-year-old, she goes, "Someday, I want to go to Paris mom." So our dreams, they may change. You know, when I was 25, it was, Oh, I hope someday I'm going to get married and have a family. You know they change as you age and they develop and they grow. And a lot of the seniors we serve, their dream is just to spend time with their family members. So, our dreams change, but the reality that you're never too old to dream.

Lyn Wineman

That's beautiful. I can't imagine life without dreams. So that's a beautiful thing, Cheri, last question. I'm going to ask you for our listeners who would like to help out with your mission at Dreamweaver Foundation, and they'd like to make an impact for seniors, how can they support your efforts?

Cheri Mastny

We try to keep things pretty simple with Dreamweaver. There's really three ways to get involved. You can make a financial contribution. We are supported 100% by individual donations and each dollar counts. Our average cost of a dream is about \$5,000. Right now, we're doing our Connecting Hope Campaign and we're giving gifts of Portals. Each Portal is \$179. So, you can go to our website, dreamweaver.org, and make a contribution. That's the first way you can get involved. The second way is that you can nominate a dreamer or a senior to receive a Portal. We're only as good as the seniors we serve. So, if you have a senior loved one, a grandma, a grandparent, someone in the community, someone you work with that has a dream, that's sitting out there on their bucket list and hasn't been able to be crossed off, maybe because they can't afford it, or they haven't found the time for it or whatever, reach out

to Dreamweaver, nominate them for that dream. Let us help you fulfill that dream for them. And the last way to really get involved is to join our dream team we call it, of volunteers. There's volunteer opportunities all the time at Dreamweaver. You can participate in a dream. You can write letters to a senior. You can help set up a Portal. You can be a personal shopper. You can help with fundraising. There're so many different ways that you can volunteer with our organization. You can find more information about all three of those on our website, which is dreamweaver.org. We also are, like I mentioned before, on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn. So, like our pages, follow us, retweet us, repost us, reshare us, re-story us. Whatever it is, just re-do it. And that's a great way to support us as well.

Lyn Wineman

Oh, Cheri. That is, that is fantastic. I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy day as a nonprofit executive, in your service to seniors, as a busy mom. And this has just been wonderful and inspiring. Thank you so much, Cheri.

Cheri Mastny

Thanks Lyn.

Announcer

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