

Agency for Change Podcast : Rai Kortan, Executive Director of Ronald McDonald House Charities in Omaha

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, Founder and Chief Strategist of KidGlov. And welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Prepare to be inspired today. We are talking with Lindsey Rai Kortan, Executive Director of Ronald McDonald House Charities in Omaha. And for those of you who are not familiar with this fabulous organization, they provide programs that directly improve the health and wellbeing of children. They're most known for taking care of families during their most difficult and challenging times, which is when a child is in the hospital. Lindsey Rai, it's great to have you with us today.

Rai Kortan:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. It's my honor.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. Would you start by sharing a bit more about the work of Ronald McDonald House Charities in Omaha?

Rai Kortan:

Sure. So, you did a great job introducing what we do. We're basically the place where families can come to live when their child is critically ill and can't get the care needed in their hometown and they have to travel to Omaha. So, we have families from all over the world who are here with the direct focus on healing their child. We do things a little bit differently with those families. It's not just a place to stay. It's not just a hotel for a specific family. It's a lot different and a lot more robust than that. And we have a lot

of beliefs around why we do that and things like that. But overall, it's a place for families to come if they need help with their critically ill child.

Lyn Wineman:

That's wonderful. That is such a tough time in life because parents are so worried about their precious children, and then there's financial issues and health issues and just so much going on for them. So, it's great that they have you. I'm always very interested in how people get where they are, and I know you have an interesting story. What was the path that led you to this position at this point in your life?

Rai Kortan:

Sure. The truth is I didn't know anything about the Ronald McDonald House. I wasn't sure what went on there. I wasn't really interested in working for a nonprofit. I'm very pro-private enterprise – all of that. But a previous employee took me to lunch and said, "I really think you should consider coming to work here." I said, "No, no, no, no, no." And then they said, "Why don't you just come in for a tour? And then if you decide that that's not something you're interested in, then no problem. I won't ask you again."

I came into the Ronald McDonald House and met a mom who was traveling from Memphis with her sick daughter. And this impacted me, as I am someone who was very, very sick as a child who also needed to travel to get the care that I needed. I spent a significant amount of time in an oxygen tent with my mom right outside, and I was raised by a single mom who was completely invested in helping me heal. When I looked at this woman from Memphis, I saw my mom. I saw her. I saw my same story. I saw all of that. And so, I knew in that moment that this was exactly where I needed to be, and I have never looked back since. That was eight years ago.

Lyn Wineman:

It was just meant to be. And when something finds you like that, there's just something bigger happening. I'd love to take a deeper dive. Can you talk about how your work is making a positive impact on the world today?

Rai Kortan:

Sure. I certainly think that we're making a positive impact on the world. We are here to help relieve some of the burden that these families take on with this type of diagnosis – I mean, honestly with the diagnoses that these kids are given, these families sometimes walk away with over \$1 million in bills, so to be able to be part of the release of not having to worry about where you're going to stay or what it's going to cost or what you're going to eat, basic needs and things like that, is amazing.

But I think that here in Omaha what makes us really unique is that we see these individuals as individuals first and patients and caregivers second. And what that does is it changes the narrative of how someone can participate in their child's care. Because the minute that you get a diagnosis, you've got to learn, especially with these kids, they've got to learn an entirely new language. How is my child

going to eat? How are they going to handle all these different things that come up? And so, by having that approach, we have designed a number of external programs to surround these families with the support they need. For example, after we talked to the families quite a bit, we realized that their English as a second language is a challenge, so financial support in a completely different way is of the utmost importance. Also, something like art, which may seem superfluous, is such an opportunity to heal and express yourself and have something to look forward to.

These kids also sometimes experience extreme gaps in education, not just the kiddos that are sick, but their siblings that are traveling along for the ride. They don't get to go to the classroom. And this is even pre-COVID. They don't get to go to the classroom anymore. They don't get to experience the types of things a normal family would experience. So, if we can create a sense of normalcy and a place where they look forward to coming to, they can walk away a more wholesome unit as a family, because when there's a sick kid, there's a sick family that follows. If we can create a more wholesome unit for that, and they can walk away feeling more empowered, we've done our job. If they just had a good night's sleep, we've done our job. But if we can walk away knowing with confidence that they're far more empowered, then we really did a great job. Does that make sense?

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing! Absolutely, makes sense. Parenting is hard enough as it is, right? Just the day-to-day, taking care of training and feeding and teaching and sleeping and activities in school – it's a lot. And you layer in something like a really tough illness that puts someone in the hospital, that's really difficult. I did not realize, Lindsey, how many programs you had, in addition to being a place to stay. And I think that's really amazing.

Rai Kortan:

Once we realized that there were gaps there, we immediately took it on as our obligation that we have a leg to stand on. And what a unique opportunity to collaborate with partners in the community. Because, I'll be the first to tell you, I don't know anything about providing financial services and paying for the bills for those families. But we're not in that market. But you know what? Angels Among Us is, so we're partnering with them. And we don't know the first thing about education. We're really good at what we do, but we don't know about education. So, we bring in another nonprofit to come and provide those things. It's just been this really unique, almost comprehensive healing community that has come together in a very real way, where everyone is able to showcase their talent in addition to us at the benefit of all of the families.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. So, you do such great work, but what are some of the biggest challenges that you face, Lindsey Rai, both in your work, but also as somebody who's leading positive change in the world?

Rai Kortan:

We are at the peak of a global pandemic, so the whole world is essentially on fire, not to mention civil unrest and everything else that's going on at the same time. While trying to navigate just like every other business is doing their best to navigate through a time like this, part of my role is to curb some of those fears associated with COVID. But the truth is the only difference between that challenge and what we face all the time is that the rest of the world now knows what it feels like. Because the moment that a child gets diagnosed, they're immediately masked up, they immediately go into sheltering in place, and that's the world they live in because the flu virus, norovirus and any other virus, including coronavirus, is an immense threat to these families.

They've been living with this diagnosis or with those challenges since day one. Now the rest of the world knows what it feels like – not knowing if you can even go to the grocery store. Couple this with the tangible anxiety when you go out into the community – curbing those additional fears around the energy of something like COVID-19. So that's one specific challenge.

In addition, not being able to have as many volunteers. We have 2,600 volunteers a year who come through. To be working with five out of 2,600 at a time like this creates some challenges. And certainly one of those challenges is regarding one of our most successful programs.

We have different groups in the community come in each night and make dinner for all of these families. And there's a number of benefits that are experienced on both sides that are reciprocal with something like that. Now we can't have that. However, we think that there's a huge opportunity to promote local commerce, right? So now we're working with different restaurants to provide catering opportunities and how the community can be involved in that. I say all of that because it's a massive challenge that we're working with right now. But it's also paved the way for massive opportunities for organizational strength and change and community and unity, and unity in a way that we haven't seen yet or that we have yet to see in its full potential. And I truly believe that this could – rather than rip us apart and keep us all in our homes – this could bring us closer together in a way we've never felt before.

Lyn Wineman:

I just think that's a mark of an amazing leader, what you just said there, to be able to pivot and change and find the best in what we're going through. And I think when I see great nonprofit leaders like you, when you're focused on your mission, you are going to do what it takes to deliver that mission, right? You can't just close the doors and say, this is too hard, we're not going to help families right now, because families need you now more than ever. And all of this time leading up to this, you've just been getting ready and now you're doing it. And there'll be things I'm sure with your organization that have changed for the better that won't go back someday. Right? There are probably things that you're doing that you'll stick with, and I think that's really nice.

Rai Kortan:

Sure. Well first of all, thank you for saying that. I'm truly flattered to hear that. That makes me feel great, and I am no one without the team and the board and all of that, but I really do appreciate you saying that. But I think that just with all businesses, nonprofit or private enterprise, there are going to be some changes that will stick permanently. And if anything, this has taught us one more time that we have the capability – we can tuck and roll. We know how to tuck and roll, we've been through hard

times, and this is just another one of those opportunities for us to really shine at a time where the market is ripe for fear and hiding and all of the anxiety that is surrounding us. We feel really strongly that rather than even dance in that arena, we'll just rise above it and pretend for as long as we need to that we already know what the solution is until it actually comes. Yeah.

Lyn Wineman:

You just fake it till you make it. Sometimes that old adage just works, right? And you as the leader, and I know this too, you have to provide the vision and the calm and be ready to pivot when you may not always feel visionary and calm, right?

Rai Kortan:

Sure. Yeah.

Lyn Wineman:

But as the leader, you have to do that. So, Lindsey Rai, what advice do you have for someone out there who aspires to lead positive change like you do?

Rai Kortan:

As much as I think it would be appropriate to say “read this book” or “listen to this,” listening to podcasts like this one is certainly helpful. But the truth is if you want to initiate change, if you want to be a part of something that's bigger than yourself, then it is imperative that you embody what it is you would like to see. And once you start to embody whatever it is that you want or however it is you want to lead, what I can promise – and this has shown itself, I mean daily – you embody what you want to see, and the whole world will follow you. There's one woman who I strongly believe in. And she says that one person in alignment is far more powerful than millions who are not. And I absolutely believe that to my core. Personally, I've experienced it. I've watched it with the wonderful people who we get to work with and the embodiment of change, and really walking that talk, you will be able to accomplish whatever it is that you're after.

Lyn Wineman:

That is such great, great advice. So, I have to slip one marketing question in here, being a marketing person. How do you get the word out about the great things that you're doing at Ronald McDonald House Charities in Omaha?

Rai Kortan:

I'll be the first to admit that there's a lot of things I don't know much about and I'm not well versed in. And marketing is certainly one of them. However, when you don't know what you're doing, surround yourself with people who do. So, we've got a really incredible marketing team, and there's actually one individual who's kind of our guru. And she's really great at putting messages together that are appropriate for the right people. And our message always changes, right? So, it's going to be a little bit different for one audience versus another. And just being able to bend and adapt and go with whatever you need to go with to make sure that the right message is delivered, it's going to sound very different.

I just talked to a gentleman who was the second board president ever of the Ronald McDonald House in Omaha. When he was here, he sat on five-gallon drums, and the rest of the board got together and they contributed toilet paper and did a spring cleaning, and that's how they got things done. The message that I say to him is going to sound wildly different than the millennials who we're working with who may be contribute \$20 a month. They sacrifice a couple of cups of coffee so that they can contribute to us. The message is going to be different, but I have to rely on talent that we have in-house to deliver those messages in a way that is going to be the most successful. So, I really rely on other people to tell me how to rally. If I'm going to be honest, I rely on Pam to tell me how to do it.

Lyn Wineman:

Can I say, I've met your marketing guru and I hear amazing things about her. We'll give her a little love here.

Rai Kortan:

We're so lucky. Yeah, we have to. She's amazing.

Lyn Wineman:

I think too, for people who don't know marketing well or marketing isn't their top thing, what you just said there I think was really good because you have to think of marketing like a conversation. And you wouldn't have the same conversation with a parent as you would with a child or with a mother as you would with a daughter. And so, thinking about those different audiences and the message you need to communicate is really, really important. There's one other thing that I really love. I love motivational quotes. That's how I get in alignment. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration to those listening today?

Rai Kortan:

This may sound really simple. So we just expanded our location and everyone who wanted to contribute to this little brick pathway in our serenity garden outside could put something down. And again, it's very simple. But I have to lean on what I know and that is "Yes, you can." And that's it. That's what I lead with, that's what I believe. And you can take that in so many different ways. But the truth is "Yes, you

can.” Yes, you can get through this day. Yes, you can get through the next five minutes. Yes, you can find a way. Yes, you can seek opportunity. Yes, there is sunshine behind the clouds. And I know that there's some pieces of that that might sound esoteric or even Pollyannaesque, but I don't care because “Yes, you can.”

Lyn Wineman:

That is fantastic. If I were to turn my computer around, you would see Rosie the Riveter on the wall because “We can do it” is mine. Like, we'll figure it out, right?

Rai Kortan:

Yeah.

Lyn Wineman:

This has been wonderful. So, for people who are listening who would like to learn more about you and the services offered by Ronald McDonald House, how can they find out more about you?

Rai Kortan:

Sure. RMHComaha.org is our website. We've got some amazing events that are coming up pretty soon that you can participate in. We always have different opportunities to be a part of this healing circle. If anybody out there listening wants to contribute to something that's a little bit bigger than themselves, we've got something for you. And nothing is too small or too big. One person tried to donate a horse. We can't take any horses, but other than that, if you just want to be a part of something bigger than yourself, we've got that for you at RMHCOMaha.org.

Lyn Wineman:

That is fantastic. And honestly, nonprofits need your support now more than ever. So sometimes too, that's the first step in making positive change in the world is donate, volunteer, do whatever you can. Even sharing this podcast to get the word out would be one way to do that. Lindsey Rai, it has been wonderful talking with you today and learning more about the impact of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Omaha. You are so inspiring. Thank you for your time.

Rai Kortan:

Thank you. Have a great day.

Announcer

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