

Agency For Change Podcast : Paige Piper, Executive Director of Child Advocacy Center

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:

Hello, this is Lyn Wineman, Founder and Chief Strategist of KidGlov. Welcome to another inspiring episode of the Agency For Change Podcast. The word I would use to describe today's guest is dynamo. Paige Piper has recently been tapped as the Executive Director of Child Advocacy Center, an organization that provides help for children who are victims of serious physical and sexual abuse in Lincoln, Nebraska. That's an amazing appointment considering she's only been out of college for seven short years. Paige, it's great to talk with you today. How are you?

Paige Piper:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be part of the podcast.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. I'm excited to have you here Paige. Would you start by sharing more about the work of Child Advocacy Center?

Paige Piper:

Absolutely. The Child Advocacy Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. And like you said, our job is to work with children who have been victims of serious crimes. For us, that ranges from sexual abuse to physical abuse, children who have witnessed a violent crime like domestic violence or a homicide. We work with kids who have been drug-endangered, sex-trafficked, and the list goes on. So, it's never a good thing that's happened when children are walking through our doors.

Paige Piper:

But what our team does is, we partner with law enforcement and health and human services. So instead of that child having to retell their story multiple times to different agencies, they get to come to a center where the staff is completely focused on them and helping them to feel comfortable and safe. We provide forensic interviews, which is a really big, fancy way of saying that we help collect the information for law enforcement or health and human services to conduct their investigation. While simultaneously collecting information for us to figure out what that child needs to have the best chance of recovering and moving forward from the most difficult things that have happened to them.

Paige Piper:

We have advocates on staff. That's the person who stands next to that child and is not family and says, "I know this is a really scary time for you, and you're not sure what comes next, but I'm going to be here with you through every step of that process." So oftentimes that's from before they walk through our

doors until the case is closed. And that can honestly be years, especially if there's criminal processes that follow. We stay with that family all the way through the court experience to make sure they know that they have that support.

Paige Piper:

It's pretty common, oftentimes we've heard families that have said, "This advocate, the CAC, it's like having an extended family member." It's that one support person and touch point. We really just try to make sure that we're connecting all of the pieces for kids and families through some really difficult times. And our service list goes on and on, but in terms of our core, that's forensic interviews with the advocacy. And then we also offer medical evaluations onsite.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, Paige. That is big and important work. I mean, wow. And considering your relatively young age, how did your path lead you to this position at this point in your life?

Paige Piper:

That's a great question. There's a couple of significant things that I would attribute to wanting, and to be at the CAC and leading myself back there. I worked at the CAC as the development director and I was gone for two years and returned in this role. So, ultimately from a young age, I've always been very passionate about the nonprofit community. I've always felt that no matter what, I want to do work in my life that makes a difference. And I want to ensure that the time I have on this earth is spent doing something that's meaningful for at least one person.

Paige Piper:

And so I've always known that nonprofit is where my heart is, where my passion is, and where I belong. I know that in terms of my skillset, really where I'm strongest is in leading, it's envisioning, it's in high level strategy. So as my career developed, I realized that ultimately, that lends to being in a position like what I'm doing right now. And there were moments in my career where I thought, "Oh man, I wish I wasn't wired that way." Because it is a lot of stress. It's a lot of long hours, sleepless nights. And it would be much easier if I were content with doing something else. But ultimately, I know that combining my skillset and my passion, this is the right type of role for me.

Paige Piper:

Now, why the Child Advocacy Center? That's a little bit of a deeper reasoning. And that boils down to when I was 17 and had just started college. I had started college at a pretty young age. I actually graduated from high school a year early, and I was so excited about being on campus and wanting to make friends. The reality was most of my friends were still in school, they were still in high school. And so I joined just about every activity I could, from the dance team, to the sorority, to a Christian club. And the list goes on.

Paige Piper:

And through that club, I met a young man who had become a friend of mine. And there was a day that I had gone to his dorm room, and I left my backpack. We had gone to a meeting, a club meeting. And I came back to get my backpack and walked into his room and he slid a dresser in front of the door. And the sheer panic in that moment of realizing what was happening and feeling like I had no control over my body or my life was probably the most, one of the most, painful experiences I've ever had.

Paige Piper:

And I was fortunate that before it progressed too far, I did scream and an RA found us, came and knocked on the door. But in that moment, feeling like I had absolutely no control over what was happening to me and being so aware of what he was doing and being overpowered and not able to stop it. I didn't think of myself as a child in that moment, but the reality is, I was. And coming off of that experience, I had no idea what to do next. I was so embarrassed. I thought it was my fault. I never should have left my backpack in his room. I never should have been hanging out with an older boy. The list goes on and on of reasons that we blame ourselves and in that experience, it really, it didn't really help me. Initially I threw myself into more activities and I was working 25, 30 hours a week while going to school full time.

Paige Piper:

And then my sophomore year, I had a class in the same building as him, and so we would walk past each other every day. And I, my anxiety just took over. I dropped out of most of the activities that I had participated in. It was a complete 180. It was the first time in my life that I didn't have a 4.0 GPA. I was struggling in my classes. And most of that was because I just couldn't stomach that experience, that trauma had just resurfaced. And the way it was impacting me mentally and emotionally, physically was pretty unreal. It changed about every aspect of my life. And it took a lot of years before I even told my family what happened. I was in my mid-twenties before I disclosed to my parents that, that had happened to me on campus.

Paige Piper:

And knowing the impact that, that had on me, someone who I consider to be pretty resilient, I knew that ultimately, this is what I needed to dedicate my life and my work to. Trying to be that change agent, that advocate for other children who have found themselves in similar experiences, to know that their voices matter and that there are people out there who can help them. Because when that happens, it feels so dark. Everything around you feels so dark and you feel isolated and alone. And I want our agency, I want to help be the light for those kids when they need it the most. And so that's what led me.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, Paige, that is such a story. And this is a podcast so people won't be able to see that I have goosebumps up and down my arms right now. But for you to have that level of vulnerability and share that with us, I appreciate that. And I can see where that level of understanding and empathy will make you even more amazing at what you do than I already expected. So, that is really neat. And you shared some magic words with me that I have heard from others that I've talked to on this podcast.

Lyn Wineman:

And that is, you said, "From a young age, I had this passion for, or I had this desire to make a difference." And it's amazing to me how many people I talked to that, that seed or that flame was started as a kid. So all the parents out there that are listening right now, just recognize your kids are in those formative years, but those things will carry, bear with them for a long time. So just really great. Thank you for sharing that.

Lyn Wineman:

You've touched on a couple of different things, but I'd like to take a deeper dive and really talk about how this work is making a positive impact on the world today. Can you go deeper into that?

Paige Piper:

Sure. I think one of the best ways to illustrate this is, there's a lot of research being done right now on ACE score studies or Adverse Childhood Experience scores. And this work, this research is really fascinating because it looks at 10 different variables or events that can happen to a child that have a pretty remarkable impact on their life as they grow into adulthood. And it looks at things like alcoholism in the household, mental illness, incarceration, sexual assault, and the list goes on.

Paige Piper:

And ultimately what that research says is the more boxes that you check on that list, the greater likelihood that, that child, as they grow into an adult will have substance abuse issues. That they may become incarcerated themselves, have mental health issues, all the way to the point of saying that the higher that ACE score study is, or your ACE score in general is, there's a strong likelihood that it'll actually shorten your lifespan by about a decade.

Paige Piper:

So when you start looking at the impact that has on our community, and you compare that to current incarceration rates, mental health, etc., we know a lot of that stems from childhood. And ultimately what the Child Advocacy Center does is, we sit on the vast majority of that early trauma. We know that most of the time when children walk through our doors, they may be coming to see us for an incident of sexual assault. And as we talk to that child and family, you start peeling back those layers and realize that most often that's not the only incident or only traumatizing thing that has happened in their lives. That was just the triggering event that got them to the CAC to begin with.

Paige Piper:

And so we know that a lot of kiddos that we see unfortunately have pretty high ACE scores. And that means as they grow up, there's going to be a lot of additional factors and struggles that they'll encounter. Now the interesting thing with the ACE study is, it also talks about resilience and the science behind resilience. And what we know is that if trauma is addressed, there's a strong likelihood that, that child will grow up to be a functioning, healthy adult.

Paige Piper:

But when that trauma goes unaddressed and it just manifests in their psyche and in their body, that's when we start seeing those implications where that child will always have some long-term issues. And so the CAC, not only are we aiding in that criminal investigation, as well as helping that child and family through a pretty difficult process, it's also taking a first look at how do we address childhood trauma so we can help make sure that, long-term, we're not seeing the implications for our community that are often an outcome of the things that happen to us when we're kids.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, I could listen to you talk about this all day. That is really fascinating. And you think about the ripple effect of how one life affects other lives, and one event changes the outcome. I mean, your work that you do is so important. And you've already, just in a few minutes here, we've gotten into some really heavy topics, right? And I'm sure that you and your staff and the advocates, you see and hear

things that are disturbing and maybe even depressing. How do you find it within yourself, Paige, to do this work day in and day out?

Paige Piper:

Yeah. We do, we hear the worst of the worst. And it's interesting because I thought about this in the context of, it's almost like working in an emergency room where you don't ever know exactly who or what situation is going to come through your doors, but you have to be prepared for it, right? Because you are that person that's there to deal with the crisis. And you have to know that no matter what it is, you're going to do your very best to help address the issue in that crisis in real time. And as a staff, we do a lot in terms of training on secondary trauma and providing our staff with EAP, encouraging mental health days and counseling. But the reality is, what impacts each of us is a little bit different.

Paige Piper:

I think about two of our staff, their very first day they showed up to the office and we were working a homicide investigation. We had children there who had just unfortunately witnessed a homicide in their household of one of their parents. And there's nothing that prepares you for that until you're working in it. And my very favorite thing about our staff is, especially with those difficult cases, it's the worst of the worst, but you see us at the best of the best. And I think it's so interesting to watch our staff come together in those moments and know that nothing else matters but being together, supporting one another and ultimately supporting that child and their family.

Paige Piper:

And it's in those moments that you realize just how much of an impact this work can make. So I think that we have really been able to deal with this and handle the dark and depressing things. Because number one, we know that it's making a difference. Second, we support each other like crazy. It's very common in our agency that if someone has had a challenging case or a difficult day, you see people in and out of their office saying, "How are you doing? What can I do for you? Do you need some lunch? A bottle of wine? I don't know, something to help be there to support you through a difficult day."

Paige Piper:

And I think on top of that, just the dynamic of our team, we have a lot of humor. It's interesting to see that even though we work around some very challenging subject matters, we have a really funny team. And just knowing that we keep positivity and humor at the forefront of the agency. It's not as doom and gloom, as you might think. You walk into our center and it looks just like this bright, open farmhouse and you interact with the team and they're so bright and bubbly. And I think it's a combination of our culture. And also knowing that kids and families are resilient and we are so lucky to get to work with them and to get to see those processes through.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. I mean, I could really see where I picture you and your team taking a child by the hand and you're leading them out of the darkness into the light. And there's something very powerful about that. Paige, as you do your work with Child Advocacy Center, what are some of the biggest challenges you face? I mean, we've talked about the challenges that the kids and the families have, but what are the challenges that you face in your work, and also as someone who leads positive change?

Paige Piper:

There are several challenges that we face. And I think first and foremost, it's the stigma around child abuse and especially sexual assault. It's not comfortable to talk about. And what we know is statistically for every child that comes forward, there are nine others who will not. And a lot of that comes down to it just being so tough to talk about. And that's challenging for a number of reasons. One, because oftentimes even if kids do disclose, adults will say, "Oh, we can't do anything with this. I'm not ready to take in this information." And second, the reality is we're a nonprofit, so we have to fundraise. And our work is only possible if we raise the dollars that we need each year to keep our doors open, lights on, and children and the families served.

Paige Piper:

And then, we are not an agency that has children and families screaming from the rooftop about the great services that they received at our center, this is something that's a very private matter. And knowing that, can make fundraising very challenging because we're not able to disclose a lot of details because oftentimes these cases are part of a criminal investigation. We don't have the testimonials because nobody wants to be the poster face for an agency that works with such challenging matters.

Paige Piper:

And when you have the stigma, coupled with the inability to really talk about some of the cases that we're seeing, I would say our number one challenge, just like most nonprofits, it's always going to be fundraising. It's just challenging. And especially with, I'd be remiss to not mention, fundraising during COVID.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Paige Piper:

A lot of people are experiencing financial hardship, that just adds an additional layer of complication. I think another key challenge is that our agency, it's a challenge and an opportunity, but we are so interconnected with other entities. We call it our multidisciplinary team and what that is, are the different agencies that come together to work these investigations between Department of Health and Human Services, law enforcement, which might include the police department or Sheriff's office. We've worked with the FBI and Homeland Security, and doctor's offices, therapists, etc.

Paige Piper:

So there's a lot of moving pieces in the cases that come through our doors and a lot of different perspectives that we approach these cases with. And that's such a great opportunity because we know that we have the most important players all coming together, but sometimes it is challenging because we each have our own lens on and we see the case through our own lens. Being able to serve as the glue that keeps everyone pieced together through that process and laser focused on what is best for this child and family is the most important thing that we can do. And I'm so proud of our team for doing an incredible job of that every single day. But I know that it's tough work.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Challenges will always be there, but because we are in the fall of 2020, and we are in the midst of a pandemic, I mean, that's got to be a big one. I was actually wondering a little bit earlier if one of the 10 variables on the ACE score, is pandemic one of those on the list? Or, how many of the other things,

because of what we're all going through, as not just a country, but as a world right now? How many of the other 10 variables are impacted just by the financial, emotional, health, stress that's going on right now?

Paige Piper:

Oh, a lot. That's the challenging thing, there's so many heightened tensions in the home right now. And there was some really interesting research that came out about the pandemic's impact on child abuse and the rates are skyrocketing. Initially when the pandemic happened in March, April and the world sort of shut down, our numbers dropped. And so people started asking us, "Oh, does that mean that abuse has slowed down?" And our response was no. When kids are out of schools, the number one reporters are teachers because kids develop strong relationships with their educators and feel safe talking to them.

Paige Piper:

Unfortunately, home is not a safe place for every child. And having them home when there's scarcity of resources, there's mounting tensions with finances, with just the overall fear of the pandemic, has a really negative consequence for children. And our fear is, now that school is back in session and we've already seen a huge uptick in the number of cases we're seeing, that we haven't even scratched the surface of what's going to happen later this fall and into the winter as children start to develop those close relationships with our educators again, and we start seeing the reports skyrocket.

Lyn Wineman:

I have so much respect for you and your staff and for educators too. They're just going through so much right now, so much weight on their shoulders. It's great for kids that they're out there and that you're out there as a resource. Paige, what advice do you have for someone, particularly younger individuals, who aspire to lead positive change?

Paige Piper:

I would say my advice is, do not let your age be a setback. I think that people have always been surprised when they hear how old I am and they're like, "Oh gosh, there's no way that you're competent to be serving in the role that you're in." And that's a challenge I face, so I have to show up and bring my very best at all times. Because it's assumed that, well, you haven't lived enough to know, or you don't have enough experience to be able to speak to this or to make that decision. And I think younger people are often inhibited by that and feel like they don't, or can't reach the level that they want to because it's this mentality of, "Well, you know, I have to do my time and I have to earn it."

Paige Piper:

And when people ask me how I ended up in this position and have advanced my career this quickly, honestly, I've just been laser focused. I knew exactly what I wanted and I relentlessly pursued it. So any opportunity I had to be at a leadership table, I took full advantage of. And I intentionally put myself in uncomfortable situations where I was the youngest one in the room, but I also know what I have to offer. Age does not equate to competency. And if there is something that you want, you are the only person in your way, go get it.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, I love that.

Paige Piper:

Maybe that's my inspiring quote.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Let's come back to that. Paige, so let's get back to it.

Paige Piper:

I'll get back to that.

Lyn Wineman:

I have completely observed that in you. You and I have known each other for a while now.

Paige Piper:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lyn Wineman:

And I have observed your energy and your passion and your willingness to put yourself out there. Because sometimes, I'm going to say this, even as a woman, sometimes we have this perfectionist side and there's a great fear of failure. But we have to get to the point where we put ourselves in positions to learn and put ourselves out there. So I'm proud of you for doing that.

Paige Piper:

Well, thank you. And you know what? You're right. I think that's the interesting thing to not only being young, but also being female. The reality is that the pressure is a little bit higher. And I honestly think that one of the best things that I ever did for my career is, I worked for Bulu under Paul and Stephanie Jarrett. That was really the first organization I worked for that said, "We are completely fine with you failing as long as you understand why." And having that position and opportunity where it was okay to make mistakes. It was in a sense, I don't want to say encouraged, but it was allowed in being able to have that freedom that moved me out of my own way.

Lyn Wineman:

I think that's great. I admire the team and Paul and Stephanie at Bulu. They do some great things, both product wise and culture wise, because I think it's easy to tell yourself it's okay to fail. And it's easy to put this mantra on the wall that says, failure is learning, but to really believe it and act it out, I think that's really, really important. So, that's cool.

Lyn Wineman:

I have to ask you just one marketing question because being a marketing and advertising professional, I always want to know. What are you doing at the Child Advocacy Center to get your story out so people know about your good work?

Paige Piper:

Up until now, we've really focused on communicating with adults and doing that in a variety of ways. Obviously through our online efforts, with our website and social media, but also just being very active in the community. We have a really great training and prevention program that we try to get in front of anyone and everyone that we can to talk about child abuse. What are the warning signs? How as adults do we help to prevent this? What do you do if a child discloses to you? And all the way down.

Paige Piper:

And now in the past couple of months, we've started to switch our marketing approach. We're starting to look at - how can we talk directly to kids? How can we meet them where they're at? A lot of this stems from the month of April - for the first time in history, RAINN, which is a sexual assault hotline program, received more calls from children than adults. And it came down to kids being home and starting to research how to advocate for themselves. As sad and tragic as that is, I also think it's really fascinating that we are living in a digital era where kids are on their computers, they're on their phones.

Paige Piper:

I know how critical it is that we provide them with the information they need to know who to get in contact with if there are situations happening like sexual assault or physical abuse, neglect. So we are starting to reframe our approach and having conversations about, "What does it look like if we start doing targeted messaging on TikTok or meeting children on Instagram?" And I'm going to have to do my research to be cool and figure out where they're spending their time and hanging out. I don't know that answer.

Paige Piper:

But we are really trying to reframe our messaging because what an impact we could make if we can help children know and learn how to be self-advocates, and how to make a disclosure to an adult. So, we're really excited about this new marketing approach we're just starting to lean into.

Lyn Wineman:

That is really neat. I mean, that opportunity to reach out and connect with someone just might give someone that glimmer of hope that helps them turn around that part of their life. And I think you're pretty cool. You're not going to have any problem in that area at all Paige. So, all right, now we're back to that big question that we mentioned earlier. The other thing I love, in addition to marketing and advertising, is motivational quotes. These are just words of wisdom from people I respect and know and listen to. Could you give us a few of your own Paige Piper words of wisdom that could inspire others who are listening today?

Paige Piper:

Oh man, okay. Well, I said something that sounded somewhat motivational four questions ago. That's definitely gone.

Lyn Wineman:

Ah, here we go. I wrote it down as fast as I could. It had to do with don't let your age be a setback.

Paige Piper:

Okay. That's great.

Lyn Wineman:

That ring a bell?

Paige Piper:

That sounds like something I'd say.

Lyn Wineman:

And I can say that on either side, to be honest with you. Whether you're at the young end of the spectrum or you're at the older end of the spectrum, age should not be a determining factor as to your passion or your actions in life.

Paige Piper:

You're right. Your age does not determine your success. That's ultimately up to you. And I think that just like we've talked about, sometimes we have it in our heads that we're too young and can't possibly have the experience or on the flip side, we're too old to learn new tricks. And that should never get in the way of you relentlessly pursuing what it is that you want to do. And in my world, ultimately what it comes down to is - I want to make a difference for children and families. And the best way that I can apply my skills is by serving as the executive director of this organization.

Paige Piper:

And so I certainly did not let my age or experience get in the way of that. I was very confident going through that process and saying that if I am the right person for this, then I will land in that role. And if not, that's okay. I will circle back and try again. I think that my personal, my little personal mantra is so funny. I had a friend who had said this to me at one point and it just stuck. And now I keep getting random Christmas presents with this on it. It's, "Kick ass and be kind." And I don't know if I'm allowed to cuss on here.

Lyn Wineman:

Kick ass and be kind, I cannot think of four more important words than that. That is fantastic, Paige. I can't imagine anybody listening to this podcast and not being inspired by your story and your enthusiasm and your work and the importance of Child Advocacy Center. For people who are listening that would like to learn more about the services or help you out financially, how can they find out more about Child Advocacy Center?

Paige Piper:

The best way to learn more about us is to go to our website, smallvoices.org. There are resource pages on there that talk more about the work that we do, upcoming trainings and events, as well as a donate link. Another great way to learn about us is we are just rolling into our special event season. We do have some really great fundraisers that you can learn about on that page as well. They are a ton of fun, a very, very relaxed environment where you can come learn more about the center, have some fun, and start to engage with getting involved with the CAC.

Lyn Wineman:

That is really neat. That's another thing that the pandemic has changed, isn't it? Nonprofit fundraising and all the events that we have had in the past, flipped everything upside down and we're rethinking. And maybe we'll learn some new tricks that we'll carry with us into the future.

Paige Piper:

Right. It's keeping us marketing folk on our toes.

Lyn Wineman:

For sure. Paige, it is always fantastic to catch up with you. And I have to say that you are an inspiration to me and I'm sure an inspiration to others. So, thank you so much for sharing your story.

Paige Piper:

Thank you so much, Lyn. I appreciate it.

Announcer

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