

Agency For Change Podcast : Stephanie Olson, Chief Executive Officer of The Set Me Free Project

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 everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, founder and chief strategist of KidGlov with another inspiring episode of Agency For Change podcast. Today, we're talking with Stephanie Olson, chief executive officer of The Set Me Free Project. And I'm not going to lie, when I first read Stephanie's story, it gave me chills. She was at one time happily running a nonprofit women's organization but realized there was a problem. Sex trafficking was happening in her community and she decided to do something about it. So she started The Set Me Free Project and the rest is history. Stephanie, thank you so much for talking with us today.

Stephanie Olson:

Thank you, Lyn.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. This is going to be fun and would you start by sharing more about the work that you do at The Set Me Free Project?

Stephanie Olson:

Absolutely. The Set Me Free Project is very streamline focused. We learned very quickly that about 1% to 2% of trafficking victims are recovered or rescued for lack of a better word. And when this all started, I'm a mom of three and I thought, no one is telling my kids this is going on. No one is telling me as a parent and that's really how we began. Our focus is talking to youth and families to prevent human trafficking before it starts. What we do is this - we go into the schools, we talk to kiddos about healthy relationships, social media safety and human trafficking and how they are at risk. And then help them use some critical thinking steps to really figure out how they can stay safe, how they can combat some of that stuff and make those decisions on their own.

Stephanie Olson:

But we also educate parents, educators and the community at large because with prevention, we know that prevention has got to be community wide. That we have to recognize, as schools, as parents, as businesses, we all see trafficking. We all see not only the aftermath, but we see the grooming process. And I'll talk about that I'm sure at some point, but we don't always realize we see it. And so, when the community at large is trained on how to prevent human trafficking, amazing things begin to happen.

Lyn Wineman:

That is amazing. Just like our mothers always told us, "An ounce of prevention is worth a lot."

Stephanie Olson:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Mother was right.

Stephanie Olson:

That's right. I'd always tell her that now. Yes, it took me a while.

Lyn Wineman:

Stephanie, I'm really fascinated with your story. How did your path lead you to this position at this point in your life?

Stephanie Olson:

Great question. I had been working with women in the area of domestic violence, addiction, homelessness and I had also been speaking to youth, in the area of healthy relationships, in the schools. I was working with middle and high school kids and was really content doing that. I had no intentions of doing anything different. And then one of my colleagues started talking about sex trafficking and what that looked like. I had always thought of sex trafficking like the movie *Taken*, where two girls went off to Europe by themselves, they get kidnapped and shipped overseas. And that was my mindset. Then I started to learn that human trafficking looked very different than I thought it did, and that it was in my own community. And more importantly, that it was my kids who are at risk. When I recognized that, that's when the momentum started to kick in for me.

Stephanie Olson:

And there were a lot of great things happening in Nebraska in the area of victim services with human trafficking. But what I saw as a huge gap, was that no one was talking to our kids about the fact that they were at risk. And we know that for girls, the average age of human trafficking entry is around 12 years old to 19 years old. And for boys it's even younger, 10 to 11. When I realized no one was talking to my kiddos, no one was talking to me as a parent, that's where we started to pursue some options to fill this gap. How do we do that? And what does that look like? And that's how we started.

Lyn Wineman:

That is amazing. You hear so many people, that have ideas, but then to see a need, take that idea and run with it is really something. And I just have to applaud you for that.

Stephanie Olson:

Thank you.

Lyn Wineman:

Can we take an even deeper dive and really talk about how this work is making a positive impact on the world today. Because I believe, you save one person and that ripple effect makes a difference on the world.

Stephanie Olson:

Absolutely. Well, it's funny because we are in the process of launching our brand-new, updated curriculum called Ready To Stand. We've had this curriculum for years, but we've really updated it and we continue to make it better. It's all our own unique materials and things like that. We're excited about this new launch. When we started, it was one school and one school district. And now we have grown to over 400 schools between Nebraska and Iowa. We have reach in South Dakota, Kansas and moving into Illinois. It's really exciting to see how it has grown. And I will tell you, I think the reason for that is on the lines of how we're making an impact and what that looks like. When I wrote the curriculum, I really didn't write it for the subject matter, I wrote it for the youth.

Stephanie Olson:

With our youth, when they're learning something, you have 30 seconds to get their attention. And if you are not authentic, if they can tell you don't care or you're doing it for a paycheck, you're done. You have a very short amount of time to prove that you really mean what you're saying and that you're authentic and you care. So, we wrote it for the youth and we wrote it in a very engaging, interactive and humor-based fashion. And people say all the time, "How do you make sex trafficking humorous?" And you don't, you just don't. But we always say, "We take our topic very seriously, but we don't take ourselves very seriously."

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Stephanie Olson:

When you bring in humor and you bring in just small digestible chunks, kids remember, adults remember. It is so much easier to swallow and it's effective and it makes an impact. We have kids, after we leave our presentation, wanting us to come back over and over again. And that is one of the things we do. We want to be a consistent presence. We want to be in the schools every quarter, every semester, depending on the school size and their ability to bring us in. But it is that consistent presence, that authenticity and the fun with the kids that make a difference.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, that is really something. One thing that really strikes me is the fact that you said 400 schools across Nebraska and Iowa. A lot of people would think of Nebraska and Iowa, like the heart of plains, idyllic and innocent and yet it's happening. It's happening right here.

Stephanie Olson:

And not only is it happening, but we are a hotspot. It is happening in pandemic numbers. We are a hotspot. We know that because of a couple of reasons, because of I-80, certainly, going across the state of Nebraska. I-35 across Iowa. We know that those are really big things that definitely contribute to trafficking increases, but also the fact that we're centrally located and we are just great people. We are

awesome people. And so, we're trusting, and things like that, I think add to it. Now, a lot of times we think about trafficking being kidnapping, but it is really relationship building. And a lot of that relationship building happens on social media. So no matter where you are globally, you have access to the world, the world has access to you.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm also a mother of three and my kids are older now, they're in their twenties. Smartphones and laptops didn't really come about until their later years in high school. But there was a day that I sat up and realized, oh my goodness, my children have the world in the palm of their hands.

Stephanie Olson:

Literally.

Lyn Wineman:

I had been very careful about one computer in the den and then, all of a sudden, the technology changed and the access changed and I feel lucky that my kids were a little bit older at that stage, but wow, it's really something.

Stephanie Olson:

It is hard. It is very challenging as a parent.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. So now tell me this, the work of The Set Me Free Project is really heavy work. And you mentioned that it's a serious topic, but you don't take yourself seriously. How do you and your staff cope with this on a daily basis?

Stephanie Olson:

That is a great question. I always say we have the best part of human trafficking, if you will, because we are prevention. We get to talk to the youth, we get to have fun with them, so that does help. But it is a heavy topic and we have to be up to date on all of the things that we have youth consistently disclosing. And it is really, really difficult work. We make sure that we have a lot of self-care put into our staff guidelines, if you will. It's got to be up to each individual person, but I am the first to say, "You need a day off, take a day off." because it really is very emotional. We're going through a really difficult week this week. And so next week I said, "I will be requiring naps for everybody."

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. Another thing our mothers were right about.

Stephanie Olson:

Yes, exactly. I wish I would not have fought it as a toddler.

Lyn Wineman:

I want all those naps now.

Stephanie Olson:

But that self-care piece is very important. Making sure that people have a wellness plan or have opportunities to get things off their chest, that's a really important thing.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. So, Stephanie, what are some of the other challenges you face both in your work, but also as somebody who leads change?

Stephanie Olson:

Wow. That is a loaded question. I think that one of the things, and I think this is pretty standard with a lot of nonprofit leaders and possibly for-profit, I don't know, but getting past the idea, first of all, that you can do it all yourself. There is no way. So, we are very big on collaboration. We all have the same mission, so let's work together and make that happen because one organization is not going to change the world on their own. I think that's really, really important. Being a nonprofit leader, as just any leader I think, is a very lonely place. And so really having that work life balance is critical. Making sure, I always tell my staff, "Put your family first. Your family always comes first."

Stephanie Olson:

I think that is a really important piece of the puzzle because when we get those confused, it can cause a lot of stress and a lot of overwhelming thoughts. But as a leader of change, that is a great question. I really think that again, it's very similar things, connecting with people who are doing similar work and knowing that again, you cannot do the work alone. And then also remembering that it's one person at a time. I think so many times organizations just want to help the masses and that is a great goal. But recognizing that if you change the life of one person, you have done your job. I think those are important things to keep in mind.

Lyn Wineman:

I think that's really great advice. I think the, "you can't do it alone", I think is a lesson maybe a lot of us have learned in the pandemic. It's forced us to reach out and rely on others and connect with others, which at the end of the day is not going to be a bad thing.

Stephanie Olson:

I think that's great, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lyn Wineman:

Stephanie, it seems like I would be making a mistake if I didn't ask you, for the people who are listening, who have kids, who might be in a position to help with prevention, do you have a couple of top pieces of advice you can give to people?

Stephanie Olson:

Yes, absolutely. I think it's really critical to be educated. There's a lot of information about human trafficking flowing all over the place and some of it is accurate and some of it is not accurate. Social media is a huge place to find a lot of inaccurate information about human trafficking.

Lyn Wineman:

On many topics, I think.

Stephanie Olson:

On many topics, yes. And so truly get educated. And that's in part what we are here for. It doesn't matter if you have a couple of people at a kitchen table, or if you have a stadium full of people, that's what we want to do. We want to make sure that you're educated, that you know what tools you can use to help safely navigate your kiddos through this thing.

Stephanie Olson:

Because there is probably nothing more dangerous than misinformation...because what I always say is, "When we are looking for what trafficking isn't, we miss what it really is." So, it's really important that we get the actual education. The other thing to remember is it's not those kiddos over there or those over there. It is our kids, our grandkids, that are at risk. That is the key thing to remember. And again, with social media, with online gaming, they have access to the world, the world has access to them. And so it is absolutely all of our kiddos that are at risk for this and that are vulnerable to this. That is a really important thing to remember.

Lyn Wineman:

Thank you. That is really great advice. I'm going to switch gears a little bit because I am a marketing person. I always like to ask one marketing question and so I'm wondering, how do you get the word out about the great works and the teaching that you're doing at The Set Me Free Project?

Stephanie Olson:

Well, that's a really great question. And that's one of the questions we have, that we have been picking your brain a little bit about because you guys are brilliant at this and it's such an important piece of the puzzle. Fortunately, or unfortunately for us, we don't pursue opportunities. They come to us and that's a good thing, that seems like a great thing. When we started six years ago, we sent out one mass email and really have not pursued opportunities since then. Every time we speak, there's about three or four more opportunities that come along. We did literally grow from one school to 400 by word of mouth, which is outstanding. The problem with that is, you don't learn how to best market yourself.

Stephanie Olson:

And that is something we are really working on. And one of the things we are doing is really using social media, using our website and things like that, to really start to get the word out there. Outside of our great word of mouth, people just really pursue other avenues through things like that.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there is a real need for what you do. And people need those resources, so I think that's great. And I do appreciate the shout out and part of the reason we're doing this podcast at KidGlov is, we want to put the microphone in front of the good guys, literally. We want to help organizations like The Set Me Free Project tell their stories because you truly are making a difference in the world. So, thank you for the work that you do.

Lyn Wineman:

So, one other thing I have here. I also love motivational quotes, it's one of the things that gets me through the pandemic and moves me forward. So, Stephanie, could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration to others?

Stephanie Olson:

Well, so yes. I would say that one of the things that I tell people when it comes to this topic is traffickers build amazing relationships. We have to build better ones. Traffickers build incredible networks, we have to build bigger ones. And that is something that we can do just by connecting with each other, just by working together and really providing a network for our youth and being those safe people for our kiddos, so that they can go to somebody and say, "I need help." And they know that that person will respond.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. It strikes me that over my career, I've been part of different sales trainings and marketing trainings and the things they always talk about are building relationships and building networks.

Stephanie Olson:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

And this is a very negative way to teach those skills.

Stephanie Olson:

Yes, and unfortunately, they are brilliant at it and we just have to be that much stronger. And I think that we can take that and make it a positive thing if we can build those relationships and those networks and strengthen our community through them, to stop those, the bad guys essentially.

Lyn Wineman:

I really like that perspective. I really like it. Stephanie, this has been so much fun.

Stephanie Olson:

It has been.

Lyn Wineman:

I think we could do this every day.

Stephanie Olson:

I do too, actually.

Lyn Wineman:

For our listeners who would like to help, maybe donate or volunteer, or even just come to your website to become more educated, how can they find out more about The Set Me Free Project?

Stephanie Olson:

Absolutely. You can find us at setmefreeproject.net. And there you can find out all kinds of information, the things we're doing. There is a link to donate, /donate. But you can also email us at info@setmefreeproject.net. And we would love to get you connected. We are always looking for amazing volunteers. We're always looking for people who would love to be advocates for us. We have somebody who is getting ready to start... I don't know what the word is... like a guild, to help bring advocates together and volunteers and things like that. We love to work with the community and connect with them. So those are the best ways to get ahold of us.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. Once again, congratulations and thank you for the great work that you're doing and for taking time out of your very busy schedule.

Stephanie Olson:

Thank you.

Lyn Wineman:

This has been a lot of fun.

Stephanie Olson:

Thank you so much, Lyn. I appreciate it.

Announcer:

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