

Agency For Change Podcast : Sarah Sjolie, CEO of The Wellbeing Partners

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 change makers, 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 episode of Agency for Change podcast. October is National Women's Small Business Month, and I'm excited to talk with Sarah Sjolie, CEO of The Wellbeing Partners. Sarah believes everyone deserves the opportunity to be healthy and her efforts over the years, focusing on community health collaboration, have made a serious impact. Sarah, thank you so much for talking with us today. I can't wait to learn more about the great work that you're doing.

Sarah Sjolie:

Absolutely. Thanks, first of all, Lyn, for having me today and giving me the opportunity to talk about The Wellbeing Partners. My team is amazing. We have about eight of us. We have about 120 member organizations, big and small and in between, and we have a huge, awesome board of about 23 leaders and all of us together are rocking and rolling. So I'm really excited to share more with you today.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. Sarah, would you start us off by sharing more about the work that you do with The Wellbeing Partners?

Sarah Sjolie:

So The Wellbeing Partners, our mission is to build wellbeing into the way communities grow and do business. Essentially what that looks like is you don't have to have a public health degree to think with a lens of health or to wear a little cape on your back to just think about health first. So when we're building a park or when we're redesigning a school, how do we think about connecting families to that school? How do we think about safe lighting? How do we think about the context of traffic around a key asset area? Then from the business perspective, what we don't realize is the benefits that we interact with internally from a business impact our health, right? If premiums are really expensive or if we have a difficult time accessing mental health care because our copay is exorbitant per visit, that's going to impact the care that we receive as well as how companies invest in the community. Companies that get smart about it really align their community investment, similar to the health systems, with where they want to see change in the world and we help them do that.

Lyn Wineman:

So you've talked about building healthy communities. And, reading and learning about you, I know this has been a passion of yours for a long time. What sparked that interest for you and led you down this path?

Sarah Sjolie:

It might sound cheesy, but I feel like it's what I was born to do. Since I can remember, I was that kid that started a neighborhood recycling program. I got my neighbors behind it. To my mom's chagrin, I staged a protest in one of our local delis. I'm originally from Fremont. Because they were serving things on styrofoam. Back in the '80 things were not recyclable styrofoam. So it's just ... I've always been a passionate individual, wrote letters to the president from as long as I can remember. I was that kid and really growing up, I didn't realize public health or community health was an area of interest, and so just to talk about that for a moment, I think there are youth out there who are change advocates, and they're just trying to figure out where to place that. There may not be a degree specifically for what you want to do at the moment.

Sarah Sjolie:

Now there are lots of undergrad public health degrees, but what I chose to study was a combination of journalism to take the complex and really simplify, to make it accessible for all, and biology, science. I love science. I love the application of science and fact, but it needs again to be accessible to all people and what I, again, really wanted to do was study public health. So my master's degree is in public administration, how to serve in the public interest, how to look at systems and who they're benefiting and who they're placing burden upon and specifically how to lead a nonprofit organization. So early on, I got to work with a local health system who's been acquired a couple of times, but I was able to, from a very young age, message and write from internal communications. So essentially we were an internal communications agency for all the departments, and that was just an incredible experience to be able to support change management, the rollout of different benefits, design plans, etc.

Sarah Sjolie:

But what I realized about myself was while it was exciting to learn how corporation is messaging and working, my passion really led with how are we helping others? How are we driving change externally? So after my master's degree, I was able to move into an department where I was part of the corporate social responsibility approach and I got to start working on a healthy weight in youth strategies at the time. We don't call them that anymore because we know that healthy weight is one component of a healthy youth. Mental health is just as important as physical health, financial, access to healthy foods, access to active transportation or being physically active. I guess it's a long, long answer, but it's been a lifelong passion, and my hope is that each year I continue to learn more and contribute more so we can continue to measure impact, but I will probably work in this area of business until I am no longer serving.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. Sarah, I completely have this picture of eight year old you staging the protest. I think that's so fantastic and I think it's a great reminder to all of us who are parents to really appreciate and honor our kids' passion because we're really formulating that path for them, and I think that's really great. Sarah, I'd like to take a deeper dive and talk about how your work with The Wellbeing Partners is making a positive impact on the world.

Sarah Sjolie:

Thanks for asking, Lyn. We have an incredible lineup of programs in our first year. We're about 10 months old. One of them being that we're working with the Douglas County Health Department to support small and minority owned businesses to plan for recovery and plan to keep their employees safe during COVID. That's a really big one because if you're a large corporation, you might have a whole

department supporting you, but in small businesses, it's higher risk and you may not have access to all the evidence-based resources. So our team is working on that. Another component of our work is supporting youth in their holistic wellbeing. So we have a program called Activate Youth and through that program, we are working with several Omaha public schools on safe routes to school to try to encourage more youth and their parents to bike, walk and roll to and from school. We also promote Healthy Kids Countdown, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Go, and that essentially is five fruits and vegetables, four servings of dairy. Oh my gosh. I'm not going to remember all of them.

Lyn Wineman:

That's all right. That's why there's the program for people to remember and learn, right?

Sarah Sjolie:

Yeah, I used to implement that way back in the day. But anyway, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Go is a Healthy Kids Countdown that helps kids make healthy choices related to what they're eating and to reduce screen time and make sure that they get at least one hour of physical activity each day. We also support change agents within the school, which is really fun. So principals, counselors, teachers who are those change agents that are trying to make a difference. We're supporting them with the resources, social support and just coaching to make healthy policy changes. An example of that is we know that kiddos will actually eat more lunch if you have recess before lunch. We know that some schools for kiddos who have behavioral health issues will withhold recess for punishment, and we know that that's not an evidence-based practice. So those are some of the ways that we help schools to just change their environments, to be healthier for kids, more readily access to water, etc.

Sarah Sjolie:

So that's Activate Youth, and then probably what we're also most excited about right now is a mental health stigma reduction campaign that is funded by Mutual Omaha Foundation, CHI Health, as well as the Sherwood Foundation, and it is an unprecedented community campaign led through social media and through just everyday people telling their story. The whole predicate of it is showing that myself you, others, are allies or are individuals who have been impacted by either a life situation or a diagnosis related to mental health, and that it's okay. That it is actually what makes us unique, what makes us different and what makes us an individual to just normalize the discussion around mental health. We know that from an employer standpoint, mental health ... this was even before COVID, so it's even more paramount during COVID that mental health is a critical health issue. It is a reason behind a lot of turnover, but from what we're hearing from our corporate members, it is a reason behind lost revenue. It's a reason behind productivity challenges.

Sarah Sjolie:

So if we can wrap around support to individuals and tell our stories, that we're not ashamed that we seek therapy or that we have had challenges throughout our life. In fact, it's what makes us even more unique as a community and as companies in particular. So that is running right now. In parallel to that is a Spokesimals Midwest Campaign. It's also focused on mental health, but it's maybe for folks who aren't as comfortable talking about mental health. So you will simply submit a photo of your pet with a little bit of information, and then the creative copywriters from our partners will write a little message tied to mental health. So I submitted my dog June and June makes me run with her all the time and running helps my mental health. So that's simply what they wrote to in my instance, and it's a nice, really cute way to get people thinking and talking about the support that we all need.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. That's an important principle in advertising, that you want to make things entertaining and accessible. If you just come straight on at it as mental health, sometimes that can be kind of scary. And also, wow, I did not realize you have all of those programs under your umbrella and I wasn't planning to ask this, Sarah, but as a small business owner, do you have some advice for me on things I could do to help make sure we've got a culture of wellness at KidGlov?

Sarah Sjolie:

I think there's a couple of things I would share, and really we have experts on our team that work on this every single day so I'm sharing basically on behalf of our team of experts. But yeah, I guess first and foremost, making sure culture is psychologically safe, that folks can address when they might have a personal issue or when maybe there's a misunderstanding or just healthy conflict. Conflict is not bad. Healthy conflict is amazing, and how to work through that. Benefits designed for small businesses. Sometimes there are not a lot of options and some small businesses are still stuck on the exchanges, et cetera, but making sure that when benefits design comes around, right, and the re-up of benefits comes around and we're in the same boat as every small nonprofit, looking at the combination of what is a deductible for a family or an individual? What is the percentage of premium that the individual is paying in relation to their actual salary?

Sarah Sjolie:

I know that there are some companies out there that when it comes to specialty care, that is a lot higher as far as a copay or mental health care. If someone has to pay, and I'll just throw out a number there, somebody has to pay \$100, \$150, \$200 every time they'd like to see a mental health practitioner, we know that they're less likely to seek care, even if they really need it. So those are some benefits design components. I think externally, and I think KidGlov does this really well, just knowing Lisa Bowen, creating a team atmosphere and really being banding together to do good out in the community. I think that that really brings people together. We all love what we do, hopefully. I mean, if you're in the right role, I know I do. Even then sometimes we can get burnt out, but if the team can have fun together, be vulnerable together, create amazing things out in the world and celebrate together, that also creates that psychological safety and a culture of health.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great advice, and you are right. We are very lucky to have Lisa Bowen on our team and she is fantastic in making sure that we've got a great culture and she's just a great human being. That helps too. So Sarah, we've talked about a lot of great things. What are some of the biggest challenges you face both in your work, but also as someone who leads change?

Sarah Sjolie:

I think in our first year, our challenge is COVID.

Lyn Wineman:

COVID is a big one, right? A big one.

Sarah Sjolie:

Well, I would say, and this is to no disrespect for all the lives lost and just economic hardship that continues to be pervasive out there. The challenge was COVID hit obviously March 12th around these parts, and we were just one quarter into our very first fiscal year as a newly merged nonprofit. So with that comes a lot of challenges as you're building culture, as you're building a new team. I think the blessing of that is we were given some space to ask the questions about why are we doing XYZ? How can we improve XYZ? What I've seen is just incredible innovation from our team. So yes, we couldn't have our big full-on educational conference this year, but our team figured out how to do it with less costs and online platform and the most amazing content we've ever had. So they got innovative. They just got creative.

Sarah Sjolie:

We saw our team make some just amazing, really funny videos about our team to share with the members, which, again, helps build culture, that conversation. They went above and beyond to make it fun and make it relatable. So that's been a challenge. I think, again, though, it's a blessing when you have such an amazing team because you see people just rise to the challenge and excel. I think the second that I would share, the second challenge I would share, is mental health is a really tough issue. I think it's important for all non-profits and organizations to find their direct contribution. So which problem are you trying to solve within the big pervasive issue? The one that we're trying to solve right now is we want to normalize the conversation around mental health. We know that workplaces, oftentimes there's discrimination. We know that even within housing sometimes there's discrimination, even among family and friend groups.

Sarah Sjolie:

So we are doing an evaluation, pre and post, on the campaign, and it will be published in a peer reviewed journal article. Did we reduce felt stigma related to mental health by 10%? That's our shared goal. So we're really hoping for that. But I think just that mental health is so big and we are so, so thankful for the many, many mental health providers and coalitions that are out there working directly with kids, directly with elders, directly with parents, all across the board. What I would say is The Wellbeing Partners is serving in a prevention space. We don't want someone to get into the suicide prevention realm. We would rather have someone connect with us, see someone like themselves and say, "Okay, I'll go to therapy. I think I'll start that." Or not even therapy. "Okay. I think I'm going to start journaling," or, "I'm going to just pick up the phone next time and call my friend on a really tough day."

Sarah Sjolie:

That's what our hope is upstream because we know that more people are struggling with suicide ideation and more people are struggling with some of the downstream effects. I think the third thing related to that is prevention isn't sexy. There's a lot of controversy out there about masks. Masks do work as a public health intervention. There are lots of studies about all kinds of different health issues and I'll just give you one story. Out of Camden, New Jersey, there were a group of senior individuals that kept coming into the emergency department over and over and over with all kinds of illness and it was costing Camden, New Jersey a lot of money because they were a lot of low-income individuals. Once a home visit was actually conducted, what they found, and this is classic public health, is they all lived at the higher levels of a public housing tower and they were overheating and having all kinds of related health issues. So what was the solution? They bought each individual an air conditioner, installed it and taught them how to work it, and they didn't come in.

Lyn Wineman:

And saved a lot of money and made people healthier. Amazing! Amazing!

Sarah Sjolie:

Yes. So if you plug and play that to nearly every health issue, I mean, we don't recognize public health gave us fluoride in our water, which helps protect our teeth, seatbelts, all kinds of things. Right? We just don't even think about the realm of public health. I would say prevention isn't sexy, but if you have a moment to drop a helpful, kind email to the Douglas County Health Department, the Sarpy, Cass Health Departments or Pottawatomie County Health Department, some of our partners, they are doing amazing, amazing work and it's hard work and it is saving lives, whether or not we see that, and wear our masks.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes. Wear your mask, that's the public service announcement of today, for sure. I know our public health departments are just working like crazy right now and not always with a lot of positive fanfare. I've never heard that before. Drop a note to your public health department and tell them thank you. That's fantastic. Fantastic. I love that you've talked about innovation and the things that you are doing. I think that's a great coping mechanism for all of us during the pandemic. I'm just curious too. I'd love a little more advice for you on your philosophy of moving forward in the face of adversity. Because let's face it, 2020 has been the year of adversity, right?

Sarah Sjolie:

My philosophy in moving forward in face of adversity is always follow the mission and the mission doesn't steer you wrong. Our mission is closely tied to supporting organizations and supporting businesses. So we might see something in the news, we might be passionate about something, but we first and foremost go to those stakeholders and vet the solutions with them, what they're seeing out there, and that helps us understand how to respond.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. That was great. I'm going to say that again. I wrote it down. Follow the mission and the mission doesn't steer you wrong. That's great. Sarah, I'd love to hear about something you're really excited about working on right now.

Sarah Sjolie:

What we're working on that is super exciting is our mental health stigma reduction campaign. It's the first time that area health departments across Nebraska and Southwest Iowa are teaming up to tackle one health issue that was in the mind of everyone that we talked to all across the region, and it's amazing to hear the stories of brave, resilient, amazing humans that none of us have at all quite figured out, but you watch and you read a story and you're like, "I see myself in that," or, "I've been there. I could feel that," which just shows us that the more people we get engaged, the more relatable conversations about this can be, and we really hope to shape culture to just be more supportive and open for each of us.

Lyn Wineman:

I think that's really great. It really warms my heart because I can just see the need for that and if people feel like they can reach out for support without stigma, you just know that's not going to only help them,

but it's going to help all of the people around them as well. So, Sarah, what advice do you have for somebody out there, young or old, that wants to lead positive change in the world?

Sarah Sjolie:

I think there's a misnomer about what it is to be a leader or how to lead. So I have a philosophy that everyone is a leader, wherever they are. It doesn't matter what your positional power is, or your title, et cetera. Anyone who chooses can get up that day and choose to lead wherever they are. In fact, we need people to do that. I think that that's really important. So I would just say, as far as advice for someone who aspires to lead change, just know that you can do that without any sort of magic wand or knighting from anyone else. Just go and do something because the world needs more people who just want to go out and figure it out. I would also say that I've gotten it wrong a lot of times, and I'm not ashamed to say that. I learn as I go, I fail forward, and our team is situated really in a learning innovation environment in that same way. So just go out and try something that you're passionate about, that leads to positive change, and celebrate just taking action.

Lyn Wineman:

I think that's great. I too, I'm a huge believer too, that everything you do makes a difference. If each of us just did one small thing every day, the collective impact of that would be amazing. So now I have an advertising and marketing background, and I think you have a journalism and communications background as well. I always have to ask one question related to this topic. Can you share how you get the word out about the good work that's being done at The Wellbeing Partners?

Sarah Sjolie:

We have a website. We are on Facebook and LinkedIn and Instagram. So those are some tools that we use. We largely depend upon a word of mouth network from our members, our partners and organizations that we work with to help us tell our story. We're certainly always improving and iterating how we share our stories within our first year. So, yeah, I think we're on a lot of the traditional tools. We do have a blog, which I love because that's been our chance this year to ... Tonya Vyhlidal, an incredible leader on our team has shared a lot about being mindful and practice of yoga and just being heart-centered. We've had other folks talk about how to connect to resources in the community. So it's a little bit more of an authentic conversation that goes beyond just posting news stories.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. That's great advice for everyone. I think really particularly during the pandemic, all of those online tools become more and more and more important to us. One thing I also love is motivational quotes. That's what's helping me get through the pandemic, really. I'd love to hear some Sarah Sjolie words of wisdom that I could use for inspiration.

Sarah Sjolie:

I use other people's quotes.

Lyn Wineman:

I know, but this is your chance so that other people can use your quote.

Sarah Sjolie:

That's profound. Oh, that's funny.

Lyn Wineman:

Sarah, while you're thinking, everybody always tells me this is the hardest question I ask. While you're thinking, I actually wrote down something you said earlier that I thought that is really cool. When I asked you about your philosophy on moving forward in the face of adversity, you said, "Follow the mission, the mission doesn't steer you wrong." I wrote that down because I thought, "You know what? That sounds like great advice for business, for nonprofit, but also for individuals." Because when you have a personal passion or a personal mission, whenever you're feeling confused or a little off target, or you're wondering, "What should I do? I'm overwhelmed," when you go back to that core and focus on the mission, you know you're going in the right way. You didn't give yourself credit for that, but I thought those were great words of wisdom.

Sarah Sjolie:

Yeah. I mean, I always use Margaret Mead's quote, right? So, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." We use that a lot in coalition because I can't tell you how much prevention folks get done with elbow grease of partners. I think that's huge. I guess as far as personal words of wisdom, I would say absolutely always listen to your gut no matter what, and find partners along your journey that you can trust wholeheartedly that have your back and are willing to go to courageous places with you because they're willing to make a big difference.

Lyn Wineman:

That's beautiful. That's really great, really great. Sarah, for our listeners who would like to learn more about the work that you're doing with The Wellbeing Partners, how can they find out more?

Sarah Sjolie:

Listeners can find out more about The Wellbeing Partners by finding us on Facebook. Our handle is The Wellbeing Partners or at our wellbeingpartners.org website. We're also on LinkedIn and Instagram.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. I hope everybody checks that out and I feel like I could just keep talking to you all day, but we've come to the end of our podcast, Sarah, and it's been such a pleasure. I just appreciate you taking the time to share your story with us today.

Sarah Sjolie:

It's been wonderful talking with you, Lyn. Thank you.

Announcer:

You've been listening to Agency for Change. If you're enjoying these inspiring stories, please subscribe. Is there a change maker you'd like to recommend for this podcast? Just visit the [KidGlov](http://KidGlov.com) website at kidglov.com to share or to listen to more stories about the people behind positive change.