

Agency For Change Podcast : Scott Young, Executive Director of the Food Bank of Lincoln

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 episode of Agency For Change podcast. I'm going to start us off today with an alarming fact. It is estimated that 237,440 Nebraskans are food insecure. And now as a result of the global pandemic, Feeding America projects this number will rise by 16 to 17% with a 24 to 26% increase in food insecure kids. Wow. Today we're talking with Scott Young, Executive Director of the Food Bank of Lincoln, and he is going to share more about the work his team is doing to help alleviate hunger. Scott, thanks so much for talking with us today.

Scott Young:

Lyn, glad to be with you and great to be here, even if it's only electronically.

Lyn Wineman:

Right. A lot of us are getting together electronically nowadays. Scott, would you start by sharing more about the work that you do with the Food Bank of Lincoln?

Scott Young:

Gladly Lyn. The Food Bank started in 1981. A group of community-minded citizens put this nonprofit together and their first full year was 1982 when they distributed something like 332,000 meals. At that time, that must have been a staggering amount of food that they had put together and turned around back to the community. Food banking was a new idea then. They kept this thing moving and conditions changed and ideas changed and need grew. The Food Bank has moved three times up to our present location, and we moved here in 1997.

Scott Young:

Along about 2000, the need in America really started to spike and really started to increase dramatically. And I got this job on September 10th of 2001 the day before September 11th.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, my goodness. Wow.

Scott Young:

Yes. And I thought, "Well, this is great. I'm going to be presiding over the train wreck of one of Lincoln's great institutions." I was really concerned, there was great concern. You will remember that Lyn...

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Scott Young:

... about the economy and what's going to happen. And there was a lot of anxiety, somehow this organization pushed right through it. And somehow, I pushed right through it. Frankly, I didn't know what I was doing, but we had a patient board of directors and a key staff person that stayed here at the Food Bank. Wende Baker was my predecessor. Wende and those boards previous to September 10th, 2001 had set great systems in place and some great branding things. And so we drink water from wells dug by others. That was the case here at the Food Bank of Lincoln.

Scott Young:

So, we went along for a couple of years and along about 2007, we really got a lot more aggressive about what we were doing. We started doing a mobile pantry operation, which had a little controversy across the Feeding America network. We're in a network of 200 food banks and I like change and welcome change and it seemed to me that this was worth a try. So, with the Center for People in Need, we started a mobile pantry program down at a small church, just north of the viaduct on North 27th Street and we had a great turnout. That led to a lot more mobile pantry activity, which in short order, doubled the amount of food and pounds of food we were distributing - up to where in fiscal year 20, which ended June 30th, we connected people to 11.5 million meals.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow!

Scott Young:

Yeah, it is a big number. I think most people are surprised at the scale of the Food Bank when they hear about it. But we have 55 agency partners. We have 90 school partners when schools are in a normal situation, which they aren't. Now we do this aggressive mobile pantry program and we do food stamp outreach, which has really been a game changer for us in terms of the millions of meals mark. And we also do a thing called Bridges Out of Poverty, which is designed to shorten the lines of people here at the Food Bank of Lincoln.

Scott Young:

We have evolved a great deal from when I showed up at the door in 2001 and we continue to evolve and the pandemic certainly has evolved us more quickly and more dramatically than we might have expected, including the big number. I think going into FY21, which is what we're in, or FY20 I should say, Lyn, I thought maybe we could get to 10.2 million meals and that was kind of a stretch goal for us, but I thought we could do it. The pandemic then launched us into this entirely different orbit and put more food into the system. And we ended up at that 11.5 million meal mark. I tell the board on a monthly basis, if not a weekly basis, "Don't get too used to these numbers because they may not stand up over the test of time." But for right now, we're getting more food into Southeast Nebraska than we ever have previously.

Lyn Wineman:

Scott, it's got to be a really interesting dynamic because there's a part of this where it'd be great if the Food Bank was out of business and people didn't need food anymore, but it's amazing the capacity that you have built over the years through the different programs. And since you brought up the pandemic, I'd really love to talk about what you're doing because I know everywhere in the world, the need for food has increased. I've heard a lot of stories about the great work that your team is doing to shift and serve a greater need, but yet with some restrictions of social distancing. Could you talk about that?

Scott Young:

Lyn, back in February and March, we had a couple of young women leaders here in the Food Bank that had their finger more on the pulse of all this than I did. There's nothing unusual about this. And we gathered and said, "We have to think really purposefully about this. This is coming." They had a much better grip on coming circumstances than I did. What we did was, we divided into three teams, a work from home team, a green team, and an orange team - green and orange are basically the Food Bank colors that we use. The idea was to stay open and not get sidetracked by a positive diagnosis. That's why we had those two teams, green and orange, begin to work separately. Then if there was a positive diagnosis and we had to quarantine an entire team, we would have another team of people that would be able to come in and work.

Scott Young:

Those two teams alternated weeks and it really has kept us safe. I was on the work from home team and there is work clearly that can be done from home, which a lot of us have found to be a possibility. I did that March, April, May, and June. And in July I started coming back into the Food Bank because I just couldn't stay...not being around us.

Scott Young:

At the same time, the federal government started a number of programs that poured fresh produce into the Feeding America food bank network system. And beginning in April, May, June, July and August, we set records every month for distribution. We did it by doing the drive-through mobile pantry distributions. It's no contact, low contact, kept clients safe, kept staff safe. We stopped having volunteers in the building, Lyn. So many of our volunteers are 70 plus and we love them dearly, they love us dearly, but the risk was too great to have those folks in. And that's really been difficult. We're trying to stay in touch with these folks, but sitting here now on the 5th of October, I have no idea when, or if, they'll be able to come back into the Food Bank and do their great volunteering that they do. So suddenly we were tasked, morally and philosophically, with getting more food distributed with less resources, just like you have identified. And this outstanding group has done it.

Lyn Wineman:

I've heard you have an amazing team, Scott. I know you have a lot of great volunteers and when the volunteers backed out, the team had to step up, didn't they?

Scott Young:

Yeah, it's been an interesting time, but we're not alone in that. Everybody I know that has a business or is engaged in some businesses, has had things up-ended. And as you and I have talked Lyn, I fear for a lot of small businesses in Lincoln and across America. This has been such an economically challenging time for these businesses and these charities and these public institutions that we have. No one is, as we've

found here, no one is free from risks here with the pandemic. And one of our two top decision-making things, I think, that have been important at the Food Bank. We were having trouble making decisions about what we were going to do back in February and March. I woke up one morning, and I thought, "We got to have some priorities and I've got to set them out there. We're not arriving at these things by consensus."

Scott Young:

So, I called a little short meeting when I got to work that morning. I said, "These are going to be our priorities - getting food to people, staff safety, volunteer safety, and an eye on the future of the Food Bank." And I said, "In everything we do, we need to run through those filters." So now seven months later, those are still our filters. One of the things that we try to think about here Lyn, is not what others are doing or what the president says we should do, or what the governor says we should do. We're going to do what we think we should do, independent of this other stuff, based on the knowledge we have, which is limited, or the people that we ask for knowledge about this stuff. We're really working hard to try and balance those four priorities. And sometimes they're in conflict, getting more food to more people is in conflict with staff safety. I understand that, our staff certainly understands it, but we're all trying to balance all these things. Lyn, you're not old enough to remember The Ed Sullivan Show...

Lyn Wineman:

I am, I am, I am.

Scott Young:

Okay, I didn't know...

Lyn Wineman:

Thank you for that generosity, though Scott.

Scott Young:

But you remember, The Ed Sullivan Show about once a month, it seems like they'd have a juggler on who would spin plates on sticks.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, my goodness, yes.

Scott Young:

He'd have four or five sticks going. And one of them would fall, one of the plates would fall and smash and then he'd hustle over. This is what so many of us are doing right now. It's what's happening at the Food Bank of Lincoln, we're spinning all these plates and trying to keep them up off the stage floor, and it's a riot, and it is taxing, it is anxiety producing, but it's a riot to try and keep all these different things moving. All of us right now are learning a lot about ourselves and our businesses we run, and our community and how that works. And I think going forward, this will have been a big opportunity for all of us to think about things differently.

Lyn Wineman:

Scott, I've interviewed a couple of business owners, one woman from Fort Collins, Colorado last week, who said, "I think I'm on pivot plan number 17." And every time I think I've got it, I've got to pivot again. I spoke with someone else who's in the sustainability industry. And he said, "This is terrible, but there are going to be some good things that come out of it." And that's the way I've got it in my mind. Just got to keep looking at it as, "Hey, we've got to just keep working as hard and fast as we can work and keep those plates in the air." Our arms are tired, but there's not a lot of options, right?

Scott Young:

That's right.

Lyn Wineman:

So, Scott, based on that, I do imagine there's a number of people who find themselves in need of food for the first time. If they are in our area or even if they're not, what would you recommend they do to seek services?

Scott Young:

The key thing for us in terms of information and referral Lyn, would be our website, which KidGlov has played a big role in. On our website, there are resources where people can find out where food will be distributed today, what our schedule for this week is, which changes on a weekly basis in terms of pivoting, perpetually in pivot form. There is also food stamp outreach information on there, folks can get hooked up with our food stamp professionals. We have three people that do nothing but work on the SNAP applications and food stamp outreach. The truth of all of this Lyn, is that the federal government is the biggest answer to keeping people fed. It's not food banks. And we'd like to take full credit for being the number one feeder in America. But we're not, it's the federal government..between what happens with the SNAP program, with Senior Citizens Program, with the free and reduced lunch program for kids. The Lincoln public schools are now feeding more people, with more food this week, than everything the Food Bank does.

Scott Young:

These programs are really critically important to people. And in terms of thinking about that new person that has not used the charitable food system before, our best message is, "Don't worry about it. We are here for specifically this reason and we're not going to judge people at the Food Bank of Lincoln." We believe that people receive enough judgment on a daily basis from a number of quarters and they don't need to get it from us. If someone shows up at a food line, at an agency of the Food Bank or one of our mobile pantry operations, or if they call the SNAP hotlines that we have, that's enough for us. If you didn't need food, you wouldn't be calling, or you wouldn't be waiting in line for 45 minutes to get a box of food that you need.

Scott Young:

People are worried about it. We've heard people say, "I hate to have to do this." And I understand that, I empathize with that, but we don't want folks to worry about it. Food is fundamental. And if you are struggling and maybe have found a rock bottom that you never could have imagined, which is one of the stories we have lately, not to worry, the Food Bank is here specifically to lend a hand to folks that need it. No shame, no questions asked, no embarrassment. We do the best we can about that. But it's being poor and being in a situation where you're not able to feed your children or feed your elderly mother

that's living in your home. That's not something anybody wants to do. It's not something you'd take great pride in. We ask people to put that aside and don't worry about it, this is why there's a food bank.

Scott Young:

Lyn, to your point about in the ideal food banks would put themselves out of business. We talk a lot about that on the national level. And it's not a realistic conversation to say, "That's our goal is to put ourselves out of business." That's not going to happen, unfortunately. So, one of our responsibilities is to think about, how do we think about putting ourselves out of business or lessening our business? Is there a way that in 10 years we could be distributing less meals, we helped enough people get out of the line so that we didn't need to distribute as many meals? Those are the thought provokers that we go round and round about with ourselves here at the Food Bank.

Scott Young:

But I think those are the right questions, are we serious about this work? And how do we think differently about it? You've said it Lyn, and I've said it already once on the podcast today. Alynn Sampson, one of our young leaders, when we were gathering in February and March, she insisted that we think differently about our work. And that's been one of our mantras - we can cling to what we used to do, or we can think differently about it and look for some new solutions. And for any of us and those of us in the nonprofit line of work, I think this pandemic calls us to think quite differently, we just have to.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. Scott, I appreciate what you said there, because the pandemic has brought circumstances that nobody could have prepared for, best laid plans, and I think this is a year that you do have to open up and think of things differently and access the services that you need, because that is why they're there. And also thank you for the shout out about the website. That was our pleasure to work with you. I remember when we started with your team, they very clearly said the number one goal for that website is to help people access food. And so, if they go to your website, they'll be able to find that very quickly. I want to switch gears a little bit because I am fascinated with your story Scott. How did your path lead you to this position at this point in your life?

Scott Young:

I was in radio for 28 years and in my mid-forties, my wife convinced me, she'd been after me about it, I never finished a college degree. So, in my mid-forties, I went back to school, to Nebraska Wesleyan. I didn't go as a non-traditional student because I did a morning show, I could go in the afternoons to classes. I went with a bunch of 20 year-olds and that was a riot.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, my goodness. I actually...I hear for your professors, like their surprise...Scott Young shows up in your classroom.

Scott Young:

Yeah. I had Rachel Pokora as a communications professor at Wesleyan and she might've been 29 years old and she's in her first semester at Wesleyan. I show up and sprawl out at my desk and she's thinking, "Oh my God, who's this guy." We've become fast friends, but for Rachel, it was daunting. It was daunting for me every year or every semester when I'd go and walk in to a classroom of 20 year-olds and

go, "Hey you all, hello, I'm here to learn." But it was a great experience for me. And so, I get my degree at 50. I'll cut to the chase and get back on track... So, I do my degree...

Lyn Wineman:

Congratulations.

Scott Young:

I applied for the job at the Food Bank.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh.

Scott Young:

Excuse me.

Lyn Wineman:

It's okay. Let's take a little break. Oh, it's an emotional time.

Scott Young:

No, yeah. So, I get my degree at 50. I applied for the job and I'm the runner up.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh no, you're kidding me.

Scott Young:

Yeah. So, I'm the runner up and the last interview was between me and a guy who was a food banker who I've come to know since, he was in Missouri at the time. The last interviews were on a Friday and I got a call on that Friday afternoon and they said, "We've decided to go with the other guy." I said, "Okay, well, that's fine. I appreciate that. Thanks for the opportunity." And I was just mad all weekend.

Lyn Wineman:

I understand. I get that.

Scott Young:

Yep. And so Monday, they call me and say, "We're having trouble getting together with this gentleman on benefits and salary. Do you still want the job?" And I said, "Well, you have to understand that for the last 48 hours, I've been doing nothing but cursing you up and down." I encouraged the board there, I said, "Get together with this guy. He's who you want. And that's what you should do." But they couldn't. They called me back, and I took the job and it was the greatest break of my life.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, that's fantastic.

Scott Young:

It's actually the greatest professional break of my life. It's changed everything for me. And I think people are happy they hired me.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm sure that they are.

Scott Young:

Yeah, it's been a well-balanced thing. That was 19 years ago. Now all those board members are no longer on the board, but I'm still in contact with many of them. And many of them still are great friends of the Food Bank and still very supportive. But this is testament to being able to learn things because... that was one of the themes, "Well, he's not qualified for this job, but we believe he can learn to do it." And I've not quite learned it yet Lyn, but I'm still working on it. Is that fair to say?

Lyn Wineman:

I think everything I've heard says you're quite accomplished at it, Scott. So, I think-

Scott Young:

I'm getting by here. I'm getting by Lyn.

Lyn Wineman:

I've heard a lot more than that, as a matter of fact, I think that's such a great story. I'm really curious. What advice would you have for others out there who want to lead change and make a positive impact?

Scott Young:

That was the point I hoped to circle back to. If someone wants to do something different, take some baby steps and commit to doing it and tell people you're going to do it. I had to tell people I'm going back to school and I'm going to get my degree. Then I had to hold myself accountable for that. But the thing is if I had gone back to school and wasn't comfortable with it, or just didn't feel like I could have done it, I could have stopped. That's the thing. Take some risk. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out. Lyn, you've taken risks, I've taken career risks. It was a risk when I took the Food Bank job. If it wouldn't have worked out, I'd have done something different.

Lyn Wineman:

There you go.

Scott Young:

And so my message to folks who are in their thirties or forties or fifties or sixties, if there's something you want to do, take some steps in those directions and see what happens. And it's hard, some people are more risk averse than I was at that time or that I am now. I like change and I like risk. My wife wouldn't say that I like change and risk, but I do. I just really encourage people every chance I get. If they've got something in mind, take some steps toward it.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great.

Scott Young:

Don't be self-defeating about it. Because there was no way I could have gotten this job and I got it.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great advice, Scott. And also a shout out to your wife there. I too benefit from a very supportive spouse who challenges me and supports me both. And it's a great thing to have as well. Now you spent the first, I think 28 years of your career in the field of communications and I'm a lifelong advertising person. So, I have to ask you one advertising question. Can you share how you get the word out about the good work that's being done at the Food Bank?

Scott Young:

We have a number of people here who... John Mabry, he's our development director. He worked in the newspaper business for years. I worked in communications for years. Michaella Kumke is our director of community engagement. She has a great background in media and public relations. And I think, some of this goes back to Wende Baker, when the Food Bank was starting, relationships were forged with KFOR radio, that was a community property. And there were some things that happened from a branding standpoint, in what were then the traditional media newspaper and KFOR radio and 10/11, those three entities all were extremely supportive of the Food Bank. When I got over here that all continued. So that a foundation was built from a branding standpoint.

Scott Young:

So now here in 2020, social media is the thing, and those other things still are extremely important relationships for us. But I think we've done a nice job of social media awareness. I think our network, Feeding America, has done an exceptional job of getting that national message out, and the idea of food banking.

Scott Young:

And part of it, Lynn, is the luck piece that you and I have talked about, when the pandemic started... Let's take a hurricane, for example, in terms of a disaster. A hurricane hits some remote town in Florida, the Red Cross goes in and they're there for a month and they're helping and helpful. And then they pull out with the food banks. And this disaster, this form of disaster, food banks were here before the pandemic started, we're here during the pandemic, helping out. And everybody knows we're going to be here after the pandemic is over.

Scott Young:

I think that's one of the reasons that Feeding America as a national entity, and food banks locally, just really emerged as an important community, more important community property than they previously had been thought of. This community has always thought highly of the Food Bank. It has been well engaged in it, but I think the pandemic has pushed it further toward the top. I think that's one of the... it's not a positive of the pandemic, but it is a result of the panic. I think that we will continue to grow from it because of the increased public awareness about poverty issues in our community.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm glad you brought up the notion of relationships with media partners because sometimes social media and the digital world are hot and sexy right now. But boy, our traditional media partners can be

so important to us. And you know that better than anyone. I have one more big question for you here. I love motivational quotes. It's one of the things that inspires me through tough times. Could you give us a few of your own Scott Young words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration to others?

Scott Young:

This is a longer story than you need here, but when I was in radio, I was at a conference and I saw a professor from NYU and a student came to him who had studied for his bachelors and his masters. He said, "Professor, I've taken all these classes from you. And I still don't understand how to be successful. What would you tell me? How can I be successful?" And the professor said, "Show up, show up on time and show up ready to work." He said, "If you show up, you're ahead of about 50% of Americans. If you show up on time, you're in the top core tile. And if you show up ready to work, you're in an elite group of people." Now that's funny and there is some truth to it.

Scott Young:

But I also think, and I tell people that when I came to work at the Food Bank and I think they go, "Yeah, that guy's nuts. He doesn't really know what he's talking about." But if you do those three things Lyn, the rest is going to take care of itself. And so I've try to show up and show up on time and ready to work.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Scott Young:

The other thing I would say is, people need to feel like they're loved and listened to. That advice from my brother-in-law Bill Calhoun was as good of advice as I got before I started here at the Food Bank. I think it's true. And it's true of people you work for. It's true people you work with. It's true of people you meet. And I don't think there's enough of that. In this day and age good listening is becoming an increasingly rare quality. And at a time like this people need to be listened to.

Lyn Wineman:

Scott, that's great, a bonus you gave us two.

Scott Young:

Yeah, I did.

Lyn Wineman:

You know what, there was also something you said at the beginning that I wrote down, you said, "We drink water from the wells dug by others." And you mentioned community-minded citizens. It makes me think, you mentioned a lot of names during this podcast of people who were impactful in your life and who were impactful in the history and success of the Food Bank. I think this is a time for us to stand up and be community-minded and think about what wells are we digging for the people of the next generation and the next generations.

Scott Young:

I couldn't agree more Lyn. I mean, what we do now, shouldn't only affect us. There should be a benefit for others, look at Lincoln High School, and look at the State Capitol, the people that built those buildings, they were building those for us.

Lyn Wineman:

They were.

Scott Young:

Do we have that nerve now to dig those wells for others?

Lyn Wineman:

I think that's an important sentiment. Scott, for our listeners who would like to learn more about the work of the Food Bank and to help out...I know you're not taking volunteers right now. I'm sure you're taking donations or helping whoever might need to access services. How can they find out more?

Scott Young:

They need to go to lincolnfoodbank.org Lyn and look around on our website. And I do need to say that we are taking some volunteers now of a certain age.

Lyn Wineman:

Got it. Got it.

Scott Young:

We have safety requirements that we didn't use to have to worry about, but lincolnfoodbank.org is where you can find out how to help. You can find out how to get help. You can find out about hunger and poverty issues in our community and start a learning process for yourself.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. Scott, I feel like I could talk with you all day. Thank you for taking time with me. And I just appreciate all the work that you and your team are doing for the people in Lincoln, the wells that you're digging for today and tomorrow.

Scott Young:

Lyn, thank you. And thanks to KidGlov for all you're doing. And happy 10th anniversary.

Lyn Wineman:

Thank you so much.

Announcer:

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