

## Agency For Change Podcast : Catherine Harrington, Chair of Junior League's Community Action Committee and Shannon Lang, Chair of the Hunger & Food Access Committee

### **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. Welcome to another episode of Agency for Change Podcast. Today, we're talking with two amazing changemakers from the Junior League of Omaha. Now, the Junior League of Omaha is in its 102nd year of empowering women to be effective volunteers. In truth, the purpose of the organization is to train an army of new changemakers. How amazing is that?

### **Lyn Wineman:**

After a couple of years researching what Omaha most needed from its volunteers, the Junior League of Omaha has settled on the critical need of hunger and food access and is putting all the weight of its 700 plus members behind solving it. That gives me chills. With us today are Catherine Harrington, Community Impact Council Director, and Shannon Lang, Chair of the Hunger and Access to Healthy Foods Committee. Welcome. I'm so excited to talk with the two of you.

### **Shannon Lang:**

Morning. Thanks so much for having us, Lyn.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

Absolutely. Truly my pleasure. Let's get started. I'd really like to hear more about the Junior League of Omaha overall. And I feel slightly bad saying this, but when I think of Junior League, the first thing that comes to mind are pearl-wearing 1950s housewives. Yes, I know. That's ridiculous. Catherine, is that an image that you feel like you're fighting against at JLO?

### **Catherine Harrington:**

That's so funny. That's not my experience within the Junior League at all. In my experience, it's like a group of women who are ready to roll their sleeves up and pull weeds and do landscaping and hand out massive boxes of food. I haven't seen anybody wearing pearls at any of our shifts. I do know that sometimes... I know that there was a movie called *The Help* and that is where some people got their opinions of maybe what the Junior League was. But in my experience, that is not it at all.

### **Catherine Harrington:**

I don't feel like we're fighting against that in any way, but in my experience, it is a group of amazing women who are strong.

**Lyn Wineman:**

When you get a group of amazing women who are strong together, I know that really great things happen. I do appreciate you clearing that up for us, because I think it actually was that movie, Catherine, that movie that I was thinking of, right? And we need to get that picture out of people's minds.

**Catherine Harrington:**

Well, and I would say that I think the majority of our members probably work. I think I'm in the minority. I stay at home with my kids, but the majority of our members are working at a day job. It's not a lot of housewives that are staying at home.

**Lyn Wineman:**

And also, Catherine, we're not going to kid anybody, staying at home and raising your kids is some of the most difficult work anyone could do. I know that to be the case. Catherine, as the group was working through all of the possible things that you could put your efforts behind, so many of them were very valuable. How did you decide on this one?

**Catherine Harrington:**

Lyn, you're absolutely right. It was so hard to narrow down our focus area to just one, because they were all such worthy areas where we want to make an impact. There were two main factors, I think, that went into that decision, and I wasn't even part of the group that made the decision. One was the logistics of things. Our other focus areas, we had hunger and access to healthy foods, and then we had abuse in women and children, and then we had opportunity for youth.

**Catherine Harrington:**

Whenever you're working with children, you have the issue of background checks, and background checks on a massive scale cost a lot of money. We didn't want to be spending large amounts of money just getting our members cleared to be able to work with these kids. We thought that that might be a barrier to entry for us. And also, some organizations aren't willing... Sometimes you have to have lots of training to get in. Before you can go there, I know to be like a cost advocate. It's like a 40-hour class that you take before you can even work with the kids.

**Catherine Harrington:**

We saw that as a barrier to entry for us. And the other thing that helped lead into that decision was that we could see very clearly with food access how we could incorporate those other focus areas. If you look at your basic needs, you need food and clothing and shelter. And if you don't...If you're not meeting those three needs, it's hard to focus on learning. It's hard to focus on having good family units. We felt like if we could help with food access, that then we can incorporate those other areas to make a more stable community.

**Catherine Harrington:**

And one of the things that food access is working on is actually going to be working with foster kids in the future. We are incorporating those other focus areas. We're just meeting them at the food access point.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That makes a lot of sense. There's definitely a hierarchy of needs, and you have to start in the first place and then move on to build stability into the community. Shannon, I'd love to hear from you. Hunger and access to healthy foods is really a huge issue. I mean, a couple of weeks ago, we talked to the director of the Food Bank of Lincoln and he was just talking about how the need is growing, and even more since the pandemic hit. I'm so curious, how is the Junior League settling on this particular problem to address?

**Shannon Lang:**

So, as Catherine kind of touched on a little bit, we had those three focus areas last year. And how we came to the decision to choose hunger and access to healthy foods was through service learning opportunities. So what these entailed were going to a different community partner and we would learn about how they are addressing this focus area or this issue. And then we would participate in an act of service for that organization. After each one of those shifts, we would have our members fill out a survey.

**Shannon Lang:**

And based on that data collection, we have an amazing community research and development team that compiled all of this data. And seeing how great the need was, the data spoke for itself. Choosing hunger and access to healthy foods, as Catherine said, it's a hierarchy of needs. So that's kind of how we landed on the process of choosing last year. But the need is, like you said, is so great. Right now in the Omaha metro area, our percentage of the population that is living in a food desert is 9%, and the national average is 4%.

**Shannon Lang:**

We are over double the national average of people living in a food desert. And that just means that people are not near enough to affordable and nutritious food. That number is always kind of my big one where I'm like, it's over double. We're over double. And in Omaha Public Schools, 75% of students receive free or reduced lunch. We're seeing such a great need, and it became apparent that this is somewhere that we can use our woman power to help.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I love the idea of using woman power. You're right. That number is shocking. I had no idea. I'm also very impressed at the logical data-driven process you went through to select, because it would be very easy to let a certain need just pull at your heartstrings, right? Or a popular cause to jump in. I think that's very impressive that you tested things, you looked at the data, and then you chose. We are in 2020, and we are in the midst of this pandemic.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Shannon, I imagine the pandemic has really hindered the League's ability to do the traditional face-to-face experience. I'm just curious, what has it been like standing up a whole new initiative in the time of COVID-19?

**Shannon Lang:**

I, first and foremost, want to thank our Food Access Committee because their ability to pivot this year is incredible, because this is not the committee that they initially signed up for. We have a placement bulletin every year that kind of gives you your job description, and we've all had to do completely

different things this year. Working with them and being able to pivot our entire plan, I'm just so proud of our team this year because we are still offering those in-person shifts.

**Shannon Lang:**

And just a quick statistic, we have already volunteered 665 hours this year since May.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Shannon Lang:**

And 441 of those hours are direct in-person face-to-face service. We are still in the community. We're still out there, but we're being safe. We are following all CDC and county guidelines. We are masked. We are socially distant, because that need is still there. Just because we do have all of these restrictions in place does not mean that we can't provide service safely. We are still at Heart Ministry every week handing out 60,000 pounds of food a week. We have helped them distribute over 400,000 pounds of food this year so far, which is a shocking amount.

**Shannon Lang:**

The work they are doing in our community is incredible, but we are offering virtual opportunities too. We have had the opportunity to do 3D tours through some of our community partners. You can actually walk, step-by-step, through each of their rooms and learn about what they do and how they use their space. We also came up with some virtual or some digital resources this year, and we had brainstorming shifts for members. We have a committee called Done In A Day, and they are writing what is called Week Letters.

**Shannon Lang:**

They're basically love notes, like we appreciate you. You're doing awesome. We sent some recently to one of our community partners, No More Empty Pots, because their emergency food relief plan is incredible and they're doing awesome work. It's definitely required some pivoting, but I think we are being really successful in what we are able to achieve right now. And it just requires a lot of critical thinking, a lot of cooperation, a lot of patience. And I'm just so proud of what our members have been able to accomplish amidst a global pandemic.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I think pivot is the word of the year for 2020, right? All of us started the year with some kind of plan or idea. And if you've only had to pivot once, I think you're lucky, right? A lot of us are just making that full pirouette, like a ballet dancer here.

**Shannon Lang:**

Yes.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I also think taking this full circle, for anybody who did have that picture in their mind of the pearls and the housewives, Catherine, you said this is a group of strong women who roll up their shirt sleeves. I

mean, I think nothing proves that more than your data-driven process. You're focusing in on a critical need. Six-hundred sixty-five service hours and 60,000 pounds of food per week. Did you say 60?

**Shannon Lang:**

They're doing 60,000 pounds of food a week, but we have helped distribute over 400,000 pounds so far this year.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow, that's amazing.

**Shannon Lang:**

And most of that is fresh fruits and vegetables.

**Lyn Wineman:**

So, it's healthy food also.

**Shannon Lang:**

Yes, because that's a huge part of what we're trying to do - educate and help people have access to that healthy food. Not just your traditional food pantry staples, which are 100% necessary, but teaching people how to use those staples in a better way. A big part of what we are trying to do is education on nutrition and how to make your pantry staples go further, how to budget appropriately, basically how to make your supermarket trip successful for you both in a nutrition standpoint and also for your pocketbook.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah, very good. Catherine, we've been talking about how the pandemic impacted your ability to stand up a new initiative. I'm curious, I know also you've been studying hunger in the Omaha metro for a few years now. What are you seeing the pandemic doing to the need?

**Catherine Harrington:**

The need right now is massive and it's not slowing down at all. I had the pleasure of working at the Heart Ministry Center food pantry this summer. And there were just hundreds of cars lined up, and these people are waiting in line for hours to get food. And we are putting these massive... If you ever go to Costco and they put all your groceries in one of those big boxes, you're loading that up, and it's like amazing food that you're putting in these cars. It's awesome.

**Catherine Harrington:**

But these people are waiting in line for hours, which is absolutely incredible, and they are so grateful when they come through. You get that opportunity to talk with them just for a little bit while they're waiting to move up to the next station. And it's incredible. But when we're seeing regularly 200 cars a day go through, it gets up past 300 cars on the weekends. It's absolutely incredible. They almost need to shut the road down because these cars are waiting for blocks just to get their fresh food. Do I have time to share a little story about it?

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh, absolutely. I think stories are very helpful.

**Catherine Harrington:**

When I was helping, we found these... When you're working at the distribution line, you get a giant box of just zucchini or you get boxes and boxes of them. So you take a little bit of everything. We were in the fresh vegetables section. You take a little bit of everything. You put them in a box to give to an individual car. And they had these little Mickey Mouse snack pack things. They're in little plastic containers that had Mickey Mouse, and they've got some cheese and some crackers and some fresh sliced apples in them.

**Catherine Harrington:**

And I bought them for my kids before. We were so excited when we found this box full of these little snack packs. We were like, this is going to make some kids so excited. We set them aside to wait until we saw a car that had kids or somebody told us that they had a bunch of kids at home, so they would go to a home that would really appreciate them. A minivan pulled up a little while later and there were three kids in the backseat. There were two older kids and then one baby in a car seat.

**Catherine Harrington:**

The back hatch of their minivans open, and so we're loading it up and we're talking to the kids. And we asked the parents, we were like, "Can we give them these?" They wanted to open them up right away. They were so excited for these Mickey Mouse things. And we were like, yes, this is exactly what we wanted to happen. We wanted them to go to some kids who were super excited to get those Mickey Mouse snack packs. We were talking in the back with the kids. They were cute, like normal precocious little kids. We had a ton of fun talking with them.

**Catherine Harrington:**

And one of our other League members was in the front talking to the parents. And after the car drove up to the next station, she came back and she was like, "Oh my gosh, this family hasn't had any food in their house since Monday." We were there on a Thursday. They had no food for several days. That excitement that those kids were showing us, we thought that it was because they got this Mickey Mouse thing. In reality, they were genuinely excited to be getting food and to know where their next meal was coming from.

**Catherine Harrington:**

And that really puts it into perspective for you. My children don't struggle with food insecurity, so they would be excited to get the Mickey Mouse part of it. There are children and adults that struggle with food insecurity every single day or every once in a while. And to imagine what it would be like to go to your pantry and to look in there and not know what you were going to feed your children for their next meal is heartbreaking, but it is such a big reality for so many people in our community.

**Catherine Harrington:**

Right now, Heart Ministry Center is on track to distribute six million pounds of food this year, which is twice as much as they distributed last year. If that doesn't put it into perspective for you, the need is so big right now. And that's why we're continuing to offer these safe in-person shifts. COVID has really shown me some of the privileges that I have. My family can stay at home. It's a little bit of an

inconvenience for me. I miss the things that I used to be able to do, but I have a safe, warm home with plenty of food. I can go do a Target pickup anytime I need to.

**Catherine Harrington:**

Not everybody has a safe home to go home to. Not everybody has food at home. We're committed to continuing to help because the need is bigger now than it was in the past. The Food Bank distributes 2.8 million meals monthly. Usually that number is around two million. So we're looking at an extra 10 million meals this year across the state. So yeah, the need is greater now than it was last year, and it's probably going to continue to grow.

**Lyn Wineman:**

You guys, I do a lot of work with nonprofits and human service organizations. And there's not a lot that shocks me, but your numbers and your stories do keep shocking me. And I think those of us that are inconvenienced right now, I think should thank our lucky stars because the pandemic has turned things upside down for families across the metro area, across the state, across the country, literally across the world for no fault of their own, families that are seeking access to healthy foods for the first time. And you're making it available, and I think that's just so great.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Shannon, I want to ask you, and Catherine has kind of alluded to this as well, it's such a massive problem that not just one organization can solve it. I'm curious, how is the JLO collaborating with other organizations in Omaha to have an even bigger impact?

**Shannon Lang:**

We have amazing community partners, the work that they're doing. We touched a little bit on Heart Ministry Center and their food pantry. They are the largest food pantry in the state of Nebraska. They provide the most volume outside of the Food Bank. And the way that they're able to pivot to a, as we say again pivot, to a drive through capacity to make it safe for their employees and for their clients. We're working with Heart Ministry to provide food in their pantry. We are working with No More Empty Pots.

**Shannon Lang:**

They make homemade meals every week that are distributed to those in need. And I have gone for a shift to help package and it's so hard to try not to eat all the food. It smells amazing, and they're all plant-based meals. We're putting in that nutrition aspect as well. The last time I was there, we packaged 1,000 meals while we were there. And those are going out at free or reduced cost to members of our community. They also provide delivery for those that are quarantined.

**Shannon Lang:**

And I know people personally that have used this service while they have COVID and are unable to get nutritious food delivered to them. We are also working with Together. They also have an amazing food pantry. They have a brand new community garden that we also have been working in all summer. We've worked with the Union For Contemporary Art, who has a community garden as well. And we have helped prep all of their harvest to deliver to area food pantries to have fresh tomato sauce and things like that. They have a kitchen.

**Shannon Lang:**

We work with The Big Garden. They are a huge asset to our community because they help all of these other organizations get their gardens started. The Big Garden comes to Together and says, "Hey, let's build a garden." They make it happen. We've just been able to partner with so many inspirational organizations that are doing amazing work in the hunger and food access arena. However we can support them, we will give them that support.

**Shannon Lang:**

If No More Empty Pots emails me and says, "Hey, we really need help," we find those ladies that are going to come and volunteer and make those meals. I feel like Omaha has a lot of nonprofits. We have a lot of them. But not only do we have a lot of them, we have the really good ones. I think we are so lucky to have these organizations that are doing the work that they're doing. And hopefully someday we will have our own Junior League branded program that will help in conjunction with all of these organizations. That's something that we're working towards right now.

**Shannon Lang:**

But right now, we are just... We're trying to help. We're there in any capacity that we can be.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Well, it's so obvious Junior League is doing just great work in the metro area. You both chose to join JLO for a reason. I'm curious from each of you, what brought you into the organization and what have you gotten out of it?

**Catherine Harrington:**

Well, I have gained so many amazing friends. I feel like I've made some lifelong friends that I'm excited to continue having a friendship with. And it's nice to be with a large group of like-minded ladies who want to give back to our community. That ultimately is why I decided to join. Helping out and pitching in and serving others, it fills my cup. That's what I really get out of it. I'm happy to be able to say that I've been able to make a lot of friends along the way.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's fantastic. That's always a great bonus.

**Shannon Lang:**

I joined the League because I had two and a half year-old twins and I needed adult interaction. My main goal of joining the League was to make friends. This was a couple of years ago. I like to share this story with other members too, that joined for the social aspect of it. But actually Catherine introduced me to the world of community impact. It's a council, so there's multiple things under that umbrella. But I found purpose in my life through community impact.

**Shannon Lang:**

Not only have I made amazing friends, which is what I sought out to do, I wake up every morning thinking of others and thinking of the work that we're doing and just the impact that the League is able to make. I have made incredible lifelong relationships with not only other members, but community partners. And I am shocked at the... I shouldn't be shocked, but I was shocked at what the League has

done for me in terms of giving meaning to my own life outside of just a twin mom. And I felt like I had lived that life and that was all that there was to me.

**Shannon Lang:**

And now I know through the League that I'm much more than that. I am a volunteer. I'm a friend. I'm also a mother, and it's not just a singular thing. I'm just so thankful for the experience so far that the League has given me and giving me purpose and meaning to my daily life and these incredible friends and these women that I get to work with on a daily basis. I mean, Catherine has been one of my biggest supporters and one of my best friends through this, and I would have never met her without the League.

**Shannon Lang:**

I will tell everyone, shout it from the rooftops, how incredible the League is. And I recommend anyone to join if you want to make friends, but also let's make a huge impact in Omaha. We can do that at the same time.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That is great. You are both smart, talented, inspiring women. You are moms. I mean, Catherine, we're hearing the joyful noise of kids behind you occasionally, which I think is fantastic. And you're just so inspiring. It would be easy to just get so focused on your own lives and busy in your own lives. And what you've done is, you have found a greater calling, in a way, through Junior League, which I think is so admirable. I also know that you are being a great example to your own kids.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Your own kids will be more likely to give back because they're seeing that example in you. I think that's an important ripple effect on the world as well. We pride ourselves on making this podcast inspiring, so I'd really love to hear from both of you. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration to others? Catherine, let's start with you.

**Catherine Harrington:**

I would just say, "Just start someplace." It doesn't matter if you start big or start small, but just start. Take that first step and you don't know where it's going to lead you, like what Shannon said. She's got all of these other amazing things that came out of her joining the Junior League. She didn't think that that was what she was there for.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I love that. Take that first step, you don't know where it's going to lead to, right? Sometimes the first step is the hardest. How about you, Shannon?

**Shannon Lang:**

I would say that wake up each morning thinking of one thing you can do for others, whether that's a volunteer shift somewhere or donating something to a food pantry. But just every day do one thing for someone that is not in your immediate family, not in your household. Just wake up every day, "What can I do for others today?" And it doesn't have to be a big thing every day. It can be a tiny thing, but just one thing every day.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That is lovely. Both of those are lovely things. This has been a great time talking to you. As we come to the end here, I'd love to know how people can find out more about Junior League of Omaha and the food access initiative.

**Catherine Harrington:**

We have a website, [jlomaha.org](http://jlomaha.org), and we also have a Facebook page, which is the [juniorleagueofomaha.com](http://juniorleagueofomaha.com).

**Lyn Wineman:**

Perfect. Great ways for everybody to find you. I imagine they can also say, "Siri, help me find the Junior League of Omaha," as well.

**Shannon Lang:**

Absolutely. And honestly, one of the best ways is, you probably have somebody that you know who's in the Junior League or who has been in the Junior League. I feel like those personal connections are what really helped. Somebody suggested that I join the Junior League and that's how I found it and looked into it. And I was like, what? These are people who just volunteer all the time? Sign me up. It's humbling and it's grounding to be able to serve others. I'm really grateful for the opportunities through Junior League.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That is really great. Shannon and Catherine, thank you so much for taking time out of your very, very busy schedules to talk with us today. This has been informative and inspiring and motivating, and I thank you both for that. And I thank the Junior League for all of the good work you're doing in the Omaha metro area.

**Catherine Harrington:**

Thanks for having us.

**Shannon Lang:**

Thank you so much for having us.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Absolutely. Have a great day, ladies.

**Shannon Lang:**

You too.

**Announcer:**

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