

Agency for Change Podcast: Abbi Swatsworth, Executive Director of OutNebraska

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.

Kelley Peterson:

Hello, fellow changemakers. This is Kelley Peterson, nonprofit creative director from KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today, we're talking with Abbi Swatsworth, executive director of OutNebraska, an organization that makes an impact by advocating, celebrating, and educating to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people. According to a Local View article in the Lincoln Journal Star, a recent survey found that more than one in three LGBTQ+ Americans faced discrimination of some kind in the past year. More than half of LGBTQ+ people said they experienced harassment or discrimination in a public place such as a store, transportation, or a restroom. OutNebraska works to end discrimination and to support equality for the 67,000 LGBTQ+ people who live in Nebraska, and I can't wait to learn more.

Kelley Peterson:

Abbi, how are you today?

Abbi Swatsworth:

I'm good today, Kelley. Thank you so much for having me. This is going to be really fun.

Kelley Peterson:

It's going to be great. I can't wait. Abbi, OutNebraska has been around for more than 10 years. Can you tell me about your organization's vision for the next 10 years?

Abbi Swatsworth:

Oh my gosh. Wouldn't it be amazing if Nebraska was known across the United States as being a fully inclusive state and every LGBTQ+ person who lived here felt like they could live their full, authentic lives in their communities wherever they live?

Kelley Peterson:

I agree. Wouldn't that be great? And I want to be here to see that happen. And I think, Abbi, you are going to make that happen.

Abbi Swatsworth:

I don't know. That's a big vision.

Kelley Peterson:

It's a big vision, but I think you have big vision, and that's what I love about you. We mentioned some powerful statistics about LGBTQ+ Americans in our opening comments. Can you talk about how this specifically affects people in Nebraska?

Abbi Swatsworth:

Sure. One myth that I would like to dispel is the idea that LGBTQ+ Nebraskans only live in our metro areas. Like everyone that identifies on the LGBTQ+ spectrum only lives in Lincoln or Omaha. And we know that's not true. We live all over the state. There are plenty of people living in the rural areas of Nebraska who identify as LGBTQ+. And so what we are hearing from them is that they are, in a lot of instances, afraid to live their authentic lives. They are not necessarily out and proud of their identity because they fear discrimination.

Abbi Swatsworth:

And for folks who are out, they are experiencing discrimination. And we always talk about how Nebraska is such a nice, friendly state, and I'm not saying that's not true. We are friendly people. But I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about LGBTQ+ identities, and so folks can experience discrimination through things like being called names, derogatory language, hostile service in a restaurant. Also, we see a lot in healthcare, unfortunately, that people are experiencing discrimination in healthcare settings, which is really hard, especially for folks in our rural areas where they don't have a lot of choices for where they can seek medical care.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely. And especially during this time right now with the pandemic, healthcare is so important for everyone.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

I know that that's all ... Everything that you said is hard to hear, but what is great about it is that OutNebraska is making positive change for people in the metro and for people in the rural areas, as well. Abbi, how has the work of OutNebraska created positive change for LGBTQ+ people in our state?

Abbi Swatsworth:

I think one of the ways that's probably biggest right now is that by being an organization that puts ourselves out there to say we're representing LGBTQ+ Nebraskans, we have sort of just elevated the visibility of our community overall. We do advocate at the capitol and talk with senators about LGBTQ+ constituents, and I know that there are some policy makers who don't understand that they have LGBTQ+ constituents. Right? That everyone is in the metro areas. And so, we're really trying to elevate the visibility of the community, to say we live everywhere, that we are your neighbors and friends, and that we're trying to talk with different policy makers about changes that we can make in policy that will improve lives. We're also trying to activate the community in ways where we're helping them advocate for themselves, which is not something everyone feels comfortable doing. It can be scary to be a part of the policy making process, to reach out to your senator, and so we're trying to educate the community about how to be engaged and what that looks like and why it makes a difference.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Harvey Milk, who was, unfortunately, assassinated, was a really big proponent of the idea that coming out changes hearts and minds. The idea of living your full, authentic life in a public way can help people to know that LGBTQ+ folks are your neighbors. Right? We live next door. We shop in the same grocery stores. We have the same kind of ... The idea that there's a gay agenda. Really? Sometimes that agenda is buy milk, pick the kids up from school, and help them with homework. Sometimes, the agenda is broaden perspectives on equality. And the thing about it is, is that equality should always be a nonpartisan issue. Especially in Nebraska. I feel like I'm rambling on that answer, but that, those are some of the...

Kelley Peterson:

I think it's a great answer.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

And I know that you talked about, in your previous comments, about people in the rural areas and that you're saying we want to be visible as an organization and that you want to, if maybe someone out in a rural area of Nebraska isn't as comfortable voicing what they need to voice, that you can act as that voice for them. And I think that's one of the things that OutNebraska does extremely well, and what you're bringing to all Nebraskans so that they are aware about the equality issue, I think is just amazing because every ... We are all neighbors. And I loved your example of saying, hey, we're just going to the store and getting the things we need, too, just like everybody else. There is so much the same about how we live, how everyone lives, but even how Nebraskans live. Can you talk about the impact of your work that you've seen firsthand?

Abbi Swatsworth:

Absolutely. Pre-COVID, we had a group of people that, one of the community building activities that we had happening in Lincoln was a group of folks who got together to play volleyball, which sounds like, oh, that's just recreation. Right? But really, it's about community building and helping people to feel less isolated. I do love the story of Robert, who's given me permission to use his story. Robert came out later in life, and he is a man of faith, and the bar scene was just not going to work for him. That is not how he imagined meeting people. He wasn't comfortable in bars. That was not his, not a natural setting.

Abbi Swatsworth:

And so he was looking around for ways to make friends and decided to join this volleyball group that got together and he said it was the first place he made other friends who identified on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, who were just supportive, just accepted him for who he was at that point in his life and that it made a huge difference for him in that process and journey. That's one way we've seen impact on individual lives. Also, we've seen some impact with the advocacy work that we do behind the scenes. Sometimes, we'll get contacted, and somebody will say, "I'm having this issue with this system or organization."

Abbi Swatsworth:

And then we'll reach out to that organization and sort of say, "Someone's contacted us about the way that you're processing this request or the way that you're handling this issue with them, and they feel like it was insensitive or that you could do a better job. Can we talk to you about some ways that that might work better?" And there've been a number of instances where we've been able to help an organization make some changes that then not only impact the individual person who's come to us, but then going forward, to all the other people that they are going to serve. And that's a little bit of where we've also seen some impact.

Kelley Peterson:

That is some great impact to be making. Would you say in that example where you're working with other organizations to say, "Hey," are a lot of them unfamiliar, or they didn't even realize they were coming across that way? Are they open to that change?

Abbi Swatsworth:

Some organizations are, and we've had actually really good luck so far. And it is a matter of not necessarily being aware of how a process might impact someone. They didn't know ... Well, for example, someone was requesting records that were stored under their name prior to their transition. They're a transgender person, and they needed those records, but they were stored under the old name, and they didn't really want to deal with that old name anymore, and so the system in question was sort of like, "That had never occurred to us, and we don't really have a system in place, so we would have to create a different system for keeping track of the old records, but also being able to attach the new name." And it took the system some time to make those changes, but they were open and willing to do that, and that's been something that has been helpful.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Now, every system isn't going to be as open and as easily ... We're not going to make changes easily, so we might need to engage other community members in a process, say, if we're trying to work with a school board somewhere or something like that. That isn't generally a situation where we can just walk in and say, "Hey, you need to make some changes." That is kind of a situation where we need to do more community organizing and really get other folks engaged, and that's an important place that our allies can come into play. Because we know that in efforts to make changes in systems, it can't always only be the people impacted that speak up on the issue. We also need ally folks to speak up and to talk about why it matters, right? Why it matters to everyone and not just impacted people.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely. And I'm glad that you mention that, Abbi, that there's this great framework that OutNebraska has put together and that people can rely on to support them for these things to have a voice, but it doesn't just include the people that are impacted. It includes allies as well. And you have a very large ally, a network that is inclusive within OutNebraska, which I think is just fabulous. When you talked about Robert and the volleyball story, everybody is impacted by COVID-19, and it just makes your heart go out to, gosh, there's not any volleyball either, and how important volleyball could be to somebody. So as we're in the midst of this COVID-19, I'm curious, how has this impacted the work that you're doing in addition to not having volleyball?

Abbi Swatsworth:

It's moved all of our community building to online spaces. We're utilizing a lot of Zoom, which we also recognize has some disadvantages, right? One of the advantages is that people from all over the state can participate in a game night that's online or a social hour, or we also do Crafternoon once a month where people sort of work on craft projects together and hang out. And so it's great that anyone from anywhere can participate online, but it also is difficult for folks who maybe don't have reliable wifi or internet access, who struggle maybe paying for internet to have that access online, so moving things online is partially a solution but also creates barriers for other folks too, we know. But we have been having people attend those events, those virtual events, and we know that they have been really important.

Abbi Swatsworth:

One thing we know is happening that is really difficult is that for youth who are LGBTQ+, a lot of times, school was a safe space for them because maybe their families are not supportive. And with school not necessarily being in person, that has placed additional strain on LGBTQ+ youth who are in these unsupportive homes and have no peer to peer support and are missing maybe that one supportive teacher they had. Yeah, it's been a challenge. COVID has really challenged us to be creative, and we're really focusing in on our partnerships with other organizations and working on those advocacy projects right now, and then maintaining those virtual spaces as best we can.

Kelley Peterson:

I like to envision the world without the pandemic, without COVID-19, when we will get there someday. But do you think you'll take those lessons learned about bringing maybe rural and metro people together? Will you continue some of those things that the pandemic has brought that are positive?

Abbi Swatsworth:

We might. Our film festival is one of the biggest programs that we have that's part of our celebrate mission to uplift LGBTQ+ culture and sort of help people know us better. We do a big film festival called the Prairie Pride Film Festival. We've been doing it now 10 years. 2020 was our 10th anniversary. And because of COVID, we moved that to an online space, and we had more viewers than we had had previously. People could, the way the platform worked, is that they could stream and then broadcast it to their TVs or stream it through a smart TV and watch the films at home. And as we're looking ahead, we may be keeping some aspects of the film festival as digital, again, moving forward and just seeing how that works.

Abbi Swatsworth:

And yeah, I could see how having an online social could perhaps continue as well because we've had some people attend that online social that never attended in-person events, even though they live in Lincoln where our in-person events were happening. And we just find that that online space is maybe a little less scary for some folks who maybe have a hard time connecting with others or just feel like being out in the world is a little scary. So those online spaces, maybe will continue. We'll have to see. And it's been a good way to organize people, too. We've done some phone banking, and so people are making phone calls on their own phones, but they're hanging out together in a virtual space so that they have a feeling of being part of a team. And if they have questions while they're calling, they can talk with the organizer and be a part of it that way, too. So, there have been some silver lining things that have come out of COVID that we may continue on with.

Kelley Peterson:

Great. OutNebraska has improved the lives of thousands of LGBTQ+ people. What are some of the greatest stories you have heard that demonstrate the outcome of your work?

Abbi Swatsworth:

Oh, wow.

Kelley Peterson:

We've already heard some of them.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Yeah, absolutely. I think a story from earlier in 2020 is one that I really lift up a lot. We did the first ever LGBTQ+ legislative day at the state capitol, where we brought people from all over Nebraska to come and speak with their senators. The day started with some storytelling training. We had a panel, and it was a full day of activities, and we had two young women come from a small town in southeast Nebraska. They said it took them 45 minutes or so to come to Lincoln. Their teacher joined them, and they were sort of unsure about the process. They were really excited to be there, but they were sort of like, "I don't know about this." They went through the storytelling training, and their senator, to his credit, actually came and spoke to them.

Abbi Swatsworth:

We had people from 15 different legislative districts participate, and not everyone's senator was willing to come and speak with their constituents. This particular senator did come out and speak to these young women, and just to watch them being so confident while they spoke to their senator and then after we came back to our conference room where we were meeting, they shared a little bit with the rest of the group what it was like to live where they live and to go to school where they were going to school and what an impact it had made on them to be a part of this day and to be surrounded by other ...there were like 35 people altogether. To be a part of that day and to know there were other folks who felt like this work was really important and who were supporting them in their efforts to speak up. It just really, it was so rewarding to see them participating. Kudos to the senator who actually came to speak to them, right? Because not all of them, as I mentioned, not all of them were willing to do that.

Kelley Peterson:

Just an amazing experience for those young women that they'll never forget.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

And that they...Not only it's an unforgettable experience, but they can build upon it, and those things help build confidence in the future for them to do even more things out and about, so that is just a great story.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, Abbi, let's switch gears and talk about your story.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Sure.

Kelley Peterson:

How did your path lead you to this kind of work?

Abbi Swatsworth:

Wow. I have an undergraduate degree in social work, and while I was in school, I got really interested in macro-work as opposed to micro-work, so that just means, really, that I was more interested in impacting larger systems, rather than working individually with individual people or individual families. And as I came out of school, I was sort of looking around at, "Where could I plug in that would let me impact a larger system that also was a well-paying job?" Because part of my goal in going back to school was to make a better life for my daughter and I. I was a single mom when I started school and had come from a place of real difficulty in my childhood and in growing up, and I consider myself someone living in recovery from trauma, and so I went back to school with the idea of making a better life.

Abbi Swatsworth:

And I sort of fell into a fundraising position at Friendship Home, where I thought, well, I can help all of the women living in the shelter by being a part of the fundraising effort. And I love meeting people. Like my number one Gallup strength is Woo, and so it really, like, fundraising just really fit for me, and so I stayed in the fundraising and marketing, branding world for nearly 20 years. I worked at a variety of nonprofits, and just prior to being the executive director of OutNebraska worked at CenterPointe, which is an organization that was really important to me in my journey of recovery. And I learned a lot being a part of that team at CenterPointe, and while I was working at CenterPointe, I was also engaged with OutLinc, which was the name of OutNebraska at that time, as a leader of the board of directors.

Abbi Swatsworth:

We were an all-volunteer group and this opportunity came along for the organization to hire staff, and I jumped at the opportunity. I had sort of seen myself leading a small nonprofit at some point, saw that pathway for myself as a career goal, and I've always worked at organizations that held a special place in my heart, and so it just was ... And you talk about how fortunate I am to work and be paid for being professionally myself, right? Like I laugh, like, "I'm professionally gay," because I get to do this. And it's really amazing. That is how I fell into this work and just kind of stayed in it and grew professionally over the years, and being executive director is a challenge, but I'm enjoying it.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, I have appreciated knowing you over the years, personally, Abbi, and when I see someone that becomes an executive director who has a marketing, branding, fundraising background, I get very jazzed about that. Obviously, right? With being with KidGlov and working with nonprofits for as long as I have, I think that wearing...or being the executive director and being knowledgeable about marketing communications is one of those things that has made OutNebraska so successful. And not every executive director has the talents that you do in those arenas to make it happen, so congratulations on

all of the advancement that you've been able to do. And of course, having a job that you love doing every single day. You should love what you do and you 100% do, and you exude that in your position, for sure. Abbi, being the amazing leader that you are, what advice do you have for other leaders who want to inspire change?

Abbi Swatsworth:

I think authenticity is huge. I've used that word a lot in our conversation, encouraging people to live their authentic life. I just feel like other people are inspired when we allow ourselves as leaders to show sometimes we're vulnerable, right? We don't always have all the answers, and sometimes we are struggling a little bit, right? Just to be authentically a leader, I think is really important. And especially, I would say for anyone who identifies on the LGBTQ+ spectrum and is interested in leadership, is if you can find ways to bring your whole self to your work, you will free up so much energy by allowing yourself to do that. And at this point in Nebraska, we have had some good news along employment lines because of a Supreme Court case we had this summer. There is employment protection in Nebraska now as a result of that case, and so just really encouraging folks to live authentically.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that. We talk a lot about in branding, oftentimes, talking about our brands in a human context so people can relate to them, and I think that's exactly what you said. It's showing yourself as human, and doing that is showing your great side and maybe your not-so-great side. It's being vulnerable out there. And I love what you said about bringing your whole self and being in an environment that it's comfortable to do that in. And how we started this conversation today is that we want to achieve that so everyone can do that. And I just, I think that that is really great. Could you give us a few words of your own words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration to our listeners?

Abbi Swatsworth:

I saw this question in advance of our conversation, and I've been trying to think about what wonderful thing I would say. I think one of the things that's been so important for me is being willing to do the work of healing myself, right? Because all of us have experienced things in our lives that damage us in different ways, right? We're not broken, though, but there is, for a lot of people, some healing they need to do. Don't be afraid to do that work. Like really dig into it because once you experience some of that healing, you will also free up so much more energy, and you will shine in ways you didn't know that you could.

Kelley Peterson:

Thank you for sharing those inspirational words. Just hearing that is very inspirational for anyone because you're right. Everyone has their own things that they've gone through and are still going through, and if you can face that in a way that you can go on and experience life to its fullest, I hope we all can do that, so thank you for those great words. For our listeners who would like to learn more about your work and to support you, because fundraising is important, how can they find out more about OutNebraska?

Abbi Swatsworth:

We have a lovely website, which I want to say thank you to KidGlov for working with us. We're online at outnebraska.org. It's all one word. And there, you can read a little bit more about our programs, an event calendar that talks about the different things we have going on, and we have a donate page that

you can access easily if you would like to support this work. It's just outnebraska.org. We're also very active on Facebook, if people are on that platform, they can find us. We're on Instagram and Twitter, as well, and our handles are all @OutNebraska.

Kelley Peterson:

Wonderful. As we wrap up our time together today, Abbi, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about OutNebraska?

Abbi Swatsworth:

We rely on community partners to make this work happen. Without partners, whether that is through financial partnership or being an outspoken ally, that's what powers this work. And so really encourage folks to get engaged and help power this because Nebraska overall can be a better state for everyone.

Kelley Peterson:

Abbi, your story of leadership through adversity and your passion for achieving equality for all will inspire many. Thank you so much for your time.

Abbi Swatsworth:

Thank you, Kelley.

Announcer:

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