

Agency for Change Podcast: Donna Kush, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Omaha Community Foundation

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:

Hello, changemakers. This is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest, Donna Kush, is the president and chief executive officer of the Omaha Community Foundation. Now, she assumed this role on March 23rd, 2020. For those of you that think about the last year, that's exactly 10 days after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a national emergency.

Lyn Wineman:

And since that time, she has been at the forefront of orchestrating COVID-19 relief efforts in addition to the many other activities of the Omaha Community Foundation. She has also seen firsthand the incredible generosity and resiliency of the citizens of Omaha. Welcome, Donna. How are you today?

Donna Kush:

I'm doing well. Thank you, Lyn. I appreciate being here and the opportunity to talk.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. I love to talk with inspiring people who are doing big things. Donna, I can't imagine what it must've been like to start your new role as the president and CEO of the Omaha Community Foundation in the midst of all of this. What did that feel like?

Donna Kush:

Well, I have to say, thankfully my predecessor, Sara Boyd, had done a wonderful job leading the organization. The team here is extremely talented, and the culture is amazing. I came in wanting to maximize all of the good, the great that had already been here and then just focus on how to evolve the organization. The pandemic certainly wreaked havoc on any best laid plans that anyone had, but it also, fortunately for us, created some great opportunities for our organization and for the team.

Lyn Wineman:

One of the things I really like doing is looking for the good that's come out of the past year, and I appreciate you saying that. I do think organizations that came into the pandemic with a strong foundation were able to react more quickly, more impactfully. And I noticed a blog post on the Foundation's website that starts with the following statement, "Imagine having a crystal ball last year that would have revealed how 2020 would unfold. We would have thought it was a fictional movie plot, not believing it at all."

Lyn Wineman:

And I've got to wholeheartedly agree with that. Donna, I'd love to go back to those early days. What was it like as you were navigating the leadership of the Foundation and determining how to best support the community?

Donna Kush:

The early days in any new job are exciting and, of course, challenging as you're getting up to speed. The early days though, during the pandemic, were really a test in agility for our entire team. We were focused on the needs of the community, but all of those needs became amplified as we began to look at what areas needed addressing most and most quickly. The team, when I came on board, had just moved to working remotely. We were dealing with that, but also with, like I said, really focusing on those most urgent needs of the community and addressing those first and foremost.

Lyn Wineman:

I can see that. I know you've done many things, but you were recently on the news sharing great information about economic relief grants for local restaurants. I know that's just one of many, many programs the Foundation has facilitated. Can you highlight some of the things that you are doing to respond to COVID-19?

Donna Kush:

Yes. There are a couple of things I'd love the opportunity to highlight. The first of those was one that was launched before I actually even came on board. On March 13, about 10 days before I joined, the team here at the Community Foundation had launched a COVID response fund, and we were looking at the basic needs support. We were looking at food, shelter, healthcare, mental health, and in other areas, special needs of the senior citizen population in that. We were able to raise about \$1.5 million in the response fund to date.

Lyn Wineman:

That's great.

Donna Kush:

It is. We were very pleased. And that came from about 6,000 different individuals in the community who helped us raise that amount, and we're very, very appreciative, especially in such a challenging year for so many, that so many people stepped forward to help with that. In total, we were able to make about 51 grants to 51 different nonprofits. And again, those were in the areas of food, healthcare, housing, some emergency financial support, and other areas.

Donna Kush:

And then a second area that I would like to highlight was something that we had never done before at the Community Foundation, and that was partnering with a government agency, a government partner, to be able to do some grant making. We were approached to help Douglas County be able to administer grants to nonprofits from CARES Act funds that they had received. And that was challenging anew. On top of just being government money, it was federal government money.

Donna Kush:

It was a big learning experience for everyone involved in how to deal with that and specifically within the CARES Act guidelines. But we're proud to say that we were able to distribute \$28 million in total, and we ran a couple different programs through there for both health and human services organizations and then arts and culture organizations. We ran two different types of grant programs.

Donna Kush:

One was to help cover some expenses, direct COVID-related expenses, and then the other program that was really helpful, especially to smaller nonprofits, was a stimulus grant program. That just allowed a lot more flexibility in how the funds could be used and, of course was greatly, greatly needed, especially, like I said, for those smaller nonprofit organizations. So, in total, it was \$28 million that was distributed through about 320 different grants to nonprofit organizations.

Donna Kush:

And that was done at the end of last year. And I'm so proud of the team, Lyn, because they distributed those over 300 grants in about three months.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a lot of work. It's a lot of work. I think people don't realize what it takes to match up the funds and the organizations that need the funds in the right way, following all the right rules with the partnerships. I think that's just incredible.

Donna Kush:

Yes. And we tried to be very, very user-friendly throughout the whole process in terms of the grant application itself, especially in the stimulus. The stimulus, we were able to make that a pretty simple process, and then also offer support to the nonprofits through workshops, one-on-one consulting with them, and just giving them that opportunity to ask us questions and help make sure that we got as many organizations in there as possible. That grant making led to then a third opportunity for us at the beginning of this year, which was to do two million.

Donna Kush:

It was partnering, again, with Douglas County, to do \$2 million in grant making for small businesses, for restaurants, bars, food trucks, and catering organizations. The window for that has just recently closed, and so we're in the process of combing through those applications and getting that assistance out too. The county recognized small businesses have been really deeply hurt, and we wanted to be there to help get that money out. That was something new for us too.

Donna Kush:

At the Community Foundation, we're really known more for our nonprofit work, but what we are experts at is with our grant making and our grant portal. We had those great assets and infrastructure that we had built to do the grant making last fall with the county. It was just a natural extension to do this additional work with the county. We did bring in a partner, Nebraska Enterprise Fund, because of their expertise in helping small businesses so that they could help do technical assistance and then also financial analysis as we're looking at those applications.

Lyn Wineman:

I think those three examples show great agility and great versatility. I mean, jumping in right away, finding the right partnerships, sharing the information, sharing the money. When you think about nonprofits, most of our nonprofits have had increased need for their services, but yet decreased funding. So that's amazing. And you think about our bars and restaurants, they've had such a rough year, but yet they do so much for adding interesting quality to our community and our culture.

Lyn Wineman:

When I saw that you were supporting them in that way, it just made me feel really good about Omaha and what the Foundation is doing. Now, those are great programs. Do you still see gaps out there in the need as related to COVID relief?

Donna Kush:

We do see gaps, Lyn, and it's one of the reasons why we are now modifying our COVID response fund, evolving it to more of a recovery fund. And it's going to be focused on five priorities. Those include mental health, workforce and economic opportunity, arts and culture, housing, and achievement gap. I mean, we all know that is something in itself that's going to take everybody in the community focusing on to help kids of all ages get caught up from what has been a really challenging time for everyone in the education system.

Donna Kush:

I really feel for everyone from administrators to teachers, to parents, to students. It's been an extremely challenging year, and we should all be focusing on that gap. But yes, there are all these other priorities that we need to be . . . These other gaps that we need to be making a priority as well.

Lyn Wineman:

Donna, I know that we have both active and generous listeners on this podcast. If anyone does want to get involved in supporting this work, what is the best way for them to connect with Omaha Community Foundation?

Donna Kush:

Probably go to our website. Certainly if you search for Omaha Community Foundation or omahafoundation.org, that is really the best way to connect with us. And there you can email us through that. You can call us, but we're happy to help anyone with recognizing and talking about their philanthropic goals.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. I think sometimes that community foundations can be misunderstood. Can you help our listeners really understand the role of the Community Foundation in Omaha?

Donna Kush:

Community foundations are just a very different type of organization and we do vary from community to community. But in general, what we are is, we are made up of a host of different donors, a host of different philanthropists who come to us with different types of goals that they have and different areas of interest that they have for wanting to serve the community. We like to think of ourselves too, as

-serving as a connector or convener in the community. As I mentioned, we most recently did a public-private partnership with Douglas County.

Donna Kush:

We work closely with peer foundations in town. We work closely with United Way Nonprofit Association of the Midlands and other community leaders, corporations, but we want to serve in this central role, which I think is unique to a community foundation. We really want to be seen as kind of an unbiased partner. If you think about it with government partners, we don't want people to think about it as us having any kind of bias.

Donna Kush:

We want them to think of us as that partner who can get things done in the community, who can help connect, convene, get resources together, and help figure out a plan to execute and implement.

Lyn Wineman:

Thanks. I appreciate that overview. And then also, I know your work doesn't just stop with Omaha. You are going beyond the Nebraska border into Southwest Iowa. How does that work for you?

Donna Kush:

The Community Foundations of Southwest Iowa are comprised of nine counties that have come together to help minimize administrative costs. They have back office support that is provided by Omaha Community Foundation. Now, each one of those has its own advisory board and operates a little bit like its own entity, and we help do grant making for them very similar to our own to help address those individual needs in their communities.

Lyn Wineman:

That's got to be reassuring to donors and people who are setting up endowments to know that you're being efficient on both sides of the border by reducing administrative costs and making sure as many of the funds as possible are getting to that end location.

Donna Kush:

Yes, it's an important relationship for us, Lyn. We are so connected to Council Bluffs and Southwest Iowa and Pottawattamie County Community Foundation and Iowa West Foundation. I'm very proud of the work that we do in Southwest Iowa, because it provides a formal relationship for us there that then leads to informal relationships as well.

Lyn Wineman:

I mean, when you think about how all of those communities are intertwined, it really just makes sense for that work to have some synergy in those ways. I'm also really intrigued with The Landscape project, and I understand its approach is to work towards making Omaha Metro a great place to call home, a great place to raise a family. Can you tell us a bit more about this program and how it unfolded?

Donna Kush:

Landscape is a project that unfolded about four years ago, and it's really data and research that takes advantage of publicly available data, but then we also talk to residents so that we have resident

engagement and are able to really get good information directly from the residents in the region. We do have a site where we have all of that information, where all of that data is served. We're in the process of kind of transitioning it into . . .

Donna Kush:

Folding it more into the Community Foundation, but also looking at ways to help ensure that the system of knowledge that we have, this information, that it's a little bit easier for others in the community to work with. And put it in a very user-friendly kind of way as we present the data and information, allowing people to work with it and use it to what makes sense. So, if you have a specific area such as healthcare, transportation, or maybe housing, you'd be able to dig into data in that specific area.

Lyn Wineman:

Donna, it's not just funds that you distribute, it's unique expertise, it's data, it's information, all focused on making Omaha a great place to live, work, raise a family. That's fantastic.

Donna Kush:

I'm glad you brought that up, Lyn, because that's actually what differentiates the community foundation. There are other donor advice fund providers out there, commercial providers and others, and what differentiates a community foundation is that value-added community knowledge, community expertise.

Lyn Wineman:

Well, I know that something about Omaha and the people of Omaha and the extended region into Iowa, that there's great pride in the area, right? And it's really, really solid people, really solid community, and you're doing great work to build upon that. As a matter of fact, I just read that Omaha was named number six on Motley Fool's best cities for high salaries and low cost of living. That seems like it should be a headline for a Chamber of Commerce ad, doesn't it? Do you think your work, the work that you're doing, has helped achieve that type of scenario?

Donna Kush:

Certainly it's a team effort for our community and it says something, I think, about the values of our community and the values about our region in the Midwest that very much aligns with what we are known for, we believe, and it's part of our culture here, I think, to want to be known for that. That said, Lyn, we have a lot of work yet to do, when you look at information on homelessness and the great need for affordable housing. There've been some studies recently by our peer foundations and OCF has participated in these, looking at homelessness.

Donna Kush:

One of, I think, the aha moments was looking at how much funding has gone into homelessness in the recent years, and it's addressing that problem. But when you look at it, it's disproportionate to what probably should be going to more of an allocation to affordable housing and those systemic issues that are causing homelessness. That is an initiative affordable...

Donna Kush:

If you think about it, many of these issues and initiatives that we're involved and engaged in with our peers and community partners and our government partners, we're now taking a much better view and look at how these are all related and then how do we address them together, because you have affordable housing, you have homelessness, you have equity. There's a great body of work and we really just need to build some plans and work together to execute.

Lyn Wineman:

I think, once again, a great example of combining that expertise, information, funding, having a strategic approach to really building up the community. I'm curious, Donna, are there other programs that we haven't talked about that you're excited about as well, that the Community Foundation is working on right now?

Donna Kush:

I think one of the other areas . . . Those three initiatives that I mentioned, the racial equity, homelessness, affordable housing, those are all really key priority areas that we definitely have to put a lot of resources into as a community foundation with our donors and fundholders and the community as a whole all working together. The other area too, is mental health.

Donna Kush:

We all know that the pandemic has only exacerbated what has been already an issue for so many, and now it's just really caused great devastation for a lot of families, as people are home, not in school, not at work. We're all missing those social touchpoints that we previously had and those routines that we previously had. And that is another area that we know we need to be involved in and active in those discussions as well.

Lyn Wineman:

I appreciate you saying that. I think mental health is going to be something we're dealing with for a long time as a result of this. If anything has happened that's positive in the realm of mental health, it seems like maybe some of the stigma is coming off and we're talking about it more than we ever have before. I hope that that will help, combined with resources in it and attention as well. Donna, I'd like to talk a bit about you. I get to talk to a lot of great leaders, and I love to hear their stories.

Lyn Wineman:

I know you're from the small town of Monroe, Nebraska, population of 350. A bit different than Omaha. How did your path lead you here?

Donna Kush:

I did grow up in a very small tiny town, Monroe, Nebraska, and there were 11 people in my graduating class, and we were pretty much together since kindergarten. One of the great things about growing up in a small town is you do grow up with a great sense of community and knowing each other and caring about each other. And I think that has carried through in the values that, throughout my life, have actually helped me evolve and become who I have. Also, with a work ethic I think that comes from the rural areas in the Midwest and really knowing that.

Donna Kush:

If you want something to happen, you have to be able and willing to put in the time and the effort to make it happen. That said, I know that I've been blessed with a lot of really good mentors throughout my life and they gave me amazing opportunities at times when I didn't believe in myself and wasn't sure I could do what they were asking me to do. I feel very fortunate to have had that kind of support throughout my early years in school, through college, and then throughout my professional career as well.

Lyn Wineman:

That is a great reminder. Mentorship is an important way that we can all give back. There's something that we all know or do that somebody else wants to know or learn. That's a great, great shout-out for that. You and I also, I discovered, have something in common and that is we're both graduates of the University of Nebraska College of Journalism and Mass Communications. I have to give a shout-out to the Huskers there. How has that training supported you in your current work?

Donna Kush:

Having a background in communications has helped from a formal standpoint. In the College of Journalism, it's similar to . . . In terms of your training, your formal training as a journalist, they teach you the really good mechanics of the English language and grammar and everything that you need to be a good journalist. You have that formal training, which I think helps you tremendously throughout your career no matter what your job is.

Donna Kush:

And then there's that other training that comes in journalism about how you communicate, how you relate to people, being a good listener, processing the information, and perhaps being able to then distill the information back out and do it in such a way that you're not filtering too much, that you're getting the general idea and you're able to translate that to different populations.

Donna Kush:

I think when I went to school, Lyn, they didn't have PR degrees, and what I really wanted was a strategic communications, an integrated communications degree, which they do now have. I did the best I could with multiple majors and minors to try to create that integration, because that's what really interested me most from an early age, was that strategic part of how you communicate and relate to people. I think that's what's really helped me for a long view.

Lyn Wineman:

That's great. That is great because strategic communications can help any leader, any organization. I think listening too is probably a skill that sometimes we forget about. And through that journalism process, you really learn. You learn to listen well. You learn to listen fast, right, because you don't get many chances. You're trying to just bring in that information and pull it together as quickly as you can. I'm talking with more and more people recently who, as a result of the past year, are looking for more meaning in their lives, right?

Lyn Wineman:

I mean, I think it's kind of made us all look into our souls a bit. As a community leader, what advice do you have for those who want to make a difference in their community, in their world, in their circle of influence, or so forth?

Donna Kush:

I think the first thing you have to do is focus on what you're passionate about. Because if you join a nonprofit board or volunteer for a nonprofit, if you're not passionate about the cause of the organization, it's going to be very hard for you to engage with them. First, you have to think about what you are most passionate about, and then be able to think about, okay, what organizations might match up with that, and then explore them and see what different ways you might engage.

Donna Kush:

That's the great thing about, I think, the Omaha community. We are becoming a place where, through organizations like SHARE Omaha, it's not just about giving money, it's about finding volunteer opportunities. It's about engaging with nonprofits in a different way. It might be giving. It might be buying items that they need. There are just so many different ways to engage with them. I think first and foremost, you have to start with what it is that's going to be meaningful to you.

Lyn Wineman:

That makes a lot of sense. That's what's going to make you stick with it when it gets hard or when you get busy, but it's also going to be what makes it meaningful to you as well. Donna, one more question I love to ask. I'm inspired by motivational quotes, and I'm just curious, could you give us a few of your own Donna Kush words of wisdom for our listeners?

Donna Kush:

One piece of advice, Lyn, that I'd like to give people as they're early in their career is to not get stuck thinking that your career is going to go in a certain direction. That you obtained a certain degree, you graduated and got a certain job, and you're going down that path with blinders on. And you're not really looking at what's all going on to the side of you, when in fact you may get approached with these opportunities that you would never, never have thought of.

Donna Kush:

That's just been the case for myself personally, that different opportunities have come up and I've been fortunate to be approached by those, but you have to be open to those in order to really challenge yourself for growth and expansion.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great advice. One of the things about strategic planning and strategic communication is you do, when you start that process, you kind of have that straight arrow vision for where you want to go, but you don't always get there in a straight arrow, do you? Or you don't always end up where you think you will. Sometimes there will be a better opportunity along the way. As we wrap up our time together, I know you shared this earlier, but I just want to include it one more time for people because you're doing great work.

Lyn Wineman:

If people want to find out more or support your work, how do they find out more about you, Donna?

Donna Kush:

The Omaha Community Foundation website is really the best place to find out all kinds of information about us. It's omahafoundation.org. You can email, call, anyway. We appreciate people reaching out.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. So our last question for this episode, what is the most important thing you would like people to know about the work that you're doing, Donna?

Donna Kush:

I would want people to have a better understanding of the Community Foundation. And while we have a reputation of being a charitable bank, we must, first and foremost, be a really good charitable bank, and we have excellent expertise within. This team is just amazing and so talented in that area. And I think we're really well-known for that in the community, but there's so much more that we should be known for.

Donna Kush:

It's that expertise and knowledge that we have because of the grant making that we do, whether it's through our donors and fundholders, which is the primary grant making, but then through these other opportunities like we've had with Douglas County and other partners to do additional grant making. Because of that, we have this deep knowledge of the community and what the needs are, who's doing what, who's really working on what issues and doing it well.

Donna Kush:

We want people to remember to lean on us for that expertise and knowledge, as well as on that financial and philanthropic fundholder side as well.

Lyn Wineman:

Well, Donna, I sure hope that this episode of the podcast really will help shine a light on that unique and comprehensive role that you play in the community of Omaha. I just want to say thank you for your time today, as well as thank you for what you and your team are doing to help make Omaha a better place.

Donna Kush:

Thank you, Lyn. Thank you so much for having me on.

Announcer:

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