

Agency for Change Podcast: Matt Martin, AVP of Community Services, Refugee and Immigrant Programs and Mark Versen, Chief Development Officer, Lutheran Family Services

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

Earlier this year, a new report based on census data showed the immigrant community in Nebraska is not only growing, but the state has some of the highest rates of increase in immigrants and refugee populations in the country. Researchers say this is not by accident, as the entire state has taken intentional steps to diversify population.

Lyn Wineman:

Hello, everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. And today on the Agency for Change Podcast, I am talking to Matt Martin and Mark Versen. Matt and Mark are both from Lutheran Family Services. Matt is the AVP of Community Services, Refugee and Immigrant programs. And Mark is the chief development officer. Matt and Mark, how are the two of you today?

Mark Versen:

Doing great, Lyn. Thanks for having us.

Matt Martin:

Thank you. It's great day.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. It's good to talk to both of you. I love a good conversation. And I don't think I've had the opportunity on this podcast to talk to anybody about the refugee situation right now. And as we go about our day-to-day lives, I've got to believe that most of us really don't think about the refugee crisis. Matt, can you give us a high-level overview of the situation?

Matt Martin:

Sure. Well, thank you very much. Traditionally, Nebraska, as you say, has been a very welcoming community to thousands of refugees who have come to resettle here in our state over the last 30 or more years, and it's something that we are continuing on today.

Matt Martin:

A lot of it is driven at the presidential level nationally by how many refugees will be allowed within the country and so we have to go off of that at a high level. That number had gone down over the Trump administration to a place where it was down from 115,000 to almost 15,000 in the last year and now that number is going back up under the Biden administration.

Matt Martin:

So, we are facing and dealing with and preparing for a new influx of refugees overall in addition to the fact that now we have this Afghan situation which has just been with us for the last several months and we are preparing for a significant number of refugees coming in through that as well. So it's something that historically we are very used to doing and have been very welcoming in our community and now we're just looking for that next opportunity.

Lyn Wineman:

Right. When you combine "Nebraska Nice" plus the experience of Lutheran Family Services in this area, I could see where you are really set up to handle this. And Mark, diving a bit deeper, what is Lutheran Family Services doing to help refugees with resettlement?

Mark Versen:

Yeah, outside of what Matt talked about in terms of that direct support, it goes from all the way from welcoming the family at the airport and transporting them to their apartment and getting their apartments set up with the full furnishings from couches, beds, silverware, cups, the whole gamut. If you think about what we almost take for granted in our own homes by requirement of our federal contracts, we have to have one fork, one spoon, one knife, one cup, one bowl, one plate, and so forth for each individual. Well, realistically, do we really all want to be doing dishes after every single meal and only have one thing a silverware per person? No, right?

Lyn Wineman:

The answer is no, absolutely not.

Mark Versen:

Absolutely not. I think we can all relate to having the dishes pile up in the sink and sometimes we take that as a pain in the butt but it's also a blessing and something that we take for granted. And so, one of the biggest things within refugee resettlement is that we want to make sure that we are giving the equal opportunity and welcoming these individuals in the right way.

Mark Versen:

It's, think if you packed up and moved your entire life because of, say a war struck out in your country and you're just trying to survive, you don't want to go to a new place and then all of a sudden be stuck in a bad situation. So, it goes from the airport to the apartment.

Mark Versen:

It's then we work with them on the employment services side and obviously, we want to make sure that they're gainfully employed in a quick amount of time because from that then comes the support from say health insurance and being able to be self-sufficient.

Mark Versen:

And so, there's a checklist that LFS has to go through that's over 100 different items that we work with the individuals and their families and getting the kids into school, understanding the transportation logistics within our culture. It's everything that's normal to us because we were raised around there.

Mark Versen:

If you're in Lincoln, Nebraska, where you're at, Lyn, and you needed to get downtown, there's a handful of different options, whether it's from a bus line, now there's Uber, there's Lyft, there's taxis, whatever it may be, that may not be in the traditional sense that what they're accustomed to from their own country.

Mark Versen:

So, it's really helping navigate that process through welcoming into the American dream, if you will, and get them set up for success. And so that's the language side of things is a big one as well and working with them and our ELL components within our programs to make sure that we're trying to help educate them to be sufficient in English and in the fastest amount of time as possible. So that way, again, that they can overcome some of those barriers.

Mark Versen:

As what we're doing in terms of helping them directly, we've embarked on a fundraising effort of just shy of \$4 million of both cash and in-kind support and buy in-kind support, Lyn, I mean by mattresses and the forks and knives and everything that I was talking about.

Mark Versen:

And the outpour of support right now for the Afghan crisis and the humanitarian crisis that's at hand has been just... there's not really words to describe it. It's been remarkable from our metro areas to our rural populations. It's been incredible. We're sitting at roughly \$3 million against that goal in two months of both cash and in-kind support.

Mark Versen:

And there's plenty of other conversations going on with individuals and corporations and foundations and churches just across the community of how people can support. So, we're here to welcome them from the moment that we get when that they're coming to Nebraska, and then we stay with them to support them all the way until they feel comfortable, where they don't need our services.

Lyn Wineman:

Everything you just said to me, Mark is almost a little bit overwhelming. The thought of somebody coming into this country from a state of chaos, a state of danger, there's got to be language barriers, documentation barriers, there's got to be just those things, the spoons, the forks, the plates, the school, the transportation, so overwhelming.

Lyn Wineman:

But then also the outpouring of support from Nebraskans to support your work in this area. That's a lot of money that you have raised. And for anybody who's listening who might want to get involved in this, how can people either support your work or help to welcome these refugees in as they come?

Mark Versen:

Yeah, so before I answer that, to your point of it seems like a lot, Lyn, it is. It's been crazy for the last two months since we got wind of the crisis. We knew what was going on. But until we really got into the

severity of what was happening, we've been running at breakneck speed across all sorts of different avenues all the way to the point of trying to find storage, because it's a lot of items to bring in at once. And so, it's been remarkable to just be able to partner with so many people.

Mark Versen:

But for those that want to partner with us moving forward, there's a couple different ways on the volunteer front. That's one area that we're going to need a lot of people to be able to help welcome these families. In the last two months, we've increased 539 volunteers into the system.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. That's a lot of volunteers.

Mark Versen:

It's remarkable. And so when we talk about running at breakneck speed, that's one aspect of it. Well, now we have 539 people we need to get trained and through the proper background checks and everything else for direct contact with clients and so forth. So there's a lot of work being done there.

Mark Versen:

But volunteering is definitely one way from, whether that's just showing up and holding a sign and welcoming them at the airport, to sponsoring an entire family. And that's taking and accepting the opportunity to furnish their apartment. And that's, again, all of the furnishings, that's also then shopping for food and filling their cabinets and their fridge to make sure that they have something to come and be able to be at least self-sufficient in terms of food security for the short-haul while we get them employed and on their feet.

Mark Versen:

So that's one way and you can volunteer by going to lfsneb.volunteerhub.com is the best way to get into the volunteer network with us. Again, that's lfsneb.volunteerhub.com. The other way to support directly to the individuals is making a monetary or an in-kind donation. We've had phenomenal support as I shared, but we still have a long ways to go.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Mark Versen:

We've increased our capacity from what we initially thought we were going to be able to serve in our communities, just because of some of the different governmental regulations that have come down, which is a positive. And so our original goal, yeah, because there's some of that financial support from the federal government, we were able to increase that. So yes, our need went down. But then our need went right back up because we're serving more individuals.

Mark Versen:

And so, making a monetary donation or an in-kind donation is overly important as well. And those type of items can be found or ways to do that is just at our regular website at lfsneb.org or reaching out to anyone on staff, either Matt, myself, our development team, we're happy to help coordinate that. We've

had a lot of civic groups or volunteer groups, or even just bars actually, in Omaha, they had a challenge to do a furniture drive.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, wow.

Mark Versen:

And so four or five bars got together and then decided to do two weekends in challenges and collect items, and the winner got some sort of party for their staff or something like that. So the outpour has been great. So there's a lot of different ways to give back. We're happy to help coordinate and brainstorm and walk alongside of whatever those ideas might be.

Lyn Wineman:

That is fantastic. For anybody who wants to check out that website, by the way, we'll have that listed in the show notes, if you didn't get that written down. So that's fantastic. That is a lot of work all the way around.

Lyn Wineman:

Matt, I'm curious, on your end, is there anything else about the Afghanistan crisis, or maybe even other refugee situations that people should know about and keep in mind?

Matt Martin:

Thanks. Yeah, no, I think that some of what Mark said really applies, and just try to put yourself in other people's shoes, I think. Refugees are people who come to our communities, come to our country, not through any choice of their own, not because they're just want to have something different, or seek different economic opportunities, or for whatever reason like that.

Matt Martin:

These are people who come to us because of war, because of natural disasters, because maybe they're persecuted because of their identity, because of their religion, because of their politics, because of a lot of factors that are really beyond their control.

Matt Martin:

In most cases, these are people who are fleeing for their lives, taking their families, and whatever few possessions if they're incredibly lucky that they can take with them, and just imagine what that must be like to be in their shoes, where again somebody knocks on your door at two o'clock in the morning and says, "You have five minutes, gather everything you can, leave and try to get to the airport or try to get to the border or try to get your family out to safety," and then spend the next, who knows how long, with the Afghan situation, that's happened rather quickly.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Matt Martin:

But with other refugees, some refugees spend up to a decade or more between fleeing their country and their situation, living in camps, trying to find a better life for their family and themselves. Trying to find some way to piece things together to make that work. So I think that's really important for people to keep in mind. And with the Afghan situation, here's a country that we've been involved in directly as the United States military and foreign affairs over at least the last 20 years actively since 9/11.

Matt Martin:

And we've, as a result of that, engaged a lot of Afghans directly in the work that we've done with the military and the State Department and all that. There have been Afghans who have served as translators and logistics people and liaisons and all sorts of other work on the ground, on the front lines with soldiers from the United States, helping us fight the war there.

Matt Martin:

And along with those individuals and also people from Iraq, we now have this special category of refugees that come to us, these special immigrant and visa holders who, again, have helped out the US in our battle there. And because of that, we've felt a sense of obligation to help them out in their time of need when we can do something for them now.

Matt Martin:

And that's why, really, we're looking at this Afghan situation now. In the last two weeks, we've all seen the videos of people going to the Kabul Airport by the tens of thousands trying to get out as the government was collapsing, and the Taliban was taken over again, trying to find safety for their families and for everyone in their community.

Matt Martin:

And as a result of that 50,000 to 75,000 people were airlifted over the course of about three weeks or so and brought to US military forts and facilities internationally and across the United States, where we now have 50,000 to 75,000 Afghans who are waiting to be resettled in the United States and potentially elsewhere as well to find safety and security and the next step in their lives for themselves and their families.

Matt Martin:

So, we now are looking at how we can take some of those people and resettle them within our community. Nebraska already has a very vibrant Afghan community as well. In Omaha, there's about 3,000 people who have been here, for, in some cases, decades really, beginning with the war in the 80s, between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. We started seeing refugees coming into our community then. And since then, we've seen a pretty steady number of people who have come here.

Matt Martin:

So this is really the latest group of Afghans who are coming here, they have a welcome home, I would say here. We have a very vibrant community of Afghans who already have helped make it an easier transition for the people who are coming here. And I think it's important too to think of who these Afghans are likely to be, in addition to people who have served with the US military, alongside them, helping us in Afghanistan.

Matt Martin:

We have their families, we have other people who are coming from a variety of backgrounds in Afghanistan, but many of them will be educated, many of them will have some English skills and facility already. Many of them will be ready and willing to integrate into our community and arrive on the ground and get to work and get their families into the schools and taking advantage of what the community offers and being part of life here in Omaha and Nebraska. So, it's a special population, but it's, again, just the next iteration of the Afghans and refugees who have come to our communities.

Lyn Wineman:

Matt, that is such great perspective. And thank you for helping us understand that. It honestly makes my day-to-day concerns and stresses seem so small and insignificant. And that's part of the reason I really wanted to talk to the two of you about the work of Lutheran Family Services because it's such important work. And I'm proud that we have this initiative in Nebraska and thankful that there's an organization. And I know there are other organizations, too, that are looking out for this population.

Lyn Wineman:

Mark, I know Lutheran Family Services is really leaning into this work. But you're also a very large and diverse organization. Can you just give people a quick overview of what other services you provide? And I know there's a lot, and we don't have probably all the time in the world. So high-level overview.

Mark Versen:

Yeah, thanks, Lyn. One thing that I just wanted to go back to what Matt was talking about because I honestly, didn't know the difference until I started off as between a refugee and an immigrant.

Mark Versen:

And for everyone listening, I think it's important for us to know the designation between the two. And Matt touched on it, is refugees are forced to leave their country for a variety of the reasons that Matt talked about.

Mark Versen:

Immigrants choose to come to the US and so forth. So there is a big difference between the two. There's a lot of concern, and you see in the media about the violence and so forth, that comes from, say, the refugee population.

Mark Versen:

Well, since inception of the refugee resettlement program, there has been zero murders from a refugee that has been resettled into the United States. And that is something that doesn't get talked about enough.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Mark Versen:

Is that they are migrant populations get pulled together within that. And it's not the case. And so at least just wanted to touch base on that one real quick.

Lyn Wineman:

Thank you for that. Yeah.

Mark Versen:

So yeah, you talked about LFS being a very large organization in what we provide, and we could easily do another hour about our services and that would give us about a minute per service because we have over 43 services that we provide.

Mark Versen:

The easiest way to break it down is into three main areas. We've talked about our refugee resettlement program, but within the community services program that Matt oversees as well is our migrant support services and that's within the translative and interpretive services through our global language solutions.

Mark Versen:

And that has gained quite a bit of traction that we were actually translating, interpreting press conferences during COVID for Governor Ricketts. So that's something that is an opportunity for anyone listening that now can be done thanks to the pandemic virtually just about anywhere.

Mark Versen:

So, I know that there's some listening from say Vegas or other areas that you've mentioned, Lyn, that if your company or school or whatever is looking forward to translative or interpretive services, LFS has over 30 different languages and dialects represented that it can provide those services.

Mark Versen:

But within that migrant support services, it's employment services. We partner with legal aid in different situations, we work with individuals on path to citizenship, and so forth within that. Where we were founded almost 130 years ago was really in the child welfare component and advocacy within that space. We started as an orphanage, Lutheran Orphanages, now that program has obviously evolved over time.

Mark Versen:

But foster care adoption is a big part of that statewide in-home studies for foster care and adoption. So partnering with other organizations and doing those in-home studies, children's trauma treatment. So, when you think about kinship and say, a parent or a legal guardian suddenly passes away, it's working with not only the kiddo that is going through just a traumatic experience, but then the new caretaker, and that could be a sibling, that could be a grandparent, it could be a best friend, an aunt, uncle, whatever it may be. And working with them on how to navigate that new role as being that parent, if you will.

Mark Versen:

And then our largest portfolio that we operate within LFS is around behavioral health and that in itself, we could probably talk for quite some time on, Lyn, but it really does, and this isn't excluding anything in particular, but that severe and persistent mental illness, substance use.

Mark Versen:

And so anyone battling with addiction, depression, and anxiety that's something that as the pandemic really continues to drag on, we've seen increase in mental health cause just from a depression or anxiety from the isolation or the concern is the scare of what's happening in the community, at your family members. So mental health is a big thing that we do within that space.

Mark Versen:

We have a component with military and veteran services as well, that we've tried to work with the individual, but then also with the families that support our troops and if they're deployed, or when they're coming back and suffering from PTSD of how can we start to really help them transition back into the life that they once had, and it may not be the same moving forward, but how can we identify the new normal and work with those individuals to make sure that they're successful when they returned from serving our country.

Mark Versen:

We have a partnership within the criminal justice system in the sense of, say, co responders, which are into our mental and licensed health practitioners that work with law enforcement to de-escalate mental calls and crises that law enforcement are pulled into from the communities and so work with them in that space, as well as transition a lot of corrections.

Mark Versen:

The one thing that we want to make sure is that mistakes are challenges that an individual might have faced that put them in that position to be incarcerated as how can we work with them to make sure that doesn't happen again?

Mark Versen:

One part within that too, is we have a healthy fatherhood initiative, that's a new program for us, which is really, really exciting. And it's working with fathers that are trying to get back into the kiddo's lives, and whether that's coming from corrections or court order, or someone that just may not have custodial rights, that wants to learn how to be a better father to be able to have the opportunity to be in that kid's life.

Mark Versen:

So working with individuals now across the state in that regard, which is what I'm really excited about too. So, there's a lot more that I could go within that when you think about behavioral health, but those are some of the big ones. One other one that's still in its infancy stages is working with senior care facilities, and in working with individuals that are in assisted or independent living, to make sure that they also have the tools necessary to be happy.

Mark Versen:

It can be a challenge. And we heard a lot actually during COVID. The facilities were shut down from external but even outside of that, those that weren't able to get the people that are coming in, sadly to say, there's a lot of individuals in assisted living, independent living that have family, but family don't visit them. And so there's that component.

Mark Versen:

So, we do a lot, but at the same time, I think the biggest thing is living into our mission and it's providing safety, health, and wellbeing for all people. We look forward to continuing that for hopefully another 130 years.

Lyn Wineman:

It really is such a broad lineup of services you provide. I think we need to have you back to do several shows. There are several different conversations we could have. But it feels to me like the thread that goes through them all is really that care that you provide for vulnerable populations and important care, all the way up to what you just said about seniors. Seniors were lonely before the pandemic and the pandemic really shined a big light on that.

Lyn Wineman:

But kids, families, the whole mental health issue, I think too, maybe if one of the positive things that came out of the pandemic is that we're talking about it now. So, anyway, thank you for-

Mark Versen:

And then I think one thing positive came from that too, is the access to all the services.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Mark Versen:

And not only just for LFS, but other nonprofits and for everyone else, too, that if anyone is struggling, and someone in your network is struggling, the access to telehealth now has really changed in the space. Because someone that stay, lives in rural Nebraska, or a rural part of the country, that may not have a physical location and probably never will, in say a town of 1,000 people, they can now access the same level of services via telehealth over a smartphone or a computer that traditionally or prior to the pandemic they would not have the access to.

Mark Versen:

So the pandemic, though it's been a challenge, I think for all of us in our own ways, it has opened the door to some pretty positive innovations in a lot of different ways.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, thank you for that. So, I'm curious, taking this even to a different channel. I'm curious how both of you ended up in this work. I love to hear about the paths that people take. Matt, can we start with you? Were you on the playground as an eight-year-old talking about refugee resettlement or? I'm imagining that's not exactly how it worked.

Matt Martin:

Not exactly, no. I grew up in a pretty sheltered environment, I have to admit. But one thing that was very true is that I was ingrained with an ethic of concern for my community, and service to my community from an early age. I went to senior centers to help out. I participated in all sorts of volunteer efforts around my community as a kid because my parents were helpful and encouraging of that.

Matt Martin:

And so when I really had the opportunity to start into a professional career, I was drawn to the nonprofit world, pretty much from the get-go. And now I've been at it for about 30 years or so. And that journey has taken me across a lot of different parts of that.

Matt Martin:

But it's been a mix of concern for international issues, US foreign policy, international structures, international security, human rights, a lot of issues like that, and then mixed with about another half of really community development, very local-focused work on how our neighborhoods and our communities work for everyone. Or we try to encourage them to work for more people in our community and for everyone.

Matt Martin:

So, when this opportunity came up with LFS to work on refugees, it was really just a perfect blend for me of a lot of experience that I've had in a lot of different sectors to match the international and the global issues with a much more local focus in our neighborhoods. And so I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to bring a lot of disparate experiences and skills and opportunities to help now with this situation.

Lyn Wineman:

I think it's really interesting how career paths work. They're seldom exactly what you plan, but often exactly what you need. And it sounds like you're in exactly the right position. How about you, Mark, how did your path lead you here?

Mark Versen:

Yeah, so mine was a little different than Matt's. So I played collegiate basketball. And since I was young, I would always say, "I want to go into marketing to deal with people." And so that was the baseline. I don't think anyone grows up saying, tells their parents, instead of, "I'm going to be an astronaut." "I'm going to be a fundraiser." Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Right. I've never heard that one from any kid.

Mark Versen:

Yeah, me either. So, mine was always I wanted to deal with people. I love learning everyone's story and trying to connect that with a mission. And so after I got done with basketball, as with any fundraiser, you fall into the field, really. My basketball coach said, "Hey, you should look at this job with the Alumni Foundation."

Mark Versen:

I was currently working with an entrepreneurial center writing business plans and marketing plans for existing and startup companies. But after he told me about it, I said, "Yeah, all right. I'll take a look at it. I trusted you this far, I might as well take your word one more time." Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Mark Versen:

So got into higher ed advancement. And I was very fortunate to be at a smaller institution that gave me the opportunity to learn all aspects of advancement from marketing and communications to public relations, to annual major and plan giving, to board relations, the whole spectrum, and really found a passionate love for the field.

Mark Versen:

Then I moved around to different institutions, got recruited to different ones to expand on my experiences, and through it all I really found a passion for the fundraising aspect of it. I love everything else but I truly love the puzzle of working with a donor or a funder to identify how their passions and their capacity and wealth can make an impact to others.

Mark Versen:

And so frankly, I never thought I'd leave higher education. It's exciting to be in higher ed. There's a lot of perks with football games and some of these different things and it's also a different level of philanthropy than say, a nonprofit.

Mark Versen:

But also on personal side of things, I was traveling a lot and I got young kids and my wife was a single mom most of the time and when I say most, anywhere from a half to two-thirds of the year and made the decision on the personal front to start looking outside of higher ed because of the travel commitment. And my next step was into more of an executive role.

Mark Versen:

I knew enough about Lutheran Family Services because, actually, my stepmom serves on the Rocky Mountains board in Colorado, but I was blown away when I started doing the research of what we do here in Nebraska because it is unmatched. There's not a lot of organizations across the country that have the full spectrum of all that we do.

Mark Versen:

And for me when considering this role, it came down to the personal side of it too. Obviously, I have a family and what we do with families is great. My background though in terms of dealing with severe mental illness within my own personal life with family members, I've been dealing with that ever since I can really remember for the most part and that's something to be able to give back in that sense and try to help address the stigma and the overall need for support in that space was one area, as well as in the substance use side of it.

Mark Versen:

I've had a lot of personal connection to addiction and to the point that I've lost a number of individuals to addiction and suicide because of addiction. And again, to be able to help lead an organization that has a direct impact and a direct tie to terrain to alleviate some of the stresses and bring awareness to and try to help individuals come out of a dark spot is something that I just am extremely passionate for.

Mark Versen:

And so it's a blessing every day to be able to wake up and I know that though I'm the money guy as they call me inside our walls. But by way of doing that, it allows our just phenomenal staff to be able to serve the individuals and hopefully bring them into a successful place in their lives.

Lyn Wineman:

Mark, I am sure that that combination of passion and talent really makes you very good at what you do. I think whenever people can find that intersection, I think it just makes all the work that much more purposeful. And I think more and more people since the pandemic.

Lyn Wineman:

And I know you came to Lutheran Family Services before the pandemic, but more and more people are really looking for making the right choices that balance their career and their family as well. I had travel at one time in my history too, and it's hard to travel when you have kids that have things going on just leaving your spouse at home alone, but also missing those important key life moments.

Lyn Wineman:

So, I'm curious, both of you obviously have very successful careers, do very important work, sometimes difficult work. What advice do you each have for people who want to make a difference either in this field or maybe in whatever they're doing? And, Matt, let's start with you on this one.

Matt Martin:

One of the most important things I would say is follow your passions.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Matt Martin:

I think having a curious mind and a passionate mind will get you far and always dig into where you find yourself too. I think we all come from different places and we all find ourselves in different environments and all the rest of it, and there's good work that can be done everywhere.

Matt Martin:

You don't have to reach far out, you don't have to go to some foreign place, you don't have to look around to find it. You can always find needs and ways to be involved and ways to make your community a better place in whatever place you find yourself.

Matt Martin:

So, I find that the biggest things are just to be curious and to be passionate and to follow those things where they take you and try always to do what you can in your own community.

Lyn Wineman:

That's great advice. Mark, how about you? What advice do you have for young leaders?

Mark Versen:

Yeah, outside of that is make the call. We all sit there and you can think of, "Oh my God, I'm so passionate about this." And Google is a powerful tool. You can find organizations, you can find some happenings that are going on in your community.

Mark Versen:

But making that next step I think is the most important thing is sending an email, picking up the phone, and calling. And even if it's just like an exploratory message that you're reaching out to say, what are the opportunities? Or if there's something specific within, step up and make the call.

Mark Versen:

And just because, if there's any hesitation from an organizational standpoint, we absolutely love it. If we don't have to go out and find 10 people and 10 people are coming to us that want to help, it makes our lives a lot easier. And then by way of that support of those 10 individuals sometimes can do more than what three individual staff can do.

Mark Versen:

So I would say I think one of the biggest things in terms of advice that I can give is, is find that and to add onto Matt, find that passion, find what you want to try to do, but then just make the call and then make that contact.

Lyn Wineman:

Good advice. Very good advice. Everybody who listens to this podcast knows this next question is my favorite question always because I am inspired by motivational quotes. And a lot of times we look to historical figures and famous people. And I get to talk with so many interesting people. I'm going to ask the two of you for your own words of wisdom for our listeners. And, Mark, let's start this one with you.

Mark Versen:

Yeah, when you sent us this, I had tried to give some thought to it. But one that I always like is be present and lift others. I think that that can go in a lot of different ways, across a lot of different platforms. But that's one that I tried to distill within my own life. And so yeah, be present and lift others.

Lyn Wineman:

Very good one. That puts a little pressure on for you, Matt, what are your words of wisdom here?

Matt Martin:

Well, I generally don't try to compete with Mark because... So I'll just struggle by. But I would say remember, you never know what others are dealing with.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Matt Martin:

My daughter asked me a little while ago about my high school experience and about the valedictorian in my high school, who was not me. And so I told her what I knew, but I had to actually go look it up myself a little bit too to recall. And what I realized was that, and I didn't know this at the time, until very recently, until I looked at this, that the valedictorian of my high school was a refugee.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, wow.

Matt Martin:

Yeah, who up until two years before we started high school, and when I first met him, was a refugee from another country and had just come to our community very recently. I never knew that about his background. And I always assumed that everybody had a similar background as me that we all grew up in the same way. And that certainly wasn't true in his case. And so I think just always try to have a sense of humility and appreciation for the fact that you never know what other people are dealing with on a day-to-day basis.

Lyn Wineman:

Very wise words from both of you. Thank you very much. So, we've talked a lot about the refugee program, we've talked about other programs. For our listeners who would like to learn more about your work, how to support you, I know you gave us some web links earlier, but one more time, what is the best way they can find out more about Lutheran Family Services?

Mark Versen:

Yeah, I think the easiest way, Lyn, is visiting the website, and that's www.lfs.org, as in Lutheran Family Services, NEB, as in Nebraska .org (lfsneb.org). From there, or even if you just Google LFS Nebraska, there's a phone number. And to my comment earlier, pick up the phone and call us. And we will identify with you of where your passions align with how you can make an impact within the community.

Mark Versen:

I don't even want to say an impact for LFS because that's not our goal is for you to come and change LFS, it's to get you connected to make the change in the community and what we really want to do. And so that's the easiest way, Lyn, is probably the website. Otherwise, please do Google us and give us a call.

Mark Versen:

We're also on Facebook and Twitter and LinkedIn as well. So follow us on social media for updates. And there's a lot of different ways we put different opportunities to get involved there as well.

Lyn Wineman:

That's great. All great channels. And once again, we'll have those all in the show notes as well. So, as we wrap up this great conversation, I'd love to hear from each of you what is the most important thing you'd like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing? Yeah, let's start with you, Mark.

Mark Versen:

All right. I think the most important thing that I'd like everyone to take away from today is that again, whether it's LFS or other organizations, because yes, we're in Nebraska, we do a little bit of western Iowa. There's opportunity and conversations about partnerships within even Missouri and Kansas. But knowing that this reaches a broad network that's not in say in our back doorstep, there are organizations like ours in different states and communities and so forth.

Mark Versen:

And so my biggest thing is identify what you think you might be able to contribute. It doesn't always have to be money, it doesn't have to be financial. And that's coming from the money guy like I said that they call me internally. But there's so many different ways to make an impact on people's lives outside of just a monetary contribution. That's one.

Mark Versen:

The other side of it is, especially around some of the stigmas, whether it is around refugees and immigrants, or mental illness, there are a lot of ways to make an impact outside of organizations like ours that's working with your local senators, that's working with your mayor, and your city delegates, and so forth.

Mark Versen:

Really think about how you might be able to help change that narrative around mental illness. It is a challenge, it is an issue for our country. It's an issue for all of our communities, whether you're in New York City, and one of the top populations in our country, or you're from a town of 1,000 people in central Nebraska, people are struggling in a lot of different ways.

Mark Versen:

And again, we talked about some of the different ways that we can support. But by way of really being an advocate for those individuals that may not have a voice, or because of some of the challenges, that voice can't be spoken. Be an advocate for those individuals. And again, like I said, be present and lift others.

Lyn Wineman:

Great. Those are great thoughts. Matt, how about you? What are some final thoughts from you?

Matt Martin:

Oh, thanks. I'd piggyback a little bit on what Mark has said and say that we at LFS are fortunate to be able to spend all of our time essentially working on these issues and helping out people in this specific, dedicated way. But we're really just a small piece of the puzzle.

Matt Martin:

We may be leaders in some areas because we have the opportunity to do that, and to be that, but it really takes the effort of the whole community to make what we do successful. And we're only maybe the catalysts that help bring that change and help lead that, make the opportunities for change in our community.

Matt Martin:

What we really need is people to engage from across the spectrum. And yes, there are lots of ways to be involved with LFS in the work that we do, and we can channel some of that interest and energy towards what people want to help change in their community.

Matt Martin:

But also it can just be other things like, let's say there's a refugee family who moves in down the street from you, how about having like a barbecue in your backyard and invite all the neighbors and invite the refugee family in to make them part of your community? How about you go to a parent-teacher meeting with your local school, and there's an issue about how to provide maybe some services, some books supplies, or things like that, for a local refugee family? Help them out that way, make them part of your community.

Matt Martin:

Let's say you're an employer who's looking for another 20 people to add to your team. There are a lot of refugees that are going to be looking for employment, yes, we have the opportunity to provide some specific services, but it takes the whole community to make what we do really effective. So, we're all part of this together.

Lyn Wineman:

Great suggestions. Matt and Mark, I really enjoyed this conversation. And I fully believe the world needs more people like you. So thank you for taking time out of your busy days today to talk with us.

Mark Versen:

Yeah, thank you, Lyn. Really appreciate it.

Matt Martin:

Thank you very much.

Announcer:

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