

Agency for Change Podcast: Paulette Monthei, Enrichment Executive Director, Outlook Enrichment

Paulette Monthei:

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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.

Kelley Peterson:

More than 15,000 people in Omaha, Nebraska, currently live with significant vision loss. Today, we're going to speak with someone who is part of an organization that's working to make sure these individuals have the resources they need to live happy, independent, fulfilling lives.

Kelley Peterson:

Hello, this is Kelley Peterson, vice president, non-profit creative director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of Agency for Change. Today on the podcast we're joined by Paulette Monthei, executive director of Outlook Enrichment, an organization whose mission is to empower people living with vision loss with the skills and tools to achieve their goals. Paulette, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you're making on the world.

Paulette Monthei:

Well, thank you for having me. I appreciate the opportunity.

Kelley Peterson:

My pleasure. To kick us off, Paulette, for our listeners who aren't familiar with Outlook Enrichment, could you tell us what it is and how you help people?

Paulette Monthei:

Sure. Outlook Enrichment is a private nonprofit rehabilitation agency for the blind and visually impaired that serves the state of Nebraska. Our services range from adaptive technology training, recreation programming, support services and mental health programming, as well as a wide range of services for youth in transition age, as well as rec. We do provide a lot of diversity in the services we do.

Kelley Peterson:

It sure does sound like it. I'm looking forward to learning more about the organization, but first I want to hear about you. What drew you to your career in social work and how did you land at Outlook Enrichment?

Paulette Monthei:

My eye condition. I am a person with vision loss myself. I am legally blind. It is actually a genetic in my family. On my dad's side, he and several of his brothers are all legally blind. My mom lost, when my grandmother was pregnant, she succumbed to an illness that caused a genetic mutation in my mom, which was passed down to myself and my sisters. Both of my parents are visually impaired and one of my sisters is also visually impaired.

Paulette Monthei:

That kind of started us out. I've always had positive role modeling for my family. My father was an occupational therapist and my mother was a teacher of the blind. I was kind of doomed to kind of land in this role. My actual degree is in social work, but I have my bachelors in social work with a specialization in disability law.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, I certainly wouldn't say doomed as a word, especially as we got to chat a little bit before we started this today. You were saying how much Outlook Enrichment has grown just even since 2020 and especially during the pandemic. I don't think the word doomed is the one that qualifies for all of your achievements.

Paulette Monthei:

Outlook is now the third agency for the blind that I have worked for. Previously I was the director of the Center for Deaf Blind Persons in Milwaukee. I have a specialization also certification in deaf blindness also.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow, that's a lot of expertise and we're thankful for that. So many of us are increasingly reliant on technology to get things done, from paying bills on your phone, to conducting doctor's visits on our computers. What are some of the difficulties for those who are blind or visually impaired when using these kinds of technologies and how does Outlook Enrichment help them navigate these challenges?

Paulette Monthei:

One of the things to consider is many eye conditions are age related, whether it's cataracts, macular degeneration. You're talking about folks in our community who are seniors who are starting to learn how to use this type of adaptive technology. They may be really unfamiliar with it. Our teachers and instructors in the adoptive tech program, we look at anyone who's coming through the door, what type of vision they have. Some maybe low vision and be able to see enlarged numbers on the screen, for example, to make a phone call. Some people may have no vision at all.

Paulette Monthei:

Our job is to really look at what their specific needs are and what they want to do, whether it's, as you mentioned, making a phone call, learning how to use Zoom to communicate with their doctor, or for many people, it's learning the basics of the phone, how to make and receive calls, clear the voicemail system out, things that you don't necessarily think about as items that could be problematic, but clearing text messages, sending and receiving text messages. That's where we start oftentimes with people.

Paulette Monthei:

But we do have programs that go all the way up to teaching, for example, somebody who wants to maintain employment with learning how to use Microsoft Teams, which really has taken predominance in the workplace over the last few years.

Kelley Peterson:

All good skills to have and a lot of them that many of us take for granted sometimes because of the sight that we do have. I understand Outlook Enrichment also finds ways to help visually impaired people stay active. What are some of the recreational programs you offer and why is this type of programming so important?

Paulette Monthei:

Well, our programming in all of our enrichment services, we do serve all ages. We serve, they range from very young children from about five, up to our oldest consumers, been in their 90s this last year. The programming that we offer kind of meets a really diverse set of interest. For our younger kids, maybe they are more interested in sports and recreation type things. Maybe they want to learn how to do archery or rock wall climbing. That may not be as much of an interest to somebody who's in their 50s and 60s. The range, they be more interested in our virtual audio book club or one of our cultural arts programs. For example, this last weekend, we did an adaptive soap making class and the participants got to make soaps and bar soaps and sugar scrubs and all kinds of really wonderful things. But because that opportunity really plays into some of the other senses, it's been really well received the last two years that we've done it.

Paulette Monthei:

Other things, we do tours in the community. For example, we did a tour of Lauritzen Gardens and had a master gardener explain some of the plants in the fauna we saw, but we also had somebody who could really do one of our audio describers, describe all the exhibits. We try to make them as inclusive, whether it's through techniques or modifications for everyone.

Kelley Peterson:

Those just sound like such fun, but also educational opportunities. I never really thought about rock climbing just being for all age groups and that probably at my age now, I'm not sure that I would do that, so I completely agree.

Paulette Monthei:

There are other things that we do because our folks who are kind of in that 30s to 40s range, they may want to do more social activities. We did the big party patio bike that they went around downtown.

Kelley Peterson:

Yes.

Paulette Monthei:

Were able to have pizza and drinks and hang out with friends. You choose different things to meet the needs.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that.

Paulette Monthei:

We work with the sports and rec program at the university at UNO. A lot of our volunteers come from UNO and Creighton who are in adaptive rec or occupational therapy programs. We do have a lot of volunteers to make all of our programs great.

Kelley Peterson:

Volunteers are so key to all these things for sure. Were you part of the soap making extravaganza?

Paulette Monthei:

I was. Actually, I taught the class.

Kelley Peterson:

Wonderful. What was the favorite fragrance of choice?

Paulette Monthei:

The ones that they kind of have, they're one of the kits is a kind of a tropical mix. It smells like some of them smell a little like sunscreen or pina colada or different things. The tropical mix has been the favorite the last two years.

Kelley Peterson:

It's staying in place, but going on vacation at the same time?

Paulette Monthei:

In January.

Kelley Peterson:

In January. I really like the sound of that. I really like the sound of that. Paulette, can you tell us one of your favorite stories about someone whose life Outlook Enrichment has positively impacted?

Paulette Monthei:

Let me share with you about Catherine. Catherine came to us because she had been working with another service agency and she was losing her vision, but also had had a stroke. She was starting to experience problems with memory and cognition and the stroke had left her part of her on the left side of her body paralyzed. We had to really look at her needs and pay both attention to both the physical disabilities she had, as well as the visual disabilities that she was experiencing. Her husband came to us to learn mostly how to use the iPad because she was really feeling very isolated and not being able to go anywhere. You can imagine with not being able to use one side of your body, trying to make movements and things on the iPad, even just from holding it to some of the hand gestures and moving around was a challenge for her.

Paulette Monthei:

We had to work with her to kind of figure out what the best angle was, what the best setup was for her to be able to not only see the iPad, but how to make some of those movements and gestures on it with her limited mobility.

Paulette Monthei:

She came to us and she learned how to do FaceTime and do her email and search the web. She loved YouTube videos so she was really interested in YouTube. She learned how to do all of these things as well as scanning documents so she could blow them up and make them easier for her to read.

Paulette Monthei:

Catherine came to us when she also participated in our support group, she and her husband both, so that they could meet others with vision loss, but also have some of that peer role modeling that comes out of the support group. That was a really great success story for us because there were so many challenges and she just overcame them all and was able to learn new things.

Paulette Monthei:

Sadly, it was a good thing she came to us when she did to learn some of these things, because this past November with COVID she lost her husband. She now had to do more of those things on her own that he may have assisted her before with. Being able to access some of the services and things through the iPad, it allowed her to maintain more independence.

Kelley Peterson:

That is an amazing story. I like how you mentioned that her husband was able to go along with her. Those support groups are for the people who are experiencing the vision loss as well as those that are supporting them. Then that is a great impactful story about how them doing it together, starting it together, now she independently can take it on her own. That's a good one for sure.

Paulette Monthei:

We always encourage the family members to participate so that they're learning what information we are giving to the consumer. If they're troubleshooting at home and maybe the family member might know what is, or the family member might be helping them at home to set up a labeling system for their kitchen or labeling the microwave or stove for them so that they're able to do it independently at home.

Kelley Peterson:

That's great. The pandemic certainly has changed so much, but how has it changed the way your organization is able to serve people? Have you found some things or new things or better ways of doing things that you'd like to share?

Paulette Monthei:

One of the biggest things that hit us right away with the pandemic was with our adaptive technology program. We had to really figure out how we could continue to teach people in their homes or since they weren't allowed in the buildings, so we utilized Zoom very early on. We do a lot of services over the phone because both of my trainers are totally blind themselves. If we can hear what's going on on the individual's device, we can train on it.

Paulette Monthei:

If somebody doesn't have, for example, landline to use with their phone, we would send out an iPod touch that we could access either FaceTime with the person, or they could just make an audio call with it to us. That allowed us to have access to the environmental information that was going on so that the trainer could hear it.

Paulette Monthei:

We then quickly switched over to doing something with Zoom in our recreation programs to try to engage some of the people. We do a game night usually once or twice a month, and everything from Family Feud to Apples to Apples and a wide variety of trivia things we've done over the last year, but that gave people an opportunity to socialize and come in contact with each other. For this population, when somebody's losing their vision, there's a lot of isolation and depression that often happens with it.

Paulette Monthei:

We started in August of 2020, our support group program, which now has continued and many of our members have been in the program for over a year since it started. Those are things that we did, but we saw a lot of growth in those programs while they started as a COVID thing, because transportation is always an issue for people who are visually impaired, a lot of our services have continued as remote. Some of our consumers that we have are as far as North Carolina now. It's expanded who and how we can do services.

Paulette Monthei:

One of the things that came out of it is now we are doing independent living training that was remote from safe cooking techniques to wardrobe and home management kinds of things. Right now we're doing a series called Passport Around the World and every month it's a different ethnic recipe. We'll be in one of our staff's kitchens and have it set up so we can talk about different recipes and how we do different tasks as a visually impaired person and some of the adaptive techniques we recommend to go along with it.

Kelley Peterson:

I just love hearing all that and how innovative you have all been and adapting during the pandemic, but just embracing it for its pros and overcoming its cons. Those just sound like great opportunities for people to engage for sure and to expand to an audience that haven't been able to reach or to overcome the transportation issue is just really phenomenal.

Paulette Monthei:

It's really nice for folks who are still working, instead of trying to get transportation from work to Enrichment and then transportation home, they can get transportation to and from home and then just log in after work. It's been really nice.

Kelley Peterson:

A real time saver for people too, because oftentimes when you are dependent on transportation, the timeframe of it is different then you just walking from one room to another, for sure. Probably are able to engage in a lot more things just because you don't have to get a ride to them.

Kelley Peterson:

Outlook Enrichment has a full calendar of events. Just looking through the website, I saw book clubs and poetry slams and Taekwondo classes. You've mentioned so many more just in our time together today. But there's one specific event coming up in June that I want to talk about. It's the Tee It Up For Sight. What should our listeners know about this particular event?

Paulette Monthei:

Enrichment does two major fundraising activities every year. Tee It Up For Sight is our golf outing and that there are teams that will go out. But during the same timeframe in the morning, prior to the shotgun start, our consumers, all the youth in the program and some of the adults participate in the golf clinic to learn how to golf as somebody who's visually impaired in some of those adaptive techniques. That starts our day.

Paulette Monthei:

Then the fundraising piece of that is we are actively seeking teams. The save the date event notice just went out about the Tee It Up For Sight. Teams can sign up and participate. We're still looking for sponsors too. They can contact Enrichment and we can get them set up with that. Then they there's also live registration. That's coming in June.

Paulette Monthei:

In September, we also do our, this year we're doing our Vision Beyond Sight and that's going to be at the SumTur Amphitheater. We will be showcasing all of these great recreation programs I talked about where somebody can come and learn and use our simulation goggles or a sleep shade to learn how to do some of those events and experience it as somebody who might have vision loss. Those are summer events coming up so people can keep an eye out for those.

Kelley Peterson:

As a marketer that I am, I always love event names, and those are both two really good ones. Tee It Up For Sight and Vision Beyond Sight. Both of those are great and intriguing.

Paulette Monthei:

The theme for this year is Blues, Booze, and Barbecues for the Blind.

Kelley Peterson:

I like that too. That just sounds fun.

Paulette Monthei:

There'll be a blues band. We'll have some barbecue food trucks out at SumTur, and then all of the fun activities for somebody to engage in.

Kelley Peterson:

Sounds like a good time. Both of them seem to be outdoor and very COVID friendly to be outside. Paulette, what's next for Outlook Enrichment? What do you hope to accomplish in the next five to 10 years?

Paulette Monthei:

Gosh, you're asking a big question because there's so much we have planned. Outlook Enrichment started initially out of programs out of Outlook Nebraska, which is an agency that does manufacturing of toilet paper and paper products to government installations and facilities. We started with one adaptive technology trainer and then additional programs that I mentioned today have expanded. But our major goal in the next few years, we own our Outlook family owns building we are in, the old Crown Cord Conceal building on 42nd and F and this last year acquired more of the space and the Crown Cord Conceal building. Enrichment will be expanding into that space.

Paulette Monthei:

Right now we are doing some in-home services because we don't have facilities onsite. In the next few years, we will be having a fully functioning rehabilitation training center with apartment-like settings that we can teach all of the independent living skills training. Our adaptive computer lab will move over to that space.

Paulette Monthei:

We're also hoping to have some of our own recreation space, so we don't have to take that offsite all the time to different venues in the community. We will be looking at growing and doing a capital campaign in the next few years so that we can really create our own space that's unique to the population we're serving and the needs of the enrichment program.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow. That isn't any small undertaking and it's so exciting. I'm just getting excited about listening to it. Oh my gosh.

Paulette Monthei:

We'll be looking at having an accessible kitchen and things that can be used by our consumers to teach independent living skills and wardrobe care, laundry, everything. It's really going to be a unique space for us as we move forward.

Kelley Peterson:

I like the sound of that being unique to you and the services that you provide. There will just be so many good things about the outcome for that. Paulette, being a marketer, I also love words and I'm inspired by motivational quotes. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Paulette Monthei:

One of the things that was instilled in me was, "You can always do a task or a skill, we just have to help you figure out the right way to do it." Helen Keller said, one of her most known quotes is, "When one door closes, another door opens for opportunity." Enrichment is really here to provide guidance, peer support, and to provide opportunities for people to reach their own goals and dreams. That's what we pride ourselves on.

Kelley Peterson:

Which is so inspirational. Because it's the time of year and the timing that it is been watching a lot of Olympics, winter Olympics, and the inspiration of those athletes is just phenomenal. I think that they

keep that frame of mind as well of you can always do it, just need to figure out how and why can't we all be that way. I think that you're exactly right.

Paulette Monthei:

That's something we really promote a lot in our support groups is we're here to give guidance. We can give tips and suggestions, but everybody is going to find their own way.

Kelley Peterson:

That's great. For our listeners who would like to learn more and to support you, how can they find out more about Outlook Enrichment?

Paulette Monthei:

They can go to our website, which is www.outlooken.org. They can get a whole list of more information about our programs and services or all the wonderful events that we have coming up there. We do have a monthly events calendar that we send out to people too, so they can reach out to me. My direct line number or our main number, we'll go with that, is 531-365-5051. That way they can connect with me or one of our other staff people in the different areas. If somebody's interested in the services, they usually will be the first point of contact is usually me or Nina, and we can walk them through what types of services we offer and get them set up.

Kelley Peterson:

Sounds great. As we wrap up today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Paulette Monthei:

I think the biggest thing is to know one in four people have vision loss throughout their lives, and chances are, you know somebody, whether it's a family member, a friend, a parent, who's experiencing vision loss today and might be need the services that we offer. Whether they're experiencing cataracts or glaucoma, macular degeneration, when we say vision loss, it's pretty big. But if we say in a room full of people, "How many of you know somebody who has cataracts," everyone's hand goes up. Chances are, you know somebody who might be able to benefit from the types of things we offer.

Kelley Peterson:

You may know someone or in the future, you might be experiencing it yourself. And it's always great to know that resources exist to help you or to help someone you love, for sure. Paulette, I fully believe the world needs more change makers like you. Thank you for taking the time to share are with us today.

Paulette Monthei:

Thank you.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from, visit KidGlov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.