

Agency for Change Podcast: Macala Carter, Executive Director, Center for People in Need

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Macala Carter:

Few burdens are heavy when everyone lifts.

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:

We are really lucky to have so many great organizations in Lincoln, Nebraska, that help people, whether it's through financial assistance, providing food, career training or education. And today, we're going to hear from a nonprofit that's getting ready to celebrate 20 years of fighting poverty in our city. We're going to find out what kind of programs they offer, what their greatest need is right now, and how you can help them meet that need.

Hi, everyone. This is Kelley Peterson, chief creative officer at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is Macala Carter, executive director at the Center for People in Need, which works to eliminate poverty in the community through the distribution of food, diapers, clothing, household goods, and several programs that help people find employment. Macala, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you are making on the world.

Macala Carter:

Well, Kelley, thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to join you today.

Kelley Peterson:

You bet. Let's start with you giving us an overview of what the Center for People in Need does and who you help.

Macala Carter:

Yeah, absolutely. The Center for People in Need, what we do is we help low-income individuals in our community. And I say that a little bit tongue-in-cheek in terms of our community. We recently looked out and we're serving 21 different communities, so people from 21 different communities are coming to the Center for services.

And so I look at what we offer Lincoln and surrounding counties and communities, we offer a two-pronged approach to the services. And I don't think one is more important than the other. I think that they absolutely come in tandem with one another. When we're talking about the services at the Center for People in Need, we offer basic services. And oftentimes most people know us for that. That's going to be food. We distribute food Monday through Friday, twice on Tuesdays. We provide diapers for

families each month. We provide household goods that are donated by our community so that folks can come in and get those goods if they're reestablishing themselves or they're simply just needing to supplement.

And then we have our education platform, and that's really our growth pathway as we look to the future. But what we do is we provide five different programs currently to our clients that they're able to earn certifications, increase their education, they're able to do upscaling. So, we have a lot of different spaces for folks to really educate themselves.

And our end goal is for folks to earn, and we don't want to be a surviving wage, we want folks to have a thriving wage. And so we want to provide them with the educational opportunities for them to use as a springboard into that workplace, that career, that opportunity to provide for their family. And so that's what we do in tandem with one another.

Kelley Peterson:

That is so amazing. And sometimes there just aren't enough words in the English dictionary to describe things. So, when you said number one is basic, and I'm thinking, "There's nothing basic about all those amazing things that you provide." I wish there was another word. It doesn't seem basic at all. It seems essential and critical and foundational. And so we need to come up with a new word. Maybe that'll be our next thing.

Macala Carter:

Foundational. I'm going to jot that down actually, because I like that. I'll play with that a little. Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, Macala, I did a little snooping on your LinkedIn profile to prepare for our interview, and I found that you come from the banking industry.

Macala Carter:

I do.

Kelley Peterson:

What's spurred your decision to join the nonprofit world after 22 years of banking?

Macala Carter:

Oh, absolutely. Banking is an amazing industry. It's one of the oldest industries out there. And the bank that I worked for was a family-owned bank, still very much part of Lincoln. It's a family-owned bank, a community bank. And when I started my career there, they really did emphasize for all employees to be that servant leader. And that meant in terms of internally with how we're leading our teams, but also it meant how we represent ourselves in the community.

And so it was from that experience, that exposure, that I really had that first taste of giving of others, giving of myself to others. I've been serving on boards for the last 22 years within banking, representing the financial institutions that I was working at. And so I served on boards, and I found that I loved it. I looked forward to those board meetings, I looked forward to those committee meetings. I looked forward to understanding what those organizations, those agencies, were doing on repeats.

And I've led people for a number of years. It's been such a treasure. I love people, fundamentally. At the core of what I do, I enjoy learning about people and understanding folks. Most of my banking career, I

occupied the retail space, but it was the tail end of my career that I represented the director of diversity, equity, and inclusion for the organization I was with. And it was in that year and a half opportunity that I got to really understand people.

I won't claim to be a cultural competency expert, but I got to learn more about people. And I got to learn more about how I want to help people, how I want to show up every day, and how I want to meet people where they are. And it was through that opportunity, paired with the volunteer work that I was already doing in terms of serving on boards, that really did lead me to where I am today.

I maintain firmly that I am in the exact role that I should be today. I maintain that firmly, but I needed to take all of the steps up to this point in order to get here. And so that's the really exciting piece about being in the space that I am in, is I had to have all those amazing opportunities to be here today. And I'm thrilled and honored to be here.

Kelley Peterson:

I think that's a story too of sometimes you say, "I'm here today, I'm so lucky to be in the place that I am today." However, it's probably not a lot of luck. That was probably a lot of hard work and determination.

Macala Carter:

That is true.

Kelley Peterson:

And all of those things. So, when I say, "I want people to feel lucky." But I think back, you took advantage of some incredible opportunities. And whether you want to call that luck, that's okay too. But all the stars sometimes align because you manifested them to do so. So, good for you.

Macala Carter:

I do believe in that as well. Yes, I firmly believe in that. Yes.

Kelley Peterson:

Are there any lessons from your history in banking that have served you well in your new role?

Macala Carter:

Yes, absolutely. Actually, they translate over beautifully. The banking world to where I'm at today, really the skillset absolutely pairs over beautifully. And as I mentioned before, I was a people leader in addition to the work that I did. And so coming into the nonprofit space, I get to work with people from different age groups, ethnicities, socioeconomic levels, and so that moves over and pivots beautifully.

In banking, we're always talking about process improvements. We're always talking about how we can do things better, more efficiently. And I do think that coming into this space, I've had an opportunity to really sit with the processes and the procedures and the operational pieces that we have at the agency, and I'm able to evaluate them from a perspective that's a little bit more holistic than perhaps the approach has been in the past.

And I think another piece of wisdom that I learned in banking is that there needs to be a diversification in funds. When we're talking about funding, there needs to be different revenue streams and how a for-profit and honestly, a nonprofit, is operating. And so I've had an opportunity to deep dive into that as well and to challenge the team here, which I have to make a plug for, are the most exceptional people. I

keep challenging them, "Okay. We need to talk about revenue streams. We need to talk about the sustainability."

We're honored to have been in this seat and to be serving Lincoln for the last 20 years. What do the next 20 years look like? But I'm even going to challenge past that, what do the next 100 years look like? And so I'm taking all of those lessons learned as we're talking about return rates on different things, and I'm bringing them forward to the nonprofit space.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that. Taking playbook from nonprofits to for-profits, and the reverse. I think is so great. There's so much I have learned from nonprofits that have helped some of the for-profit brands be successful and also the other way around. So great.

Macala Carter:

Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

So, you mentioned a little bit about this with your focus on fulfilling basic needs or the foundational things and then the education. But what kind of programs does the Center for People in Need offer, and which ones are most utilized by the community?

Macala Carter:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm going to start with the latter part of the question is the utilization piece. This year we are at 78% greater increase over last year at this time, in terms of the families we're serving.

When I received that number, when it came through my email to highlight how we're serving our community and the numbers, I reached out to the person that sent it. And I said, "Is this number truly accurate? We are serving 78% more folks right now than we were last year?" And they said, "Yes." And I had to sit with that for a while. It was so profound to me.

One, I'm thankful that we're able to keep stride with the needs of our community, and as people are needing, and we're seeing 1,800 families each week on average, each week, that are coming through our doors for diapers, for food, for those basic items. And the fact that we can continue to keep stride and pace with that is so remarkable, and I'm so thankful for that.

But it also makes me evaluate and say, "Okay, how do we start creating guardrails around that narrative? How do we start creating identities for folks so that we can better serve and help them? So those numbers, though they're always going to be present and they're always going to be there, how do we provide opportunities for the community that we serve so that they can see things differently? So that in a year, five years, 10 years from now, they're not needing our services?"

We're still here and we're still here to serve, but they're no longer needing them because of what we provided them, both in terms of that foundational basic needs, but also in terms of that education platform that we're offering our clients at this time. In terms of who we're seeing, we're seeing certainly more people coming in for the basic needs, but how we are changing that story and the narrative is from our education platform.

Kelley Peterson:

I think that's a perfect transition to this next question because there are so many misconceptions about who you serve, or at least that is my perception of it, that there's misconceptions. What kind of misconceptions exist about who you serve and how do you dispel those notions?

Macala Carter:

Yeah. Poverty is very complex. To say that there's one reason why people end in poverty is a comment that is untrue and false and highly insensitive. Because of that, it's hard to identify one way out of poverty. And I think some of those misconceptions really do come in the form of people believing that you pull yourself up by the bootstraps, or if you work harder or more hours, you'll get yourself out of poverty.

And though those are factors, again, the notion of poverty is so very complex. And I don't always share this story, but from my own perspective, I was somebody that would have used services from the Center for People in Need. I would've been somebody that represented that 200% or greater federal poverty level and would've required the services. I have been somebody early on in my adulthood that found myself... I was a single mother and I found myself needing services, and I found myself needing people to help me.

And it was a short period of time, but there were so many notions around my situation that were false. As I get to sit here and meet people where they are, I don't make assumptions. I don't make generalizations. What I get to do, because people did this to me, and you talked about luck earlier on, and some of it was luck. A lot of it was grit and hard work, and a lot of it was also having people to mentor me and to help me and to walk beside me.

And so that's what we get to do here. The notion that to make more takes you out of poverty or to work harder, I've heard words like lazy, those are all very false and very damaging words. There's so much to poverty, there's so much complexity. And so having the opportunity to stand beside, walk beside, learn from people and help them along, that's the critical piece to moving forward. And to hear with an open mind and an open heart allows us to change their identity story.

And then that's generationally impacted. And so that generational poverty is a real thing. That's why we're here, and we have amazing volunteers. We have amazing community members that come in here, and they're willing to meet people where they are. And so when we're having that conversation, we have the opportunity to share with people what we get to do every single day, and who we get to serve every single day, we share that each person has their own story on why they're here today.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow, everything you have just said, it just speaks so true. At KidGlov, we're working on a project right now that has to do with a trauma series, how factors of trauma and mental health and things like that. And as you were saying, poverty is so complex and mental health is so complex, but there's such an intertwine of that. And poverty is something that can cause trauma that's going to follow you for your life and through those generations, and so yes.

Over the years, and we get better, we don't understand it all by a long shot, but we're getting better and better and better. And as you say, meeting people where they are at is a big part of it. I imagine that the services have changed over time. How have services at the Center for People in Need changed over the years to continue meeting the needs of the community?

Macala Carter:

That's a really, really big question. Our name is Center for People in Need, and that's really pretty darn encompassing. And so as you know, in need has a lot of different terms and thoughts and broad landscapes that we get to serve people in. One of my favorite things, I haven't been in my role for too long, but I've been meeting with a lot of other executive directors within the nonprofit space here in Lincoln. And one of my favorite things to do is to say, "What do you know about the Center for People in Need? How have you partnered with us in the past? And more importantly, how can you partner with us in the future?"

And if we were to think of something that represents us from an identity, a branding standpoint, what is it? Because I think it's fascinating to understand what people think. And on repeat, I hear so many different things. Beatty Brasch is our founder, and Beatty is still very present in our operations, and dare I even say, our day-to-day operations. She still comes and supports as an advocate and as a tremendous lifter for our community. And I'll come back to the Center and I'll say, "When did we do car seats? When did we do children's vitamins?"

And so when you ask what we've done or been known for over the years, we've been known for a variety of things. Now, what has always remained the same is that food and security component. That has been something that tethers us, that anchors us to our core and to our mission. But over the years, we've continued to expand.

And as we look to expand to the future, I think one of the biggest value adds, one of the greatest benefits that the staff did, that Beatty did from that planning piece, was bringing on that education piece and bringing in the opportunities for folks to improve their circumstances through their employment. We're known for a lot of things. Food is always going to be the anchor, but as we look forward, that narrative, what we really want that narrative to be, is around that education piece.

Kelley Peterson:

When asking these questions throughout the community, and there's absolutely no doubt in the 22 years that every person you have helped leaves a lasting impression and a big impact. But I'm curious if there's any stories that stand out to you.

Macala Carter:

Here at the Center, I think that there's a couple different things, and I can speak from my for-profit world, and there's a lot of stories of how I've been inspired and challenged by employees that are so incredibly meaningful and have allowed me to get where I'm at and catapulted me through my leadership.

But in terms of the short period of time I've been here at the Center, I think, and when I was looking at the balance sheet and when I was looking at the numbers, numbers don't tell you everything, so I want to be mindful of that. I was looking at our programs that really, we don't have funding on, that we don't have that support. And our ELL program is one of those, largely. And so I was looking at it and I'm thinking, "Gosh, does it make sense to have our English Language Learning classes?"

During my first week, I asked the ELL instructors if I could sit in on their classes. And we teach classes one, two, and three, so it would be beginner, intermediate and advanced. I put myself on the calendar, I blocked myself for the entire two and a half hours that they taught their class so I could sit in it to really evaluate and be part of it. And I'll give you the story here in just a minute, but my resounding message to you is, yes, it is critical. And here's why.

I sat in on the ELL One class and I was mesmerized by these people. In the class, there were 17 students that were taking our ELL class, our beginning, our One class. And of those 17 students, there were nine

separate languages spoken. That's amazing. And they sat there in this classroom with their eyes so wide open, so excited, so committed to learning our language, so thankful. The gratitude was so tremendous. They sat there with great ideas of what this was going to help them be and do and how they were going to become part of our community in learning our language. And after sitting through it, I didn't need to go through classes two and three to understand how enriching this was. I still did because it was still beautiful and valuable to see, but I knew in that moment, this is something we absolutely have to continue. It means something and it means something to a very large population of people that are so scared, so frightened.

And in that moment, we are some of the first people they get to see when they come to our community. And we get to provide that safety and that safety net for them. We get to provide them with English, we get to serve as one of those first touchpoints. And that is truly remarkable. And something that a price tag can't be placed on that. After I sat through those classes, it wasn't one person, it wasn't one exact story, it wasn't one exact look or quote or anything like that. It was the embodiment of what we're able to do for these individuals that truly meant something to me.

And here's another one. My office is adjacent to the waiting room. When folks come in that are new to the Center and want to apply for a Center card to get her services, I get to hear a lot of the conversations when my doors open. And the other day I was listening and I heard a woman say, "I haven't used your services in over five years. I'm sad and I'm embarrassed that I have to be here, but I simply," it makes me want to cry. It makes me want to tear up, "I simply can't make ends meet right now. One, I'm so thankful that you're here to help me. And two, I'm hoping that it is short-term. And three, there's a great deal of humility in coming back here, but there is integrity in how you work with people."

And I heard that. And I went out there and I sat with this woman and I listened to her story and I heard her story, and I heard about how her retirement wasn't getting her by like she thought it was going to. And I heard how she had worked her entire life so hard and saved and really sacrificed to get to the space in retirement. And simply put, she just can't make ends meet right now. Again, it was one of those moments that I was thankful that we were here. I was thankful for the services that we provide. Equally, I'm so thankful that we get to continue to do these things.

They're not these huge stories, and though those exist, I haven't personally experienced them, those are two stories of people that we've made impact on. And so for them in that moment, meeting them where they are, that was a huge story for them. And that was a moment of safety for both situations. Not huge in terms of these grandiose stories, but for me it was highly telling on why it's important with the work that we do.

Kelley Peterson:

I think those are both big impact stories, very powerful stories. Thank you for sharing those.

Macala Carter:

Absolutely.

Kelley Peterson:

In your view, Macala, what is the organization's greatest need right now and how can people help you meet that need?

Macala Carter:

It's a little bit of a cliché, those three Ts, the time, talent, treasure. But it rings true. Not only do we meet the community that we serve, our low-income community, we meet our volunteers, however that looks, our donors, however that looks for them. And so when we're looking at the community and the ways that they can help us and the immediate needs, of course we can always use financial support. I mean, that's an obvious, that's a given. And so that treasure component is incredibly critical and valuable.

And when I talk about treasure, I'm not talking about \$500 each month or a large pledge of \$100,000. We have many donors that give us \$5 a month. And that treasure is so incredibly valuable and it's equal to that person that is able to give us \$10,000 a month. And so that treasure's important, but if that's something you can't do, that's okay too.

That management of giving of your time. We have volunteers that come here every single day and help us. It's amazing to me. I would see the same people. I'd go out on food distribution when I first started here and I'd say, "Gosh, that person, I saw them here yesterday. I saw them here the day before." And they're like, "Yeah, they come every day." And I'm like, "But they're not paid." They're like, "Yes. They come here every day to volunteer with us." And we have those folks that come on a daily basis to volunteer. And again, if you can't do daily, that's completely fine. If you can do once a year, that is great. That time piece.

And if your talents are something where you would love to come in and help us organize, so maybe you're a master organizer, we have 100,000 square feet in our facility and we have a huge warehouse. We could use organizational skills. If you're somebody that likes to paint, there's always opportunities to paint. If you're somebody that just has a hand for cleaning and deep cleaning, we always have those. Again, as we look at the time, talent, and treasure, we welcome it all and we cherish it all.

Kelley Peterson:

So good. And so well said.

Macala Carter:

Thank you.

Kelley Peterson:

This next year is a big one.

Macala Carter:

It is.

Kelley Peterson:

You're celebrating your 20th anniversary. Are you planning any special activities or events to recognize the milestone that you would like to share?

Macala Carter:

We sure the heck are. We identified very quickly that we aren't, and I love organizations that do it, and I love getting fancy and getting my gown on, but we are not gala people. Our community isn't, our staff isn't. We're not gala people. And so in terms of honoring Beatty and the 20 years of amazing service, we thought what recognition really does embody who we are?

And so we are putting together what we're calling, and it may change a little bit, so don't hold me to this, is the People's Parking Lot Party. We're going to, we're hoping in June, to have a very large event. Now,

when we think about the Center for People in Need, we talk about community all the time on repeat. And so what we want to do is we want to invite the Lincoln community. We want to invite our clients in, and we want to have a great celebration, a party.

We want to have a big band. We are going to have food trucks. We are going to have 21 and older alcohol, should you want to. And we're going to have this great opportunity for everybody to come together and really have a great evening and celebrate together the 20 years. We are just going to have... we're kind of toying with the idea of it being a street dance, a party. Again, we have space for days. We have a parking lot that is enormous. We have the ability to do this and to do it well.

And so we're really starting that work right now. We met with an event planner last week, and she's starting to get some different things put together for us. Get Ready, be ready. More to come around that. But also as we talk about, and that's pretty big and identifiable, but then we start talking about those impact points that we have made over the years. And they're significant and they're large and they're crossed. I would say they crossed the United States, and I might even say globally, because we do help so many refugees and folks, immigrants that come here.

We want to do also a heat map. So, haven't flushed this whole idea out, but what we want to do is we really want to show that impact from a very large, broad scale. In 20 years, helping people every day, all day, what does that look like? And so when our donors give to us, what does that look like? And how is that impact really identified? We are going to start putting plugs out there and saying, "If you've ever been impacted, big or small, if you've ever been impacted by the Center for People in Need or Beatty Brasch, let us know. Share with us. Share with us where you are today. Share with us your story.

And we want to start putting pins on where those folks are. We want to start lifting those people up and sharing those stories. Again, it's going to be a hybrid of a lot of different things. It's very much in its early infancy, but that's really what we want to do. We want to bring the word people to the forefront, and we want to celebrate the people that have been impacted by the Center and have impacted us.

Kelley Peterson:

Oh my gosh, if we had a whole nother podcast session, I would do one of how Beatty and the Center for People in Need has affected me. Definitely came in contact through my work when I was at Cedar's Home for Children in their marketing department, but also personally in my family. I have taken my kids and we have filled hygiene kits for others and have worked. And to do that kind of hands on, giving back experience when your kids are young, I don't know. I could fill a whole heap map of my own.

Now I have very philanthropic and volunteering kids, and I did through my mom as well. And so that's how it all gets started, is growing up and seeing how you can be part of the community. Yes, love both of those ideas. And I'm all for a party. Come on.

Macala Carter:

I know, right? That's more of who we are too. I was talking to Beatty and I said, "Beatty, this is what we're thinking of doing." And if you know Beatty, you know Beatty had probably some really-

Kelley Peterson:

I do know Beatty.

Macala Carter:

... quick witted comment around it, which she did. And she was pretty thrilled. I said, "We could even name a beer after you. Beatty's Brew." And she really liked that. But when we were talking about doing

something a little more formal, she's like, "No." And it's like, "That's right. That's not who you are. That's not who we are." Let's be true to who we are.

Kelley Peterson:

Perfect. Macala, I'm inspired by motivational quotes. I'm a word gal. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Macala Carter:

This isn't going to be my own, so I'm cheating ever so slightly with your question and guidance here. But I've used this my entire career and it's an African proverb, and it's very simple. And it goes like this. Few burdens are heavy when everyone lifts. And I think that that translates so beautifully in so many ways.

And for the space that I'm in right now, when we're all lifting together from a community standpoint, from an organization standpoint, there's so much that can be accomplished. And when we do it together, it can be truly magical. And so that's one of my favorite quotes that I do on repeat. But I think in terms of words, and I'm very much a quote person and I love to have wordsmith things. I always think too about that, and I'm probably going to butcher it a little bit, is the Maya Angelou quote about, "People don't remember what you said or what you did, but they absolutely," again, I'm adding stuff, "they absolutely remember how you made them feel." And I remember that every day.

I remember that every day. And the responsibility I have and hold to make people feel like they're worthy, that they're empowered, that they have strength, that they have the ability to dream, that they have the ability to succeed. And so every day I get to do that.

Kelley Peterson:

Those are very powerful words. How can our listeners find out more about the Center for People in Need and the work you're doing?

Macala Carter:

Well, there's lots of different ways, and I invite any number of them. You can certainly give us a call. You can call us at the Center, and that direct line is... Well, you know what? I'll just give you my direct line. If you want to learn more, give me a call. I'd love to talk to you about it.

My direct line is 402 473 3010 or get on our website, which is CenterforPeopleinNeed.org. And you can learn about all of the different services. You can learn about all of the different opportunities to contribute time, talent, or treasure to the organization. Or if you want to reach out to me, my email's on there as well. I invited, if you want to stop in for tours, if you want to stop in to volunteer, whatever it is, however we can meet you, let us know. But reach out, certainly.

Kelley Peterson:

So, as we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

Macala Carter:

Again, it's a responsibility. It's a responsibility to be able to serve people. And it's one that I hold very dear and deeply. And the fact that we get to be here because of the generosity of our Lincoln community and because of the support of our Lincoln community is amazing. And the fact that people need our services and that we're able to be there for them is truly amazing.

Wrapping it up, making sure that every day I'm acting with responsibility, making sure that every day I'm acting with honor and integrity and truth, and that I'm fulfilling a purpose is so very important in the work that we're doing here.

Kelley Peterson:

Macala, I fully believe that the world needs more change makers like you. Thank you for taking the time to share with us today.

Macala Carter:

Well, it has been nothing short of my pleasure, so thank you so much, Kelley. I've enjoyed it tremendously.

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.