

Agency for Change Podcast: Colleen Kazemi, CEO, Social Venture Partners Denver

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Colleen Kazemi:

Be generous, be authentic, be openminded and show up.

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:

Nonprofits do so much good for our communities, from addressing environmental and social issues, to helping people secure resources. But when a nonprofit needs assistance of their own, who do they turn to? Thankfully in Denver, Colorado at least there is an answer. With training, consulting, resources provided at no cost and low interest investments, Social Venture Partners Denver offers nonprofits and purpose driven businesses the ability to refine their operations and increase their impact. Since 2002, they've helped over 250 local nonprofits and for profit social organizations, and that number continues to grow.

Today, we're going to hear from their CEO, who will help shed a light on the programs they offer, the issues facing nonprofits today, and how the organization is changing the Denver community for the better. Hey, everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov. Welcome back to another episode of The Agency for Change Podcast. Today's guest is Colleen Kazemi, CEO at Social Venture Partners, SVP Denver, which serves as a vital connector between local change makers across the Denver metro area and beyond. Colleen, welcome to the podcast.

Colleen Kazemi:

Hi, Lyn. Thanks for having me.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm looking forward to talking to you. And I have a prediction today. I'm going to predict that as you and I talk, we're going to hear the word impact several times. I know that you use it on your website quite a bit, on the homepage. Social Venture Partners Denver describes itself as an impact ecosystem. Could you walk us through what that means?

Colleen Kazemi:

Yeah. That's a great observation. People are more likely to help each other if they have a relationship and learn more about the person and understand where they come from. We've been in a really interesting time, especially over the last three years. And there's a movement towards something called trust-based philanthropy, which is essentially movement to fund leaders of social impact organizations because you trust them, and you know that they're going to do the best work and leverage the dollars that you give

them where they think that it will be most effective. As you know, it's impossible to establish trust without building relationships. And so that's where this ecosystem approach comes into play, and that's really what that means.

Lyn Wineman:

Colleen, I love the way you describe that. I have to mention I was just at a Colorado nonprofit association event where there was a lot of discussion over trust-based philanthropy and how that is really a new wave of giving and funding nonprofits. So as the CEO of SVP Denver, I'm really curious, obviously, you have a lot of trust. How did your career path lead you to this point? And what kind of roles have you held in the past that brought you here?

Colleen Kazemi:

That's a good question that I get a lot because when you look at my resume or you look at my background, it's a bit of a squiggly line, which is true of a lot of people.

Lyn Wineman:

I love the squiggly line. I love it, yeah.

Colleen Kazemi:

And my origin story started with my single, low-income mom, who gave me everything I needed, even though part of the way that she did that was by leveraging public services. And as a result, I started my career working in youth service organizations because I had a strong desire to support youth who didn't have a stable home life, as I did. I loved that work that I was doing, but I moved to the Bay Area and got pulled into technology and big data. It turned out, that I guess, I have a unique ability to sort of understand complex technical concepts and map those to business needs. But the whole time, I really enjoyed working in technology and I spent about my first 15 years doing that, I think.

But I missed having a real impact focus, so my husband and I started a probiotics company that was actually focused on human and animal health, which you may know or be familiar with in Nebraska. There's a lot of livestock and farming that happens, and to think about that effect on the environment. So, a fun fact is that my husband and I actually have contributed to a patent to reduce the use of antibiotics in livestock, in chickens and pigs.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Colleen Kazemi:

Yeah. It's interesting because when I tend to tell this story, we can go off on a lot of tangents, and people get very interesting in that particular piece, which could probably be a story in itself. But yeah, so finally I came to SVP Denver after our probiotics company was acquired, and really wanted to use that squiggly line background to find ways to connect individuals in the community and help give people the opportunity to learn more about what was happening in their community and leverage their skillsets to support organizations in ways that they maybe didn't think was possible.

Lyn Wineman:

Colleen, that squiggly line background has to have given you a really unique perspective on running an organization because I think sometimes there's a misperception that nonprofits don't have to deal with business issues, but nonprofits have to make payroll, they have to be innovative, they have to complete their books and turn them over. They have to do all the things, it just is that maybe their mission and focus is different. Their tax status is different. How have those roles helped you what you're doing right now?

Colleen Kazemi:

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think that I tend to be able to learn more about what it is that a specific business is trying to accomplish and understand more about the skillsets and the capabilities that those businesses have, and have a unique kind of skill I guess to identify gaps in places that they may need additional support. I use the word that my brain is a bit of a Rolodex, but I've realized that dates me.

Lyn Wineman:

Right, not a lot of people know what a Rolodex is anymore. I do, and that also dates me.

Colleen Kazemi:

Exactly. My brain tends to sort of look at issues holistically and think about areas where I may be able to connect individuals within those businesses to other people that have skillsets that they might not have. And those may be in the business sector, or it may even be another nonprofit that has accomplished something specific that particular nonprofit is struggling with. Yeah, I think that I just have been able to take that background and make a lot of those connections, and then develop programs to solve some of those common problems that we see on a regular basis.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, Colleen, that's where I'd like to go next, actually. Can we talk more specifically about the kinds of resources and programs that SVP Denver offers to both nonprofits and purpose driven businesses?

Colleen Kazemi:

So almost all the programs we offer to social mission organizations are free of charge to them. We tend to specialize in organizations that have been traditionally underserved or underfunded. We've been able to sort of figure out what most organizations tend to benefit from the most. So, what has the biggest impact if we can help support that particular piece and move them forward? One of our flagship programs is called A Theory of Change. Are you familiar with A Theory of Change, Lyn?

Lyn Wineman:

Actually, yes, I am. But let's talk about it more because I know that's new language that really is just coming to the market. We've actually just done some testing on in certain markets on how people respond to that phrase.

Colleen Kazemi:

I would be very interested as a data geek in understanding what you found out. Do people tend to ... What do most people think that phrase means?

Lyn Wineman:

Most people don't really understand, honestly. It's not part of common vernacular yet, but I think we'll get there. Right? I mean, 10 years ago, we did a lot of testing on the phrase behavioral health, and people didn't get it. But now behavioral health is part of the common vernacular. I think it's one of those things that's just going to need repetition. But I love the newness of it, but I am going to let you explain it.

Colleen Kazemi:

Yeah, definitely. So, the way that we tend to explain it to our audience is that it's essentially a business model or a business plan for social mission organizations. It is a framework and a roadmap where organizations can use it to map out who their target audience is, what issue area they're servicing, what programs they're creating to try to support the change that they're working to see within their community. And there is a specific framework and format around it. And so, what we do is we have a cohort model that is led by a subject-matter expert who is an expert in theory of change, and it's about eight weeks long. And we have six to eight social mission organizations participate. We've done them where the entire cohort can be environmental sustainability organizations, but we've also found that there's a huge value in maybe two immigration-serving, two education-serving, two food access.

And what we do is, it's a structured framework where the concepts around developing your theory of change are presented in a virtual format for about an hour. And we partner organizations with a mentor or an SVP partner that is an individual, a businessperson, somebody from the community that is then learning that material along with the nonprofit or social mission organization. And that mentor's job is to also understand that concepts of how you define your impact metrics, for example, and then provide that nonprofit with feedback around what they're seeing and what they're hearing, since in a lot of cases that individual is probably the one that they're trying to raise money from, or the person that may be able to help them with some additional resources once they better understand what their business model is.

So yeah, we help these organizations. In a lot of cases, they'll have maybe a board member participate. They might have somebody that's actually in the food bank working directly with the community, and maybe the CEO or executive director alongside these other organizations throughout. And by the end of the process, they have a theory of change that they can use to better align their internal mission. Some funders are actually requiring a theory of change in order for you to get funding.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. I think that combined with trust-based philanthropy are two of the big issues that we are seeing in the entire world of nonprofits right now. Another one I'm seeing, Colleen, another trend I'm seeing, and I don't know if you're feeling the same, I'm noticing right now a lot of leaders from the for profit world taking an interest in and transitioning to careers in the nonprofit world because they're looking to add more purpose or more cause to their lives. Are you seeing the same thing?

Colleen Kazemi:

Absolutely. I think that we're seeing ... Well, I know businesses across the nation understand that a big attraction point for them, for new employees, employees are looking to see what the business is doing in their local communities and how the business is having an impact locally. So, we're seeing that businesses are needing to have more of a focus not only for employee recruitment, but employee retention and employee engagement. And then we're definitely seeing individuals that are involved with technology, or something that isn't necessarily impact focused, that are really interested in figuring out

how to better leverage those skillsets that they've created to affect an issue that they're most interested in, whether that be homeless, housing insecurity, or food access, or something along those lines, so we're definitely ... And that's part of our ecosystem approach is we have model that allows them to kind of get out of their comfort zone a little bit and learn more about those issues directly from the organizations that are working in the community.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. Colleen, I also know there's some people who come to SVP because they want to offer money or skills to help address a certain cause that they care about. I know that you're also serving those individuals. Can you talk a bit more about that?

Colleen Kazemi:

Yeah. So, we work with individuals, businesses, and funders, and it really depends on what makes the most sense for them and how they would like to participate and engage with the nonprofits and with the communities. We found that some individuals are interested in participating in impact investments, some want to learn more about a variety of issues. They would like to, to your point, maybe they'll eventually transition out of their corporate role into an impact focused role, but don't understand how nonprofits are funded. They want to learn more about what the staffing model might be for a nonprofit. And so, when I just gave you that theory of change example, if they were to participate in that cohort, they would actually see the inner workings of eight different organizations that are probably very different in funding size, and some are very volunteer led, some have food banks, for example, that they're working with. And each nonprofit is really unique.

And so, we give individuals the opportunity to figure out where and how they want to engage. And some of them get more deeply involved with pro bono consulting projects. Some of them want to do a 90-minute sort of brainstorm mastermind to help on maybe funding models, or maybe a real estate purchase, or something along those lines. And this model really gives them the flexibility to participate how they would like to participate, depending on what they're interested in.

Lyn Wineman:

It's a really interesting model. Colleen, I'm really curious. Can you give us an example of maybe how you've been able to at SVP successfully help meet the Denver community's needs?

Colleen Kazemi:

We work with different types of organizations, also depending on where their biggest need is. So, we have food access organization called Bondadosa that helps deliver food boxes. And their particular need really changed during the pandemic. So, if you think about it, a lot of food is actually provided to families through schools, and so one of the areas that Bondadosa is revolutionizing access to food is around food delivery specific for the WIC and SNAP, the food stamp types of programs. And they have a lot of government funding as a result. And unfortunately, the way that most government dollars work is that you have to deliver those services before you can get reimbursed for them.

Lyn Wineman:

Which makes it difficult. Right? Because you have to front, upfront that money.

Colleen Kazemi:

Right, and as a scrappy ... Originally, this organization was actually a nonprofit, but they've transitioned to be a for profit for a lot of different reasons. And typically, they don't necessarily have the ability to get traditional financing, bank loans, because if you think about it, in order to get a loan to front those types of expenses, it's generally based off of your own personal balance sheet. And so Bondadosa has been participating in our programs for the last couple of years. They started in one of our pitch cohorts, which helps those organizations really refine what their messaging is, what they're pitching for, what their use of funds is going to be. We've done a couple of pro bono projects with them just because their financing stream was fairly complicated, and they needed better support around identifying their cashflow needs. And the punchline is that we were able to help them secure a short-term loan in 10 days that was paid back, that's considered kind of that patient capital impact loan side of it. And then we're actually working on another loan to help them scale this program, which is going to help change the food access system for the better.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. I'm really curious just digging a little bit deeper. How did that project with Bondadosa come to fruition? And were there any key learnings from that?

Colleen Kazemi:

I'm trying to remember where they originally found us. I think they applied to participate in our pitch program. And through us developing a relationship with them, better understanding their business model, and being able to help and work together with them in identifying where we could be most supportive, their project took different sort of turns depending on what their need was at that specific moment. I think in terms of the learnings from it, there's been a lot of them, to be honest with you. You had indicated earlier that many nonprofits, people don't necessarily realize that nonprofits also need to be run like a business. On the flip side, we have to be really careful about making assumptions based on our business backgrounds and experience.

And I think that we've learned a lot about some of the challenges faced by founders of color, and the fact that traditional banking isn't supportive of these organizations, and be sensitive to even some of the ways that we work with those organizations because what we tend to do is make assumptions around their ability to access resources, access finances. And we've stumbled upon ourselves a little bit along the way in making those assumptions by saying, "Well, why don't you just get a line of credit?" Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Colleen Kazemi:

And we've had to better understand the systemic reasons why that's really just not possible for an organization like this, and the fact that some of our comments and questions even in the way that we ask them, or the assumptions that we make can be insensitive and sometimes honestly hurtful. Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Colleen, such a good point. That is such a good point. I really am glad that you brought it up. I think it's a key point of awareness for many, many people, so I really appreciate you bringing that up. As we've been talking, you have mentioned, and we both have mentioned the pandemic a couple of times. I'm curious. Have you seen the needs of nonprofits changing in the last couple of years?

Colleen Kazemi:

100%. I think that-

Lyn Wineman:

That was kind of a trick question. Right?

Colleen Kazemi:

Right. It's interesting because I started in April of 2020.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, wow.

Colleen Kazemi:

And it was right at the height of lockdown. And most of our model was focused on being hands-on and in person with nonprofits. And it's interesting because a lot of the funders had the ability to be able to not go into the office. Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Colleen Kazemi:

So, they would say, "Let's do this remote. We're staying home. We're going to try to keep operating the same way that we used to, but we don't have to go into our physical space," whereas many of these nonprofits didn't have that luxury. They actually, the needs of the community, especially around food access, education, the digital divide, increased significantly during the pandemic. And so, I think that many of the nonprofits have had to really reconsider some of their programming and their models based on that, and also the ways that they're developing relationships, even with funders because funders at the time were not going into those locations either.

And so, nonprofits have really had to reconsider, so we had one nonprofit, for example, that was focused on helping Latino organizations with building businesses and business resources. And they had to fully pivot to start doing COVID vaccinations. And that meant that their funding model changed. Right? So, they participated in our theory of change program, and it was at that pivotal moment where they needed to figure out what their revised programs were at the same time. But overall, I think that what we found and what we've discovered over the last three years is that most of the organizations that we're working with have been traditionally underfunded or underserved. And many of them are led by people of color or those that have direct experience with the issues that they're trying to solve. And there's a lot of data showing that they also then get less funding than their white counterparts. They tend to bring more lived experience, but yet are trusted and don't necessarily have the same ability to be able to allocate their funds the way that they want to do it based on what they understand is their community issues that they're serving.

And so we're really working to, throughout our programming, to get people to build relationships and learn more about those individuals as leaders, and start to better work with them in partnership to help figure out what they might need, whether that's funding, whether that's programming like ours, whether that's introductions to somebody that they may not have access to within their network, so that we can start together on helping them when they have to pivot, as we described during the pandemic.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Colleen, I'm so glad that you and this organization are doing this hard work. I mean, it kind of breaks my heart a little bit to think, not a little bit, a lot, to think about somebody who is passionate about an issue, passionate about serving others, but then to know that there are roadblocks in their way because of a history of bias. And the fact that you are shining a light on that and helping people overcome I think is really, really important. How do you see some of these things that happened during the pandemic and the work that you're doing, how do you see these things changing for 2023?

Colleen Kazemi:

I didn't come out of traditional philanthropy, and so I didn't necessarily have as much of a historical context related to how the funding flowed. When I started, I saw that many were motivated to change some of their funding practices because of some of the George Floyd murder, and a lot of the inequities that were happening that were public. And I think that part of the challenge is that many of these traditional philanthropic organizations have been motivated to make some of those changes and made some of those changes quickly over the last three years. But I am hearing that because of the economy and the market, and then also the fact that they were so responsive during the COVID period that funds are tightening up again.

And we're seeing that within the space specifically. And so, what we're trying to do is help organizations reconsider some of their funding models. There's a big interest with a lot of organizations to think about: How can they diversify their funding streams? And are there some earned revenue opportunities that they can develop so that they're not specifically reliant on traditional grants?

Lyn Wineman:

Got it. Colleen, I'm curious. How does SVP Denver ensure the nonprofits that you fund are aligned with the desires and needs of the community?

Colleen Kazemi:

A lot of that is by being in the community and seeing what the different issues are that are emerging. I mean, the SVP Denver tends to focus on organizations that are really serving basic human needs. So, in Denver, one of our biggest political highlights is around housing because of course, the housing-

Lyn Wineman:

Housing is so expensive. It's so expensive, yes.

Colleen Kazemi:

Right. So, a lot of the work that we're doing tends to mirror a lot of the community issues that many of our neighbors are experiencing on a regular basis within the city of Denver more specifically. And so, the way that we're ... And we actually don't fund organizations directly, we help them get access to funding. And our motivation is ... What we usually do is we help teach them how to fish. We're not necessarily fishing on their behalf.

Lyn Wineman:

That makes sense.

Colleen Kazemi:

There's that delineation between what's called capacity building, which is really more of what we do, versus technical assistance, which is that hands-on approach to helping support these organizations. We're continuously refining what our criterion is for selection. Overall, we're really trying to stay focused on helping organizations that might not be able to get the support in another place but have some level of traction within the specific issue area that they're trying to support.

Lyn Wineman:

Got it. Colleen, do you find that people have misconceptions about the work that you're doing at SVP Denver, or maybe even misconceptions about philanthropy in general?

Colleen Kazemi:

Yes, that's a great question. I mean, I think that people don't necessarily ... It takes a little bit of a conversation like we're having for people to really understand our model. And we're trying to fix that a little bit. I mean, I think most generally understand that building relationships and learning about your community and learning about the people and the causes and the reasons and the impact associated with a specific issue is important. But we're also a nonprofit, and we are funded through donations as well. We've had to do a lot of work on our own internal revenue model as a result of that because we've historically been funded based on membership dues, which is really specifically, if I wanted to recruit you, you would provide me with \$2,500 to \$5,000, and then you would also volunteer your time in the ways that we mentioned.

It can be hard for people to appreciate and understand that. And it also can be a bit of an equity challenge because that means that most of the individuals that are participating in our ecosystem in the past had to have those dollars to be able to participate. And so, what I've done is really refined and modified our revenue model so that we're removing some of those barriers to entry. We think that it's really important to have those individuals and our legacy partners and continue to get donations from individuals directly because we've supported almost 70 organizations just this year.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a lot. That's a lot of organizations.

Colleen Kazemi:

It's a lot. Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Colleen Kazemi:

So, their money goes a long way. And we wouldn't be able to do that without those direct dollars to us. But it can be a little bit confusing because we're not, even with ... We have Colorado Gives Day coming up, and you've got your Day of Giving, and people tend to want to give to organizations that maybe work with foster children, or something that they could see tangibly. The work that we do has more of a ripple impact, so sometimes that can be hard to describe and for people to understand.

Lyn Wineman:

That makes a lot of sense. I mean, you're obviously doing great work and important work. And Colleen, I'm curious. What are you most proud of accomplishing during your time at SVP Denver?

Colleen Kazemi:

You're going to make me emotional.

Lyn Wineman:

I always tell people; I don't mean to be Barbara Walters. I don't mean to make people cry, but it happens. It happens because we talk about subjects that people are passionate about. I really know you've done so many great things, but I am curious what you're most proud of.

Colleen Kazemi:

I think really retaining and maintaining the sustainability of the organization. It's actually been around for 20 years. It's a small, scrappy community of volunteers. And in order for the organization to thrive beyond just me, the CEO, or just an individual leader, or just the individual board, there needed to be some operational things that have needed to be in place. We've needed to start to be accountable for the work that we do and really track a lot of our own internal metrics. And we've needed to develop some of those relationships ourselves with funders to be able to diversify our funding stream so that we can continue to be sustainable.

And then lastly, we've really shifted and refined our focus to support organizations that have been historically marginalized and under-resourced. And so, I think that the combination of me being able to create and kind of build upon a model that was in place, but make it more scalable and sustainable beyond my legacy I think is ... And really showcasing that work that we're doing directly with these organizations in the community to help them have an impact, that's really what I'm most proud of.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. So, what do you think is next, Colleen? What happens in the next five years for SVP Denver?

Colleen Kazemi:

One of the models that we've really gained a lot of traction around is helping businesses connect with the community and with the organizations, and then that engaged corporate social responsibility side of it, finding additional ways for individuals and businesses and people to continue to serve and have that amplified impact, it is going to be continuously important. We're embarking on some work with the city of Denver related to supporting BIPOC plus businesses and helping them move through the funding continuum to gain and grow themselves. I think that we're really going to continue to be thought leaders in this area around social impact overall. And what does it mean to have even a for profit social impact business? I think that we'll continue to really consider how to support businesses that are interested in focusing on hard issues to solve within our community. And so, I think that the next five years is just going to be more kind of building upon the same framework that we've been able to create over the last couple of decades.

Lyn Wineman:

What a great roadmap. I really look forward to watching the organization and seeing these things be accomplished. I think that's fantastic. I'm going to switch gears here in a pretty big way. You have said a

lot of inspiring things today. You are doing a lot of inspiring work. I'm going to ask you my favorite question next, which is, I'm hoping you can give me an original quote to inspire our listeners.

Colleen Kazemi:

I would say, be generous, be authentic, be open minded, and show up.

Lyn Wineman:

Ooh, I love it. Be generous, be authentic, be open minded, and show up. I think we should be teaching all of our kids these things in schools, and probably all of our grownups these things as well. That's fantastic. So how can we find out more about SVP Denver? People who are listening that maybe want to volunteer, or donate, or maybe they want to be a part of the cohort, or talk theory of change, or trust-based philanthropy, how can they find out more about SVP Denver?

Colleen Kazemi:

Our website is always the best place to start, which is www.svpdenver.org. Our email address is hello@svpdenver.org. If you go to our website and you look at the events page, we have a lot of information sessions. In early February, we're going to have one in-person, a big kick off, where you'll have the opportunity to meet social mission organizations, funders, philanthropists, and other SVP Denver partners, so that would be a great way, would be to come and attend one of our events and check us out.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. We'll put all of those links in the show notes of our transcript, just in case people didn't catch them as they're listening. As we wrap up this great conversation today, which I have really enjoyed, what is the most important thing you would like people to remember about the work that you're doing?

Colleen Kazemi:

I think that it's that we really strive to have an amplified impact. If you're looking to find ways to make your dollars, your time, your background, your experience, your lived experience go further, this is the place to do it. And it doesn't have to be heavyweight. You can show up where you have the ability to do so, and we'll put you to work.

Lyn Wineman:

Colleen, I really love that phrase, amplified impact. That sounds pretty cool. So I just want to say I have really enjoyed this conversation. I fully believe that the world needs more people like you, and more organizations like SVP Denver. And I just thank you for taking time to talk with me today.

Colleen Kazemi:

We really appreciate the opportunity, Lyn. I think that the work that you're doing in helping people hear more about what's happening in our communities and some of the challenges that are facing nonprofits is imperative, so thank you for the opportunity.

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,

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