

## Agency for Change Podcast: Tobi Mathouser, President and CEO, Goodwill Omaha

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### **Tobi Mathouser:**

That's our job—is to make sure that Goodwill employees, Goodwill program participants, that they know that we see something in them, and that there is opportunity for them.

### **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.

### **Lisa Bowen:**

Those who love the thrill of thrifting and finding that one of a kind piece you've been searching for know all about the allure of secondhand stores. In fact, shopping at thrift stores has become much more popular in the recent years as younger generations looking for eco-friendly, affordable clothing options have cast aside the stigma of secondhand shopping and brought this practice back into the mainstream. If pouring through racks of vintage clothing is your idea of a great time, then today's episode is sure to be right up your alley. Today's guest comes to us from one of the most well-known thrift stores in the United States, the Goodwill. Stick around though until the end to find out about all the great work Goodwill does beyond their retail stores and how they use those sales to help support their mission. You'll even find out where they're opening their latest retail and training center.

Hi everyone, this is Lisa Bowen, vice President, managing director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is Tobi Mathouser, president and CEO of Goodwill Omaha, which aims to change lives and strengthen communities through education, training and work. Tobi, I'm so excited to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you and Goodwill are making on the community.

### **Tobi Mathouser:**

Hi Lisa. Thanks for having me.

### **Lisa Bowen:**

Tobi, I can't imagine there are too many people out there that haven't heard of Goodwill, but what can you tell our listeners about Goodwill Omaha specifically, and how the organization helps people in the community?

### **Tobi Mathouser:**

You are absolutely right. There are not too many people that do not know about Goodwill's retail stores. And I specifically say Goodwill's retail stores because that's what everyone knows us for is our retail stores a great place to get a bargain, a great place to go and donate those unwanted household items.

But the thing about it is, is that not a whole lot of people know about our mission programs and why those donations and why those sales are so important.

What people don't realize is that every single donation and every single sale in our stores goes to help support our mission programs. As Lisa said at the beginning of the podcast, Goodwill's mission is to strengthen lives, improve communities through education, training, and work. And that is what our mission programs focus on. Individuals who are enrolled in our mission programs work very closely with case management teams to obtain their education goals, their employment goals, whatever that is for that individual. And that is what the sales and the donations that our generous customers bring to us, that goes to support those mission programs. And we just have to continuously talk about that because people don't think about that. They just think about our retail stores.

**Lisa Bowen:**

You are so right. You are so right. One of the things I'm curious about, Tobi, is you and your journey to where you're at at Goodwill today. So can you talk a little bit about your path, how long you've been at Goodwill, and did you ever see yourself as president and CEO?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

No, I did not. I started my career somewhat fresh out of college. I was fortunate to be awarded the Goodrich Scholarship here at UNO. I was born and raised in south Omaha, so I've been here my entire life. And 16 years ago, I started my career as a case manager in one of our mission programs at Goodwill. I love telling this story because there's so many people that can relate to it. And Goodwill provides opportunity, not only for the individuals that are going through our mission programs, but for the employees that work in our stores and work in our mission programs, that work in our support department. And I'm a testament to that. Someone took a chance on me. They saw something in me that maybe I didn't see in myself. I had the opportunity to advance within the organization and move around into different positions and really get to know the organization very well.

Two years ago, I was asked to consider the president and CEO role at Goodwill, and it truly is an honor to work for 700 individuals that put our mission first, that make this organization what it is today. It's truly an honor to hold this position and to continue to work for an organization that I grew up with and that I love.

**Lisa Bowen:**

That's awesome. You provide so much insight that no one else probably could, having worked your way up in the ranks. I think that's awesome and that's why you're such a great leader for Goodwill. You talked a little bit about the mission of Goodwill and how the organization accomplishes that through the work you do. Can you talk a little bit about some of those mission programs that you were mentioning?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Yeah, sure. We're on a mission to grow the programs that we have and to maybe even look at some additional programs that are new, something that Goodwill has never done before. To be quite honest with you, with the unemployment rate being as low as it is and employers needing employees so badly, it has really caused us to re-look at the services and the programs that we provide. Typically, Goodwill's programs, we aim at getting individuals who are unable to find employment on their own into an employer and make a very meaningful connection between that jobseeker and an employer. So that is really the gist of all of our programs. But like I mentioned, we're really having to kind of re-look at what those programs look like.

One of the programs that I will mention is our Work Experience Program. This program has been around for 65 years. Goodwill has been in Omaha for almost 90 years. And if this doesn't speak to the fact that not a lot of people know about our mission programs, this is a perfect example. This program has been around for 65 years and unfortunately, not a whole heck of a lot of people knows about it.

But within our Work Experience Program, we work with dozens of school districts around the Omaha area. We work with students that are enrolled in special education courses. They spend half of their day with us in our stores earning a paycheck, learning those job readiness skills, working very closely with a work experience trainer who is able to coach them on some of those job readiness skills, in a real-life work environment. That program has been around, like I said, for 65 years, and we're able to serve over 100 students every single school year, where we are really able to give them that work experience so that when they do transition out of special education through the school districts, they're able to land a job out in the workforce. And that is our goal.

Another program is our YouthBuild program. Now this program is sometimes funded through the Department of Labor. But when we don't receive those Department of Labor grants, Goodwill Fund, the operational expenses of this program, sometimes with some help from other organizations who also want to help us fund this program. For the most part, Goodwill's retail sales go to fund the operations of this program, again, when we don't receive that grant. And in the YouthBuild program, we're working with young adults who have had some challenges. They are unemployed, they are underemployed, they have some kind of barrier that is preventing them from being successful in the workforce, and many of these individuals have dropped out of high school. So, when they come to us and enroll in the YouthBuild program, they are spending half their day with us working on getting their high school diploma, and then the other half of the day they are out in the field or in a workshop learning construction skills and leadership skills.

We partner with many organizations out in the community, other nonprofits where these individuals are out in the field working on rehabilitating an old apartment complex. We did that this summer with an organization called InCommon. We work with churches so that these students are getting experience perhaps constructing accessible ramps for homes of individuals who can't afford that type of construction project. And so, the hope is that when these individuals graduate from YouthBuild, they will leave with their high school diploma as well as these construction skills, certification in OSHA, first aid and CPR training and the leadership skills that they gained over the two years with us.

Another program that I will speak to briefly is our Employment Solutions program. And this is a program that is available to absolutely anyone in the community, anyone who is in need of any type of job seeking, job readiness, interview preparation, anything like that. Our case managers work very closely with these individuals who are in need of these services. That can mean someone who isn't experienced in filling out an online application. We do not have eligibility requirements for this program because it's completely funded by our retail sales. The donations that are made in our stores and those sales that are made in our stores are going to fund the services that individuals receive through Employment Solutions from our case managers.

And the last program that I'll mention is our AbilityOne programs. This is another program that has been around for 30 plus years, and we employ individuals who have disabilities that are preventing them from being successful in the workforce, and they are employed on AbilityOne contracts. These are contracts that are set aside by the federal government, they're service contracts. And they are specifically for individuals with disabilities. So, 75% of the hours worked on these federal contracts are done so by people with disabilities. We have approximately 130 employees that are employed on these contracts, and like I said, 75% of the hours worked on these contracts are done so by people with disabilities.

Some of the locations of those contracts include Offutt Air Force Base, where we have a custodial contract and a postal contract, the Zorinsky Federal Building where we have a custodial contract, and then the Denney Federal Building in Lincoln where we also have a custodial contract. And the wonderful thing about these federal contracts is that, starting in January, individuals will be getting paid the wage determination rate, which is set by the federal government, at \$15 an hour. So, it is a wonderful supportive environment where an individual can get a very nice paycheck, but also find success in the workforce with that supportive team environment that we have on these AbilityOne contracts.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Wow. That's all I can say. That's amazing work that you guys are doing that I'm really happy to help you share that because you're right, so many people know you for retail, but not all of this great work. The other thing I really appreciate is that you guys are out there helping people get experience because we know that if you don't have experience, it's hard to find a job. And that's the first thing people ask. So, the fact that you're providing that hands-on experience and training is invaluable. And I think, if I'm correct, I saw on your website you guys have helped over 2,700 people with employment services this past year, so that's amazing. Amazing.

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Yes, it is. Our case management team, our support departments, even those in our retail stores, they provide the support that is needed for individuals to be successful. And I can't say it enough, our goal is to help people find success in the workforce, and that looks different for everyone, but our entire organization, all 700 employees are so focused on our mission that you will see that, and you'll feel that no matter where you are in the organization. And we have typically served about 2,700 individuals for the last couple of years. We did experience a little bit of a dip, as you can imagine during the pandemic, but we've bounced back and we're hoping to nearly double the amount of individuals that we are able to serve. With the opening of our new south Omaha location, I am so excited, and it can't come soon enough to open this new retail store and training center hopefully by the end of this year, early January, 2023.

But with this new location, we will not only be able to bring affordable goods and a site for people to donate and recycle their unwanted goods, we will not only be able to bring this location to a community where it is so needed, and it has been so needed for a very long time, and I'm so grateful that we are finally able to make this happen in the south Omaha community. So, we will be bringing that retail space to this community as well as a training center where we will offer mission programs, maybe some mission programs that Goodwill hasn't historically done.

Again, we took a long time to figure out, number one, if we should be in south Omaha; and number two, what that looks like and what the community needs from us. And once we determined that the community does want us there and what types of programs we should offer in this community, it looked a little bit different than what we historically have done at Goodwill in Omaha. And so, we will be offering some non-traditional apprenticeship programs out of the south Omaha location, apprenticeship programs in entry level finance, as well as healthcare. And then we will also be offering an apprenticeship program where are preparing individuals for those youth case management positions and those adult case management type positions. And hopefully that will help to create a pipeline, not only for individuals who might be interested in working at Goodwill's mission programs, but also nonprofits throughout the Omaha area. Our hope is that individuals will gain that experience, that on the job learning and that experience that employers are looking for in these types of positions so that we can

get their foot in the door at these other nonprofits who may be in need of some of these services and some of these workers.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Awesome. Great, great work. So, I'm going to ask the question that everybody wants to know, which is when I drop off those bags of clothes and those boxes of home goods, how do you take that? Can you give me a bird's eye view on how you take that item, and it goes from donation to sale and then funding your awesome mission?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Yeah, for sure. One question that I get often is where does my donation go when I drop it off? And the answer to that is typically that donation stays at the store in the neighborhood that that donation is made. There are other stores that can't support themselves, so we have to take donations from locations that are maybe in more affluent neighborhoods and take those donations to help feed other stores that maybe don't have the donation support that is needed in other communities and in other neighborhoods. But for the most part, when you drop off a donation at one store, it will typically be sold in that store.

After the donation goes through what we call it lifecycle, which I think is about four or five weeks in a store, it is then taken back to our retail operations center. Our retail operations center is located on 72nd and F. A lot of people just see this storefront, which is our retail outlet store, where those items are then sold by the pound. But what people don't see is this huge warehouse in back of our retail outlet. It is nearly 90,000 square feet of warehouse space where we are able to support those excess donations. This is where we store holiday donations so that we can put them out seasonally. This is a huge operation, it's where all of our fleet goes to pick up these extra donations and deliver out to the stores. We also run a very large recycling operation out of this warehouse.

So those, what we call aftermarket, when an item does not sell in a store and then it does not sell by the pound, we are then working very, very hard to secure vendors where we can recycle the items that do not sell. A lot of times the example that I give is if you have an unmatched shoe, donate it. It's okay. We will recycle that shoe. Obviously, it's most likely not going to sell in our stores, but we will recycle that shoe. And we work with a ton of vendors to recycle different things, shoes, belts, soft lines, purses, all of those items that don't sell in our stores so that we can keep those items out of our landfills.

**Lisa Bowen:**

That's awesome. Sometimes I feel guilty for throwing stuff like that unmatched shoe in there in there. Now I feel better about that.

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Yes.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Awesome. We talked a lot about expansion of programming. Is there anything else that you didn't mention through the south Omaha location that you want to mention as far as expansion of your mission goes?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Yeah, it might be a little bit of a stretch as far as expansion of our mission, but one thing I will say, which is very important, as we were doing focus groups over the last year talking with and listening to the south Omaha community, one thing that we heard is that there wasn't a whole lot of community meeting space available. And so, I would like to mention that so that other nonprofits and other organizations in that community or in other communities who maybe want to bring a presence to south Omaha know that we do have that space available. We have two very large conference rooms up at the front of our south Omaha location with a retractable wall. We would love to host networking events or Chamber meetings at this location. It's a wonderful location. There's wonderful space at this location and wonderful parking at this location. So that's one thing that I would really like for the community to know. We also will have a career lab that is available to, again, anyone who is in need of services that Goodwill can provide. So again, no eligibility requirements. This is funded by Goodwill retail sales, and so we don't have eligibility requirements that maybe other programs where funding is received from other places might have. We're able to serve absolutely anyone who is in need of those job readiness and employment placement services out of this location as well.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Awesome. So, we talked a little bit about how your business model just helps with sustainability by keeping things out of the landfill. And according to your annual report, it was three billion pounds in 2021, which is amazing. Can you share any other ways that Goodwill is practicing sustainability?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Yeah. Well, I think that we like to kind of pride ourselves on being the original recycler. So, for nearly 90 years, the items that individuals are donating to us, we're helping to keep those things out of the landfills. And so, I really want people to know and understand that, when they make a donation, we do everything that we can to try and sell that item at a reasonable price so that we can support our mission programs. But if it doesn't sell in our stores, our efforts continue in that aftermarket arena to try and get those items into recyclers' hands so that we are avoiding those items going into the landfills.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Awesome. So, one of the goals of our podcast, Tobi, is to put a megaphone in front of those people that are doing great work, and that means that we want to give you an opportunity to get the word out about the great things you're doing, which you've done plenty of already today, and also address any misconceptions about your organization. What do you think? Let's talk first about the best kept secret about Goodwill, and then we'll talk about the biggest misconception.

**Tobi Mathouser:**

You know what, we might be talking about the same thing.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Okay.

**Tobi Mathouser:**

The best kept secret might be the biggest misconception. I think you mentioned that I've been with the organization for 16 years and I've had the opportunity to grow up there. Well, that has also given me the opportunity to go through the good, bad, and ugly of Goodwill. I would say that we went through a bit of

a challenge in 2016, and I would like to believe that we have done a good job of talking to the community about where their donations and where their sales are going. We have put over \$1 million into mission programming from our retail sales in 2022. We will probably be close to \$1.5 million by the end of this year that goes back to our mission programs. With the expansion of our south Omaha location, we are probably on target to put close to \$2 million back into mission programs in 2023. So that is probably the most important thing that I want the community to know and understand.

We have over nearly 700 employees, and that includes approximately 50 new positions at the south Omaha location. It takes a lot of money to operate an organization with 700 employees with 17 different locations. And so, I really want the community to understand that, after everything is said and done, after we are paying for the expenses to operate this organization, \$1 million to \$2 million back into our mission programs is very significant. And so that's what I want the community to understand is that we might not have the lowest prices at all of the thrift stores around the Omaha area, but please remember that the sales and the donations that are being brought to our stores are going to help support our mission programs and those who are in need of our services. And so, every single person who has a sale or makes a donation truly is contributing to our mission programs. And for that, I am extremely thankful.

I think that Goodwill is a bit of a different nonprofit. Other nonprofits who solely rely on foundations and government grants and private dollars to support a lot of their mission programs. What I want the community to know is that we rely on you to bring those donations and to come in and shop, and all of you are the donors that keep our mission programs going.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Amazing. So, we've talked a little bit about what's coming in the near future for Goodwill. What do you see for Goodwill Omaha in the next five to 10 years?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Oh. Well, I am really excited. When I started this position, I remember being interviewed by the Omaha World Herald and they kind of asked me the same question and my response was to grow our mission programs and we're doing that. Three months into this position, we shut down for eight weeks. I started this experience with a pandemic. So that first year was really rocky at month 12, 13, we were all just really raring and to go, and we knew that that was the goal is to expand our mission programs. And so, we took a year and we planned for the south Omaha opening. And so here we are. We will open that store and that will get us into a community where we know the need is and a community that we have not had a presence. And so, we want to continue with that mentality.

If there are communities where Goodwill is needed, we want to do our homework, we want to talk to the community, we want to know should we be in that community? And if so, how do we need to show up? There are communities that we are keeping our eye on that we are looking to expand into. But again, we don't want to just bulldoze our way into those communities. We actually want to work with the community and make sure that it's a good fit and that we are wanted in those communities. And so, I would say in general, mission programming expansion is on the horizon for the next five to 10 years, and that does include retail store expansion. As I mentioned, in some of those neighborhoods that we have stores in that can't necessarily support themselves with community donations, what that means is that we might have to put a store in a different part of the city so that we can support those stores that can't support themselves. When I talk about mission expansion, that does include retail expansion as well.

One other thing that I will mention is that Goodwill Omaha doesn't have a big rural presence, so that's an area that we're also looking into that's very new to us. And so, we are just making sure that we are keeping an eye on that rural presence in future years as well.

**Lisa Bowen:**

That's great. I love that you do the focus groups before going into a community like south Omaha, and that information is probably so valuable, there and other communities as well.

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Absolutely. Yep.

**Lisa Bowen:**

All right, Tobi, I'm inspired by motivational quotes. And I'm wondering if you could give us a few of your own words that you'd like to share with us today?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Yes. Well, they're not my words, but I will share something that really does inspire me every day, it's actually written on a little post-it note that is years old sitting right underneath my computer screen, because honestly, I need this constant reminder. But the quote that I kind of live my life by is, "When God solves your problems, you have faith in Him. And when God does not solve your problems, He has faith in you." I mentioned earlier that I might not have seen in myself what someone else saw in me, especially with moving into different positions within the organization. And that's our job is to make sure that Goodwill employees, Goodwill program participants, that they know that we see something in them and that there is opportunity for them. So that is my constant reminder, that Goodwill is opportunity for people and that is why we're here.

**Lisa Bowen:**

I love it. I love it. So, we've talked a lot about Goodwill and all of the great work you do today. Where can people go to find out more information? Because I'm sure we've just touched the surface,

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Right. Yes, you can always go to [GoodwillOmaha.org](http://GoodwillOmaha.org), visit our website or truly, stop into any one of our locations. Our headquarters where a lot of our support staff is housed, is located off 72nd and Ames. And again, this is a training center that's attached to a retail store, and we'll have another one of these on 36th and L hopefully by the beginning of 2023. And truly, any of our employees can talk about our mission. And if they can't answer questions, they can get you pointed in the right direction. But always you can reach out online. And we monitor our info email very, very closely and so that's always an option as well.

**Lisa Bowen:**

Well, Tobi, I could talk with you for hours, but as we wrap up our time here together today, what's the most important thing that you want listeners to know about Goodwill and the work you do?

**Tobi Mathouser:**

I just want our listeners to know that we are thankful. We are thankful for every single customer. We are thankful for every single employee. We are thankful for individuals who choose us. We know that employees can go a lot of different places. We know that customers can go a lot of different places. And so, I just want to say thank you. Thank you for choosing Goodwill. And we hope to continue to make you proud of donating and shopping, working for us and being a part of our programs.



**Lisa Bowen:**

Awesome. Well, I cleaned out some closets this weekend, so I have some donations I'm going to drop off very soon to a store near me. Tobi, thank you so much for taking time today. You are truly inspirational, the work you do and the path that you've taken to get where you are at Goodwill. I really appreciate you taking time to share more information with us.

**Tobi Mathouser:**

Thanks, Lisa. It was a pleasure.

**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](http://KidGlov.com) at [K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com](http://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.