

Agency for Change Podcast: Becky Gould, Executive Director, Nebraska Appleseed

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Becky Gould:

Do my actions matter? When I get engaged is there a return or a benefit? And I just want to underscore that they do. And it does.

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:

Not many nonprofits have a staff that consists of attorneys, community organizers and policy experts. But when your organization specializes in fighting for complex issues like child welfare, economic justice, healthcare, access, immigration rights and more, you begin to understand why it's necessary to have a team of experts like this on hand through public policy, legal action and community organization. Nebraska Appleseed is making an impact on the lives of people all over the state. Today, we're speaking with their executive director about how the organization fights for all Nebraskans, some of their recent successes they've had, and what their greatest need is going into the New Year.

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 Becky Gould, executive director at Nebraska Appleseed, a nonprofit advocacy organization that fights for justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans. Becky, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you're making on the world.

Becky Gould:

Thank you for having me.

Lisa Bowen:

Becky, we're going to talk a lot about Appleseed here today, but I'd also like to learn a little bit about you and your path and what got you to Appleseed. I wonder if you could share just a little bit of your background with us.

Becky Gould:

Yeah, I'd be happy to. I grew up in Nebraska in a small town just outside of Lincoln, Valparaiso, and decided to go to the university after high school. And I was a history major and that doesn't necessarily carve out a clear career path. And so, I got to the end of my college career and was sort of trying to decide what I wanted to do and had a lot of teachers in my family. And so, I had thought about, well, maybe I want to be a teacher, but I had always been interested in law school and so I thought, well just, I'll just try. I'll just apply to what happens. So, I applied only to one law school at the University of

Nebraska and I got in, and so I'm like, "Well, this is what I'm doing." And I really didn't know where that was going to take me.

But as I got into law school, I started to kind of identify things that I didn't have a passion for. There was a lot of lawyers going to corporate work, a lot of lawyers take... It's an education that can take you in a lot of directions, but I wasn't really finding like, "Ah, this is my passion. This is what I want to do." After I graduated from law school, I was still sort of trying to find my way and a friend of mine sent me a position at Appleseed and I was like, "Oh, what's this?" And as I started to look at the organization, it was issues that I really cared about, interesting work that I thought I could get into. And so I applied and I got hired and I started in October of 2001 as Appleseed's first full-time staff attorney and the work at that time was called the Welfare Due Process Project that we've since kind of reframed that work to talk about economic justice because it's really much broader than just looking at public programs.

And so, I started out as a litigator. I was in court doing cases in state and federal court representing folks that were on public programs who weren't having their rights protected, weren't getting the benefits they were supposed to receive. And I learned an awful lot about how those programs worked and how people experienced them. And then I've had an opportunity to just stay and grow within this organization, move into leadership roles, and then eventually become the executive director. So I started as the executive director in an interim capacity in 2007, and then was hired as the permanent executive director in July of 2007. And I've been doing that ever since. And it's been amazing. It's work I didn't know I was going to do and who had the privilege of doing it for 21 years.

Lisa Bowen:

That's amazing. You must be really good at your job and very passionate about it. That's a long, amazing stint at one organization and you've made a huge impact. So, thank you. Thank you. Thank you for your dedication there. Well, let's talk a little bit about Nebraska Appleseed. For people who aren't familiar with what your organization does, can you just give us a little background information?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, so we are a nonprofit organization and that means that we aren't a political organization. Our job is to serve the community. And we have focused in on areas where we know there are a lot of challenges for Nebraskans and then where our skillset as an organization can make a difference. And so, we have four program areas that we work in economic justice, which is really about addressing the root causes of poverty. We know there's a lot of Nebraskans that are working really hard but still aren't making ends meet and need help and support. And so, a lot of what that program is focused on are what are those programs that are out there that are designed to help and support people? Are they working? Can we make them work better? Are there other things that we can do as a state and as communities to really help address poverty?

And that's where I think a lot of people maybe know us from some of our work in that space. So, the minimum wage campaign we just worked on, and we'll probably talk about more was part of that program. So, making sure that that jobs pay a fair wage and that folks can make ends meet if they're working full-time. Programs that help support people, have enough food, have access to childcare, all of those kinds of things, are part of that program's work. We also work on the child welfare system. So the foster care system in Nebraska, there's a lot of children and families that get involved in that system. And it's had a long history of not working very well, being both overly responsive, sometimes disrupting families that needed other kinds of support, and sometimes being under responsive and not being able to get ahead of risky situations for kids and families.

And so part of our work is to look at that system and say, why is it over and under responding? And can we take different approaches that will make it work better for people who need support? We also work in healthcare. We do a lot of work on the Medicaid program and how that program is serving folks and supporting people and accessing the care that they need. We also do a little bit of work on the private insurance side when the insurance marketplace was created and allowed people to access private insurance who previously couldn't afford to do that. Look at how that's functioning and making sure that that people are able to utilize the exchange and marketplace. And we also look at services and that too, our services available to people. We know a lot of folks in rural areas have trouble with accessing dentists and mental health providers.

So that's a bit of the healthcare work. And then our fourth program is immigrants and communities program. Nebraska is a state that's experienced a lot of direct migration in the last 15 years or so. And so, we do a lot of work with helping new immigrants to the state, get plugged into decision-making in their communities, how to get involved. We also look at immigration policy. So how is our country setting up the immigration system? How's that working? And unfortunately, largely not working for a lot of folks.

And what can we do through advocacy to change that? The common theme hopefully, you're hearing is that we're looking at systems and laws and policies and how we build these structures that are designed to help solve problems. And then our job at Appleseed is to hold them accountable. Are these systems working? If they're not working, we should change them and we should change them in ways that are resonant with what people need. So that's kind of how we approach our work. We have community organizers on staff, we have lawyers on staff. Our organizers are out in the community talking with folks, trying to understand issues. And then the lawyers on staff are the ones that are looking at what does the law say on this? How could that be changed or enforced? Or maybe we need to write a new law, create a new program to do something.

Lisa Bowen:

Well, those are four really, really, really big buckets to tackle. And you hear about issues in our local communities daily in each of those areas. So, Nebraska Appleseed fights for Nebraskans through public policy, legal action and community organization. And you talked a little bit about that. What does that look like in practice? I know you talked about how you partner with lots of organizations. What does that look like? And can you give us any specific examples of the impact in your success? I know you did mention raising the minimum wage, which is important to a whole lot of people.

Becky Gould:

Yeah, no, and I think that's a really good example of how we work. And so, the minimum wage in Nebraska is currently \$9 an hour. And when we look at some of the statistics in Nebraska and what we hear from Nebraskans on a regular basis, we have one of the highest rates of workforce participation. So, pretty much everyone that can work in Nebraska is working. We have, we're at full employment as this state. So again, not a lot of folks who are unemployed. We have one of the highest rates of multiple job holders. So, people who are working two and three jobs to try to make ends meet. We have one of the highest rates of two people, two or more people in the household working. So again, Nebraskans work really, really hard. And I think it's just part of our culture as a state that people really do believe in work and contributing to their communities.

Yet, we still have a lot of people experiencing poverty. And what that suggests is that the jobs that some folks are working are just not paying enough for them to be able to meet housing expenses and rising food prices and the expense of childcare. And so have community organizers throughout in the community listening to folks, talking to folks about what the struggles are. And those are the things that

we were hearing over and over and over again. Really having trouble to making ends meet. I'm working, I've got one job, I've got two jobs and still having trouble making it work. We were hearing that on our end. We thought probably a lot of the partners and other organizations that we work with were hearing similar things. And so, we teamed up with 25 other organizations, defuncted the Raise the Wage Nebraska Coalition, and had a conversation about what are the things we could do to make the biggest difference for folks who are working hard and still struggling and raising the minimum wage was a way to do that.

And the research and data piece of it. So, we dive into something like this. We're looking at how many people would this affect, what would be a policy design that's really going to reach everyone who is in need of support in this way. And so, we knew that if we increase the minimum wage, we'd be able to affect wages for about 150,000 Nebraskans, which is huge. So, we work together in the coalition to design the language of the ballot initiative and the policy and how it would work. And that's where our legal staff comes in and can help write the technical legal language, help set up the technicalities of how to file a ballot initiative and what that looks like. And then as a coalition, we went out and started collecting signatures. You have to collect 87,000 or so valid signatures from registered voters across the state to qualify ballot initiative.

And so that's a big person to person effort. And you're out talking to people and getting signatures. I went and knocked on doors in Falls City and Tecumseh and Taylor, Nebraska, and we had staff that were all over the state and partners that were all over the state collecting signatures. In total, we collected over 160,000 signatures statewide, collected signatures from every county in the state. And there was just a lot of energy. And I think inflation continued to go up while we were out collecting signatures and people were experiencing the reality of when prices go up and wages don't, how much harder it is when you're already struggling to pay all the bills. So the policy design was to increase the minimum wage a \$1.50 a year over the next four years, and then to index the minimum wage to inflation after that. So as inflation goes up, the wages will go up.

And that was something that was really important to a lot of people we were talking to who again, were experiencing this moment of my prices are going up, and my wages aren't. So then you qualify something for the ballot, then you pivot to talking to voters, coalition partners and our team were out doing voter education and helping people know this was on the ballot, that they'd have the opportunity to vote for it. I think direct democracies is really powerful. Giving people a say over issues that their lives directly I think is a great way for people to get engaged. And then on election day, 58.5% of Nebraskan said yes, to raising the minimum wage. So, in January will be the first \$1.50 increase, our minimum wage will go up to \$10.50 an hour. I think that's one example of how we work. And just to say a little bit, people that we worked with along the way who were working minimum wage jobs or just above minimum wage, what that looks like, one of the women that I spoke to was working in home healthcare.

She had worked in that field for 30 years taking care of people and still makes \$12.50 an hour. So, it's a little bit above minimum wage, but it's not enough and it doesn't reflect the skill and the expertise that she's bringing to the table, the way in which she cares for others. And you could see how much passion she had for her work that was driving her to continue, but also the real struggle of trying to afford housing and food and even to be able to take a vacation and visit family. So that's really important to keep at the center of all of these technical wonky, making sure that if we're successful, people's lives get better.

Lisa Bowen:

That's great. That's a huge win. And you're right, impacts so many people, the raising of the minimum wage. And I love how the things that you do are such grassroots efforts. What does your volunteer staff look like? Do you have a huge team of volunteers that support you guys?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, I mean we're very fortunate to have great support all across the state from a lot of Nebraskans on this campaign. I think we had over 150 volunteers who helped collect signatures, helped make phone calls to voters, all of those kinds of things. And it's really critical when you're trying to move a big idea forward, you need as many people who are excited about that idea as you can get. And we've just been really fortunate in the work that we've done over the years to be able to build a lot of support and get to stand alongside a lot of amazing Nebraskans who are doing the work.

Lisa Bowen:

So as an organization that serves the entire state, how do you stay abreast of issues facing the entire state, especially the panhandle and maybe some of the more rural communities that sometimes lose their voice?

Becky Gould:

We have a big geography that sits in Lincoln, and so we have a real obligation as a statewide organization to be present as much as we can in every corner of the state. So, for us, we travel a lot. Our organizing staff is out and about all over the state talking to people. We also work with a lot of local organizations. So, in some of the smaller communities, there are organizations in place that are providing services to Nebraskans and engaging in advocacy. And so, we connect up with those partners and work together as well. And then we also do, we have a statewide intake line, so people can call us and if they're struggling with something, we really pride ourselves in connecting everybody with some kind of referral. We can't help directly everyone with whatever they're facing, but we can definitely help them navigate the landscape of support in Nebraska and get connected to folks who can.

But that intake line is a place where we hear problems and when we get several calls on an issue, it's assigned to us that that's a thing. If we're getting a handful of people calling, then there's something there that is happening to more people, and we should take a closer look at it. So, it's a mix of showing up in person, talking to partners and allies, and then listening to folks directly about what they're experiencing when they reach out.

Lisa Bowen:

And the fact that you have that hotline, I mean anyone can really access you at any time, which you're so accessible throughout the state. So, in your view, what are some of the most pressing injustices affecting Nebraskans today? And really, do you see differences in the rural communities and the cities or is it pretty much same issue statewide?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, I think the things that people are sharing with us on a very regular basis are about accessing affordable housing. I think that's one of the number one thing that we hear about. And it's in urban communities, it's in rural communities. It looks a little different in different places in some communities. It's really like we can't find any housing in the city that has public transportation to where we need to work. In some of the rural communities, there just literally isn't housing stock and folks are struggling to be able to build more housing, to be able to rehab existing housing that's no longer livable. There's a lot

of challenges in that space and I think that's something the state and cities and counties have been trying to grapple with. But I think there's just a lot more work to be done there. It really affects mobility where people can choose to live.

And I think as a state that wants to try to maintain population and I think try; a lot of rural communities are working hard to try to maintain their population in their smaller towns. Housing is a key piece of that. And affordable housing that's close to where people are working. I think another really big issue right now is access to mental health services. The pandemic just further exposed what was already there as a key challenge for a lot of people, but maybe because everybody was going through challenging things, it became easier to talk about it and easier to highlight the need. And I think for young people as well, kids in school, there's just the need has been really, really clearly presented and we don't have enough providers. There's a lot of people that can't get access to any kind of mental health services. And when you look at the statewide numbers, we have kind of mental health crisis counties across the state where we just don't have services.

There's a lot of investing that will need to happen to build up the services that people need to be able to stay healthy. And there's still work to be done around addressing the stigma. I think there's still a lot of people that feel like, "Do I really need help? I feel crappy." And so, I think helping people understand how the mental health system works and the prevention side of it. A lot of times folks aren't going to get mental health services until they're in crisis. And then that's part of what creates challenges within the system because we're not getting ahead of things and managing things. So that's another area where we know there's a lot of needs and work to be done. Some of our longer-term fights: immigration reform is huge. We have big workforce challenges in Nebraska and being able to bring more people into the state is one of the ways to help address that.

And we have an immigration system that really doesn't allow for that to happen easily. We have a family-based immigration system in our country, and so you don't have family here and you want to come here to work. It is very difficult to do that. The number of work specific visas is pretty small. So, when you think about it through that lens, it doesn't work great. And then just the way that system operates often doesn't provide people a lot of dignity and choice in sort of what's going on. We've worked a lot over the years with young people who were brought here without immigration status and were able to get what's called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, DACA, which provided or provides a degree of status ability to work, but it's not a long-term solution. And the Supreme Court's going to actually review whether that program can stay in existence.

And so there's a lot of urgency around getting Congress to act on immigration reform and provide a way for people who are here and aren't working and contributing to their communities to be able to have a status here that reflects what they're doing. So we've worked on immigration reform for almost the entire time I've been at Appleseed and it's really a frustrating thing because there is a lot of agreement about what we need and what we could do, but we haven't been able to get the political machinery to make it happen. So I think that's another place where we'll continue to work and we need lots of folks to join in that conversation and help make sure we get something in place that's going to work for people.

Lisa Bowen:

Those are big issues. And I come from healthcare, I've worked in healthcare, so I know that mental health has been a struggle for forever also. And I think that at some cases you just have to celebrate the little wins, right? Because it's a marathon, not a sprint, getting those things corrected. What do you think the biggest misconception is about what Appleseed Nebraska does or who you are?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think sometimes we get pigeonholed as being maybe an organization that doesn't work broadly with people coming from all different kinds of perspectives and that maybe we're more just a left-leaning organization and only work with groups that align. And we actually work with a really broad swath of partners and folks that might seem like unlikely allies. And to me that's quintessentially Nebraskan. As someone who grew up in a small town, there's lots of opinions, there's lots of ideas in a small town, but at the end of the day, you know everybody, you know that they're coming from a good place most of the time and want to try to have good things happen in their community. And it's about finding those spaces of common ground where you do have agreement, or you can get to agreement. And then working together in that space. We've worked with the chambers of commerce, not so much on minimum wage, but on immigration, on access to childcare.

We've worked with the cattlemen on driver's licenses for DACA youth. And our approach to it is if we can agree on something, great, let's go work together and agree. And then if we have to disagree on something else, that's okay. But we can do that from a place of understanding. And I think when we do disagree, they understand our perspective, we understand their perspective, and I think we need more of that in this time. It feels like the country is very polarized. A lot of communities are very polarized, and we can't forget how we can work together and solve problems. And we have a history of that in our country and in our state, and we really have to fight to hold onto that because that really is the only way we can get things done. And again, people who maybe haven't seen us work closely might think we don't work with anyone and everyone and we really do.

I think the other challenge we face is that people tend to maybe know us for some part of our work but not see the whole of it. So, some people who have seen our legal work think of us as lawyers who go to court and do the legal work. Folks who know us for our child welfare work may not know anything about our immigration work. So, we're constantly trying to make sure that folks can understand the full story of what we're doing and choose to get involved however broadly they want in the wide range of work.

Lisa Bowen:

Now, that's a challenge for so many nonprofits we work with is just getting people to understand the depth and the breadth of the great work that you do. So, there's lots of, we've talked about lots of causes and lots of needs out there. How does your organization determine what you're going to support and what you're really going to put some efforts behind to make the greatest impact? Do you have criteria that you use? Do you do research? Can you tell me a little bit about what that looks like?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, so our mission to fight for justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans is huge you could put in that bucket. So, you're right, we have to make some tough decisions. The four areas that I mentioned are areas where there's long-term work. We know we're not ending poverty in the next couple of years, that's long-term work where there's a lot of different ways that you can come at that problem. So, what we try to do is to look at what are areas where we have expertise and we've been able to build a lot of deep expertise in those four areas that I described. And so, we kind of are in those spaces for the long-term. And then within those different program areas, issue to issue, we're looking at is it a systemic issue? Is this something that's affecting a large group of people and is it something where a change in law or policy or regulation is the solution because that's really where our skillset lies.

And then are there folks out there that are experiencing struggles that are asking us to get involved or want us involved. I think there can sometimes be in the nonprofit space, fear of overlap or competition. And as a sector that often has really limited resources, it's important that we're all using our resources as effectively as we can and not duplicating work. So, we tend to look around and say, if someone else

already doing this really well, then we aren't needed there, and we try to connect whoever's asking us to get involved to the folks who are already doing the work. We also look at are there resources we have, staff to pay and expenses that go along with this kind of work? And so, do we already have the resources? Are there resources available funding that we could seek? And so that's another piece of it.

We kind of take a look at all those different factors and then we really look for things that need persistent advocacy. So, there's often really good things that maybe aren't that hard to get over a finish line. And it's just that the right person needs to get the information and the right ask to come their way and they'll make the change, and that's great. Lots of things can get done that way, but we're really built for the hard stuff. The stuff that is going to take years is going to take a lot of people is going to take a heavy lift. So that's kind of part of the calculus too. Is this something that needs gallon and scope of Appleseed? And if so, then we're up for that.

Lisa Bowen:

I love that you don't run from a challenge, you run to the challenges. That's amazing. Not a lot of people can say that about their work. You talked a little bit about funding. How are you funded? Do you rely on donor support or grants, or how do you keep things running?

Becky Gould:

So, like all nonprofits, we have a mix of funding, about 80 to 85% is grant funding. So, we are out writing a lot of grants and some of that grant funding is what we call operating funding. So, it's flexible, but a lot of that grant funding is program grants. And so, you're writing for a very specific project and then kind of locked into seeing that project through. And then about 15% of our support comes from individual donors. And that is really critical because that's our flexible resources that if a crisis comes up or something happens that we weren't expecting to need to work on, and now we do, those funds allow us to pivot and to go take on something. You couldn't write a grant fast enough to do.

We're really grateful for the broad base of Nebraskans that support our work as individual donors. Last week had our end of the year fundraising drive and we had over 200 people support our work during just that week. And so that's really exciting to see. And we raised about \$89,000 in one week. And so you have moments like that and it's just really gratifying to feel the support for our work and to know that we're going to have resources in hand to carry into next year for all of the challenges that we're going to be tackling.

Lisa Bowen:

That is great. That is great. That's a great week for you guys.

Becky Gould:

Yes. No, it was amazing. And when you kind of dive into a focused campaign like that for fundraising, there's a lot of work that goes behind it. Our development team did a lot of work, but you're sort of on faith that what you've done resonates and that folks will show up and want to join in. And when that happens, it's another sign that you're hopefully on the right track that you're doing the things that really matter to folks and are making things better.

Lisa Bowen:

That's great. So, we talked about this a little bit, but for some people in the nonprofit sector, it could probably feel a bit disheartening to constantly be battling against these large systemic issues that don't

have a quicker simple fix to them. What kind of moments or people do you think about to remind yourself why work, why the work you're doing is so important?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, it's a combination of things because it's definitely you go into something where you're going to lose a lot for a bit, which isn't-

Lisa Bowen:

It's not fun.

Becky Gould:

You kind of have to prepare yourself for that. I will say having been in the work for 21 years, you have the benefit of the longer perspective. And so, I can see things that we fought for five years that happen and that persistent persistence pays off. And so, it's a little bit easier to say yes, probably going to be a tough slog year one and year two, but we might get there in year three. I think the other thing is really early on in my career as a young lawyer, the very first case that I worked on I lost, and I remember being very disheartened about it. I was representing a woman who was trying to pursue a bachelor's degree program as her work activity on the cash assistance program we have in Nebraska called the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program.

And my case was that she should be able to do this bachelor's degree program as her work activity. And the state was saying, "no, that it wasn't the right kind of activity to count as work under the law." And I was just demoralized. I'm sitting in my office and our founding executive director came down and was like, "Did you get the opinion?" And I'm like, "Yeah, we lost." And he's like, "We didn't lose." And I was like, "What do you mean we didn't lose, we lost. You read the opinion." And he said, "No, you have to remember in this work standing up and fighting is part of the win." Giving a voice to issues that otherwise would go unnoticed is a win. We forced the Supreme Court to clarify what the law means and now we can go and change it. And it was just this amazing conversation about how to think about what it means to do social justice work.

And I go back to that conversation a lot because it's a good reminder of the binary of win/loss is so rarely what's going on. And I think we've gotten more and more into the community organizing work and connecting with people and just getting people engaged is a win. Someone who has that first experience of talking to their senator and now knows, "Oh, I can do that. They actually work for me. I should do that more. That's a win." And so, building that engagement is a way that you're constantly progressing even if you don't get that policy change right out of the gate. So that is definitely was a huge reframe of the world for me and something that I talk about a lot because I think especially with our newer staff and folks who are just getting into this and then telling a few stories of Medicaid expansion was another big thing we worked on, and it's really tracked the course of my career.

One of my other big cases was representing 10,000 parents who got cut off of Medicaid because they made just a little too much. We were able to get them a year of transitional Medicaid through the case that I brought, but after that year, they all became uninsured, and I was frustrated by that. And so, we continued at Appleseed to look for solutions and then the Affordable Care Act emerged as a possibility and we worked on advocacy to get that passed at the federal level and to get Senator Ben Nelson to support it from Nebraska, which happened in the past. And then the Supreme Court came back and undid the requirement to do Medicaid expansion and cover that population. So, then we had to fight again and we brought seven pieces of legislation over seven years to try to get the state to take up Medicaid expansion and then moved into a ballot initiative.

We had success with the ballot initiative, which was amazing, but then the state wanted to delay implementing it for two years. And so, we filed two more lawsuits and engaged in a lot of advocacy. And now we're at a point where we've got almost 90,000 people benefiting from that program, but that's 21 years of work, really. So when you have those experiences and you can look back and say it's iterative, so you're making some progress and then you make some more progress and then you try to make some more progress, now you stick with it and then you see the change happen and then you see how that impacts people's lives and the data that's coming out about dramatically reducing the number of uninsured, how this is helping hospitals that we're dealing with high volumes of uncompensated care, all of the arguments we were making, and now we see the benefit of that.

You kind of have to be built for the long game, have that sense of patience and persistence, but then you see it happens. And I think in the social justice and civil rights space, it's always been the struggle, like it's referred to as the struggle. And that's real. And that's why it's hard work. It's not something you get a lot of finish lines in your career, in your lifetime, but you are picking up the torch from the people that did the work before. You do as much good as you can. You carry things as far down the road as you can, and then you pass that torch off to the next group of people who are coming behind you and will pick up the work.

Lisa Bowen:

And when you get those wins, they're often not little wins, they're big wins. So worth the wait in most cases, and the number of people that you're impacting it's amazing. I loved the story you shared about your first case and losing, but really someone helping you frame that into a win. And that's so true. You can't shine a light on something if you keep it in the dark and just talking about things and bringing the issues forward that you bring forward, whether you're making that quick progress or not, you're really making a difference. So, this is going to be a bit like asking you to pick your favorite child here, but I know we've talked about lots of needs right now that Nebraska Appleseed is addressing. What would be the biggest need right now that you could share with our listeners for Nebraskans?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, so I'm going to put that in two buckets that are related. I'm going to cheat a little bit and not pick one, but I think the biggest need... So, the legislature is going to go into session here in January and there's going to be a lot of really important issues that are going to come before the legislature. I would say one of the big needs is engagement by folks with their state legislators. We have a whole lot of new senators who are coming in and are going to have to learn a lot about a lot of issues really fast. And one of the things that's incredibly helpful as senators move into office is hearing from their constituents about what matters most. So that is a huge need. There's going to be two pieces of legislation that are really important, one that is focused on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, a lot of people still know it as food stamps, but it provides support for folks to be able to buy food.

And there was an increase in eligibility for that program that was passed two years ago and there's a sunset provision. And so that increased in eligibility will end in July if we don't deal with that sunset provision. So that's going to be a big focal point of our work is addressing that sunset and making sure that program can continue and the folks that are benefiting from that access to food will be able to keep that. And those are all working families. So, it's folks who are on the program who've started working and start making a little bit more and would have to move off the program if we don't keep this provision in place. And then there's a similar sunset provision for childcare and a similar increase for working families. So those are two really important things where folks are getting help and support right now, and if we don't do the work, they would lose that.

And those are just two examples. There's going to be a lot of pieces of legislation that will touch, I'm sure a lot of your listeners' lives in different ways and that engagement matters when senators get calls for, I mean, it's not that many calls that are like eye-opening for folks that are in the legislature. So, if they get 10 calls on something that's like, "Oh, my constituents care about this." So I just want to encourage folks, especially in a time where it can feel like politics is very polarizing and divided and does it matter? And I just want to say it does matter. We can all play a role in setting the tone for what engaging with our elected officials should look like. So would love for all of your listeners to get involved in that way. And then I think the other piece is picking a way to be involved.

So, for us, we can only do so much just as an organization. We need lots of people in the community involved with us in lots of different ways, whether that is making call to your senator or whether that's showing up for an event, whether that's sharing information with people in your community and financial support is also helpful. What I would encourage folks to do is pick some way to get involved in something that you really care about. And it may not even be with Appleseed, I mean we'd love to have you, but if there's something else that you're really passionate about, our communities only work when everybody is engaged and trying to help them work. And it doesn't have to be big, massive things, pick something small but lend a little bit of yourself to helping move something forward. And that will make a difference when everybody's doing that, then you get a lot of momentum, and a lot of things get done.

Lisa Bowen:

There's plenty of work for everyone to do. We all know that. And so, what I'm hearing you say, takeaways are get engaged and get involved in something you're passionate about.

Becky Gould:

Yes.

Lisa Bowen:

Awesome. I am inspired by motivational quotes, and I'm sure you have a lot of them through your work, things you've done, things you live by. Can you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Becky Gould:

That's a good one. I think mean I've shared some of them. I do feel like the winning example that we talked about is a big one that I go back to a lot. Just again, that sense of do my actions matter when I get engaged. Is there a return or a benefit? And I just want to underscore that they do. And it does. And even if it doesn't feel like that, I think it's the privilege that I have in being able to do this work as my job that I get to see how that additive action moves things and changes things. I think that wisdom of get involved and get engaged and pick something that you are passionate about and that will make it even more enjoyable when it's something that touches your life. And I hope people get the bug and you do it once or twice and then you're like, "Oh, this is just what I do."

Lisa Bowen:

Yeah, I think, so many people think that "I'm little me, I'm not going to make a difference, I'm just one person." But I love how you put that in perspective. If 10 people call their senator about something, it's a big deal. You can make an impact.

Becky Gould:

Yeah.

Lisa Bowen:

Great. So, we've talked a lot about the great work you're doing at Appleseed. If our listeners want to learn more about what you're doing, how to get involved, how they can volunteer, what's the best way to do that?

Becky Gould:

Yeah, so a great starting point is our website, which is neappleseed.org. And from there you can find all our social media. So, we are on Instagram and Facebook and Twitter and YouTube channel and all of those things. So that's a great starting point. And then you can find us in other places as well. And then I would say there's a take action space on our website and you can sign up to get our emails. And I think that what we try to do is to make getting involved as easy as possible for people. So, you can send it for our general Appleseed action list, and you'll get a monthly newsletter from us about what's going on in the different aspects of our work and ways you can get involved. And then we have a very specific legislative update email, and those go out weekly during the legislative session and they highlight, here's the bills that are going to be for hearing next week, here's some information about them.

Here's ways you can get involved. And those are two really great resources if you want to stay engaged in the kinds of issues we work on at Appleseed. We also do a lot of calls to action on social media as well. So, today's the day, call your senator, it will really matter today they're about to vote. And I know sometimes people are like, it's today, they decided. And it's like keep in mind during any session at the state legislative level, there's going to be 700 or more bills and you just can't know everything about everything. And so there is often the day of senators are getting up to speed on like, "Okay, what's coming up today? What's that about? What do I want to do on that?"

And if they're not hearing from constituents, they're going to hear from other people, right? They're going to hear from other senators, they're going to hear from lobbyists. And not that any of that is bad, but it's most helpful when they hear from constituents. So, the email, here's the way to access your decision maker and trying to make that really easy for folks, if that sounds like something you're interested in. Those are good ways to get in involved.

Lisa Bowen:

Okay. Well, we've talked about so much great stuff today, but it's about time to wrap up. Are there any final words you'd like to share with our listeners today?

Becky Gould:

I just want to share what a privilege it is to be able to do this work in Nebraska with my neighbors and my friends, my family and people I care about. And not everyone gets to find a job that they love, where they feel like they're contributing to the place that they grew up. So, I'm very grateful for that. And I hope that what we're doing at Appleseed is meaningful and making a difference, and that more folks will join in this work, whether it's with us or whether it's with other organizations that engage in advocacy.

Lisa Bowen:

Yes. Well, thank you so much for taking the time. I learned so much about you and your organization and the great work you guys are doing today, and I'm sure our listeners did as well. And we're hoping that

you're right, they're compelled to take action and get engaged and help you with some of these really, really important efforts. So, thank you.

Becky Gould:

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Announcer:

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