

## Agency for Change Podcast: Heather Ehle, CEO and Founder, Project Sanctuary

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### **Heather Ehle:**

Breathe, believe and begin again.

### **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:**

At KidGlov, we love connecting with the nonprofits that uplift our communities through making a life-changing difference. Today's guest is the founder and CEO of an organization that brings military families together through reconnection, hope and the great outdoors.

Hey, everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change Podcast. I am excited to introduce you to our guest, Heather Ehle of Project Sanctuary. In this episode, we'll talk about how a human-centered solution-based approach to healing after active-duty military service helps families move forward in life together. Doesn't that sound fantastic?

All right, Heather, welcome to the podcast.

### **Heather Ehle:**

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

I am excited to talk to you and learn more about your work. As a matter of fact, that's a great place for us to start today. Can you tell us more about Project Sanctuary and the work that you do?

### **Heather Ehle:**

Project Sanctuary is one of the very few organizations that exist solely focused on helping military families heal. When I say families, I mean the whole family—mom, dad, two, three kiddos. We're focused on reconnecting and helping them through relationships, communication, post-traumatic growth, finances. We do this in six state therapeutic retreats with a fully professional staff. We do this across the country, which is so exciting to be able to take our program and our project and make it more accessible to the families. We'll do 23 retreats this year.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

Twenty-three retreats, that's almost one every other week, Heather. What a great mission. I've never heard of another organization doing this. I read somewhere that you are a registered nurse. I'm just curious, how did your background in medicine lead you to a point where you started Project Sanctuary?

**Heather Ehle:**

Well, it started many moons ago when I was a registered nurse in a free clinic, and it was back during the first Gulf War. Families were coming in, we had a military doctor that word got out he was treating Gulf War illness before it was even called Gulf War illness, but we were listening, and we were paying attention. These families would drive from Nebraska and Wyoming to this little, tiny clinic in Colorado. It was typically mom, dad and a couple of extremely well-behaved kids out of school because everybody's trying to figure out what are our next steps, what's wrong with dad, yeah, what's going on.

Then you fast-forward to 9/11, which was obviously just earth-shattering, soul-shattering for most of us. I started thinking, oh my gosh, we were not equipped to take care of the families way back when, who's taking care of the families?

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Heather Ehle:**

I Googled, "Who is taking care of our military families?" Back then, 2017, nothing came up, and I knew I needed to do something.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah, you didn't have ChatGPT to ask at that time, did you?

**Heather Ehle:**

No, but I did have Google.

**Lyn Wineman:**

You did have Google, which is a good option.

I'm really curious. You listened and you saw the need, you heard about the need, how did you then connect that with the idea to host retreats that pair healing and physical activity and being outside?

**Heather Ehle:**

Well, part of being a nurse is you always want to be teaching. In my history as a nurse, I was in home care and hospice and a lot of times that was healing the whole family, and that was reaching back out to the community and finding resources so that they would continue on their healing journey and do well. I loosely had an idea that we lived in paradise, we've got year-round recreation, if we could just remove these families from the stress and put them into a healing sanctuary, a healing environment.

Because I had worked in home care, I knew immediately I needed a professional team. Where are my rec therapists, where are my social workers, where are my counselors? I'm not going in alone, I loosely had that in the back of my head. Honestly, we just asked the families, "What do you need? How can we serve you? How can we do this better?"

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah. Heather, I want to take a moment on a side note here, because you mentioned your history with hospice, and just say that hospice is such a beautiful service that's available to almost anybody that may be one of the most misunderstood or services that people are unaware of. If you're hearing the word hospice for the first time, give it a look because that's a great service. But I can see how your hospice background came together to help you with this approach.

Now, talk to me a little bit more, because I'm going to guess this also came from the hospice and home health background, about families healing together instead of just focusing on the individual that's coming out of active duty.

**Heather Ehle:**

Yeah. We really believe in one of our core philosophies at Project Sanctuary, is that the family serves together, and the family should heal together.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah.

**Heather Ehle:**

Now, you take your typical veteran who comes back and he may be living with post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries, and he goes off to an amazing organization. They're all wonderful, all organizations that are helping are great. He gets tools and support and he's in a different level, and he comes home, and the family's not gotten anything and they're still baseline chaos. We literally take the whole family fishing together. They all get the same tools and support.

The kids' program and the teen program mirror what mom and dad are learning in the adult classroom. We're talking to them about relationships and communication skills, we're talking to them what post-traumatic stress is, what is post-traumatic growth. We have a revolutionary money matters class for the teens called Out of the Nest. Those teens come out on fire, they're so excited to have that beginning knowledge of financial independence. It gets the whole family talking together and moving forward to better support one another. They have the opportunity to reconnect with themselves, their family, and then ultimately with the community.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I just love everything about what you just said, Heather. I think about the last few years, you take an active duty military professional, they've been through a lot, their family's been through a lot, and then you put them through a global pandemic. COVID-19 created global loneliness during the lockdown. I imagine that this feeling was potentially worse for people who are already struggling with mental health. I'm curious, how has COVID-19 impacted the work you're doing with the families?

**Heather Ehle:**

Oh, you are so right. I think all families, and I think everyone, can relate to their own personal experience and their family experience going through COVID and recognizing how stressful it was. Our military families are a little bit different in that a lot of them don't have roots or a base because of the nature of their military career. They're moved every three to four years, so they've grown up without a lot of community support or family support, which further alienated a lot of our families.

We took six weeks off during COVID. We were deemed an essential service and immediately started hosting retreats again. We did it responsibly. We did smaller retreats; we kept the families in pods. Knock on wood, we had zero transmissions.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Good for you.

**Heather Ehle:**

Pulled that nursing background back in, everybody washing their hands, we were sanitizing everything. But mental health is so critical and so crucial, whether it be a pandemic, a fire, or just normal everyday life, to be able to address the mental health needs of honestly our American heroes and keep those families together, we went right back to work. Six weeks, that was it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's amazing, good for you. Once again, another place where your medical background had to have been very, very, very helpful.

Heather, the mission of Project Sanctuary says it takes a human-centered, solution-based approach to help military families move forward. I'm curious, what's one of your favorite examples of seeing this mission in action?

**Heather Ehle:**

Oh goodness, there are so many different examples. Our favorite story is of Ronnie, the really grumpy veteran who had served 19 years and was medically retired. He knew who Sergeant Huddleston was, but he did not know who Ronnie was.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Heather Ehle:**

His wife stopped a suicide attempt and drug him to a retreat, where he was the angry veteran and we just left him alone, but he absorbed so much of the retreat, and it stuck with him. His small kid at the time drew a picture of the family. It was he, his mom and his sister on one side, and Ronnie on the other side with red flames coming out of his head.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh my, that gives me chills. Wow.

**Heather Ehle:**

After the retreat, Ronnie called, he said, "This isn't okay. I need help." We found a private therapist in his area. He did intense work, he did intense work, intense healing. Fast-forward, Ronnie worked for us for many years and ran a lot of retreats. I hired him, he was one of my best retreat managers. He's still a very good dear friend and his son is now serving.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Oh, Heather. If that story doesn't warm your heart, I don't know what will. That is just such a great example of the work that you're doing.

We have focused mainly on retreats. I'm curious, do you offer other services through Project Sanctuary as well?

**Heather Ehle:**

So, many times, after a retreat, the families would reach back out and say, "Miss Heather, where do I send my kids to camp? Miss Heather, my refrigerator's empty. Miss Heather, I need help with a job. Miss Heather, I need a counselor. Miss Heather." I'm like, "Holy cow."

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Heather Ehle:**

Back to square one, how do we best serve these families? That's through social work. We created a family support program, and we go back to that human centric. It's what those families need when they need it. That may look totally different for each and every family. We can't solve every problem, but we can certainly walk alongside them. You can't get to the VA appointment or your doctor appointment if your car's transmission is out. We can make those phone calls to the mechanics, see if we can't get it reduced, reach out to some local clubs, see what the family can do, make it work. We can't solve everything, but we are really honored to continue walking that path with these families.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow. Heather, you are a woman of action. You see the need and you make it happen, that's impressive. I also know that community is an important part of healing, but some military families might be feeling isolated because I've got to think that the act of serving is such a unique experience that someone who hasn't served is not going to understand. How do you bring the military community together with civilians, and what does that look like?

**Heather Ehle:**

I feel like I'm the bridge sometimes, especially if I'm speaking to a group of civilians who may not be aware of the particular stresses that our military families face and the fact that there aren't a ton of resources for the entire military family and we're providing something pretty unique. We have an open-door policy; we absolutely love our volunteers. I love to go speak to civilian groups also to help bring awareness and education, but to come volunteer sends a win-win-win message.

Number one, the military family recognizes they've not been forgotten and these people are taking their time to come serve them and help, and then the civilians typically walk away with this amazing gift of, "Wow, I made a difference in this family's life," and a better understanding of the unique stresses and how these families are courageously living with post-traumatic stress and living with traumatic brain injuries and what they're giving their kids by coming to a therapeutic retreat. It's a win-win-win when we can get everybody involved. That's rotary groups or businesses or individuals or anybody that's listening now that wants to get involved and help play their part in this, it's almost a magical journey, and honoring these families.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I see that, because you're tapping into two really important things. You're tapping into the need to feel seen and valued, and then on the other side, the need to make a difference. You're bringing those two together and that is amazing. Heather, you're obviously making a big difference in the world, a big positive difference, which is what I love about doing this podcast. I love talking to people who are making a positive impact. I'm curious, what advice do you have for others who might be listening, seeing, hear a need and want to make a difference?

**Heather Ehle:**

Oh, absolutely. Do it, just do it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Do it, just do it. I love it.

**Heather Ehle:**

Just do it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Just do it.

**Heather Ehle:**

You can certainly reach out to us. We're [projectsanctuary.us](https://projectsanctuary.us). We love volunteers, we love collaborating with people and businesses. Sometimes it's families serving families. That's also a wonderful way to get your teenagers or your older kids involved in some philanthropy and charity work. Whether it's our group or another group, just do it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Just do it.

**Heather Ehle:**

So many grassroots nonprofits absolutely need that little boost. They need attention, they need volunteers. You would not believe how much we can stretch \$5 and what an impact that can make. \$25 may mean the difference of a family having gas money and being able to attend a retreat.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah, that's true.

**Heather Ehle:**

It doesn't take much to create that ripple and that effect. It really is, it's a win-win-win. You come away feeling so wonderful that you are part of the solution.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Yeah. Honestly, think about it, if we all just went out and did one thing this week, one thing, what a huge wave that would make. Heather, that is such great advice. You know what? Since you're inspiring me, I'm going to switch gears and ask you my very favorite question because I love motivational quotes and I am

lucky that I get to talk to so many inspirational people. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom to inspire our listeners?

**Heather Ehle:**

One of my favorites is, "Breathe, believe, and begin again." Just stop, stop, take a big deep breath. Believe in whatever higher power, God, positive energy, you believe in, and begin again, and repeat is necessary.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Repeat as necessary, I love it. That is such good advice, because belief moves us forward, that breathing just gives your mind and your heart and your soul a chance to pause and get back up one more time and do it.

**Heather Ehle:**

One more time.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Begin it again, begin again. I love it. Thank you for that, that's fantastic.

You mentioned your website a little bit earlier. I'm going to have you say it again, because for our listeners who would like to learn more, maybe they're a military family and they want to attend a retreat, or somebody who might want to donate that gas money or for many other things, or somebody who'd like to volunteer, how do people find out more about you and Project Sanctuary?

**Heather Ehle:**

It's [projectsanctuary.us](http://projectsanctuary.us), and we have a ton of information on our website, information for our families, how they can sign up for our therapeutic programs. We will have our impact report, which has got tons of wonderful things in our annual report, also gives a brief history. We have wonderful short videos, because everybody's in a hurry these days, but five minutes just to listen to our families and have them tell the story and the transformations and the impacts and what it meant because somebody asked the question, how do we serve our military families? Lots of great things on that website.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's fantastic. We will also have that Project Sanctuary US, if you didn't catch it, we'll have that linked in the show notes on our website as well.

Heather, as we wrap up this great conversation, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

**Heather Ehle:**

I'm going back to just do it.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I like it, I like it.

**Heather Ehle:**

Please recognize that our military families are serving and that the whole family is serving. They are constantly being moved and they're constantly on alert and they're constantly being asked to deploy. We're still deploying, and I don't think a lot of Americans recognize the sacrifices that these families make. They've signed up to serve, to protect America and to protect you and me and our families. They're just like us in a lot of ways. They just want to be healthy and happy, and they want to see their kids be okay. That's what we do, we support and honor these families and we welcome everybody to join us.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Well, Heather, God bless you for the work that you do. It's good work. I'm impressed how you took your own advice, you just did it. You heard the people, you saw the need, you made it happen, you expanded as needed. I think that's really great. I hope lots of people will reach out to you as a result of this podcast. Heather, I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more organizations like Project Sanctuary. Thank you so much for sharing with me today,

**Heather Ehle:**

Thank you for all that you're doing to highlight and spread goodness and awareness. I am just so honored to be here. I think what you're doing is just absolutely fabulous, so thank you for having us.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Absolutely. Thank you, Heather. It's my privilege.

**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.