

Agency for Change Podcast: Michelle Paulk, Vice President, Community Development and Outreach, Lincoln Community Foundation

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Michelle Paulk:

The community and the world are constantly evolving. And to keep up, I think we have to be lifelong learners.

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Kelley Peterson:

Hi, everyone. This is Kelley Peterson, chief creative officer at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of Agency for Change. Today, we're talking about an organization that has been connecting donor generosity to local needs and passions for nearly 70 years: the Lincoln Community Foundation. One of the foundation's claims to fame is spearheading a community-wide philanthropic event fondly called Give to Lincoln Day, 11 years ago. In 2022, this remarkable event raised over \$8 million to help 479 nonprofit organizations. Join us as we talk with Michelle Paulk, vice president of community development and outreach, about what makes the foundation and this one big day of giving so special. Michelle, I'm eager to talk with you and learn more about the great impact you are making in the world.

Michelle Paulk:

Me, too. Thanks, Kelly.

Kelley Peterson:

You bet. Michelle, let's go way back in time to 1955. What brought the founders of your organization together a mere 68 years ago?

Michelle Paulk:

The Lincoln Community Foundation is the oldest community foundation in Nebraska. And so, the founders of this community foundation were such visionaries to start this organization and really think about in perpetuity that these funds would be around forever, helping our community forever. And so, they started a benefactor's program, which created an operating endowment so that our community foundation is not out fundraising for operating funds along with all of our thousand nonprofits who are located in Lancaster County. So, we're really well-positioned there. They had great vision back in 1955, and they had a great love of Lincoln. And so, I think that was really the spark for it. And we've been on this great path ever since. One of the cool things is we did find out the first grant made from the

Community Foundation was for a projector in Pinewood Bowl out in Pioneers Park. And so that's how it all got started.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that planning. I've been to Pioneers Park and Pinewood Bowl so many times myself. And this summer, I believe, looking forward to seeing The Doobie Brothers. So, the fact that Lincoln Community Foundation made it was the spark of even making that happen and the great artists that do come to that space something, you are part of it all. I think perpetuity sometimes, one, it's a hard word to say, but it's a great word. But I love the one you said even more, and that is 'forever' because that is truly what this means. So, what do you think the secret is behind what the Lincoln Community Foundation's continued success is in making an impact?

Michelle Paulk:

I think a big component is that we don't represent any one cause or any one organization or nonprofit. We represent the entire community of Lincoln, and our service area also includes Lancaster County. And so, we just exist to connect donors who want to do good with the causes they care about and the causes they're passionate about in the community. It's a really unique position to be in, that community foundations are in. We're this flexible entity that just really exists to increase generosity in our community and connect those donors to what they want to fund and what they really care about.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow. That is quite a footprint. Lincoln and Lancaster County, lot of good things happening there. When did Give to Lincoln Day become a fixture in our community's calendar, almost like a citywide holiday that happens every year? How did it all get started?

Michelle Paulk:

It's an interesting story. So, Barbara Bartle, who is our former president, started it in 2010, and giving days were starting to catch fire across the country about that time. And some of our board members and Barb went to a conference and heard about these giving days that were going on in fall of 2011. And they came back, and they said, "We need to do this. This would be great for Lincoln. We need to try this. And the Community Foundation is in the perfect position to do it." And so, we planned that first one in about six months from idea to running the Giving Day in May of 2012. And we didn't know what to expect. We had, I think, 130-some nonprofits participate. We raised \$1.3 million. And it was great. The community stepped up.

The nonprofits that sat on the sideline and waited to see what was going to happen here, really came in, in the next year. And we thought, "Let's continue this." And now, we're on our 12th one. And it feels like it hasn't been 12 years. It's fresh every year and it's fun every year. It really has become an event in May for our community. And so, people do look forward to it, donors look forward to it. Anecdotally, we hear that donors learn about new nonprofits, which is one of the goals of the giving day, is we want to raise awareness of all of our nonprofit community, and we want to introduce donors to new nonprofits that are working in town and the causes that they care about. It's been that connector again, for the Community Foundation in a different way, connecting donors to those causes they care about.

Kelley Peterson:

Twelve years. I love those stories where you think, "Okay. In 2011, this is in six months, this great idea." And then 12 years later, who would've ever imagined the huge success that Give to Lincoln Day has had

and will continue to have? So how is Give to Lincoln Day matchlessly different from giving days in other communities? What's the big deal?

Michelle Paulk:

I think one of the things we did right out the gate was we kept it simple. We invite all the nonprofits in, but we do have a match. So, the Community Foundation and our sponsors throughout the community come together and create a match for this event, and it's a proportional match. So, every dollar a donor gives is increased by that challenge match, that proportional match that we have. In 2011, we started with a \$200,000 challenge match. This year, we have a \$500,000 challenge match. I think that's one of those sparks, too, for Give to Lincoln Day. The match really brings in donors. They understand this is a great opportunity to support the causes they care about. And then their nonprofit is going to get a little piece of that match dollars to increase every donation.

And so, some giving days have gone away from a match depending on the size of their giving day, but there are some really successful giving days across the country and in the state of Nebraska. North Texas has a really big one. Minnesota has a statewide giving day that's been going on longer than ours. And I also always like to give a shout-out to Lexington, Nebraska, because they had the first giving day in Nebraska. They beat us out the gate. And we talked to them before we launched Give to Lincoln Day and got some insights from them as well on how they were running theirs. And I know there are several now across the state of Nebraska. Grand Island has one, Hastings, Phelps County, Fremont area, and even my hometown, my home county of Thayer County has a giving day as well. So, it's really cool to see these launch across the state because they're great ways for donors to participate in their community and give back.

Kelley Peterson:

I agree that the... First of all, yay, Lexington, what a great piece of history that is and that it just is this ripple effect of helping communities clear across the state is so neat, just so great. In addition to Give to Lincoln Day, what other ways do you connect donor generosity to local needs for people today and for generations to come?

Michelle Paulk:

That really comes back to the flexibility of a community foundation. And because we're here forever in perpetuity, we have lots of different ways for donors to plug in and practice their philanthropy through the Community Foundation. So, we have some donors who are interested in specific nonprofits, and they might give an estate gift to support 5, 10 nonprofits in perpetuity with an endowed fund. We have other donors who are interested in maybe children and youth or animals or basic needs in our community. They want to leave that decision up to the Community Foundation. And so, they might create an endowment for what they're passionate about and leave it to our board of directors to decide what the most pressing need in the community is.

And then we have other donors who really recognize that the needs and opportunities in our community evolve over time. And so those donors have left unrestricted funds to the Community Foundation. So, the board of directors really has discretion then to say, "Here are the things in our community that we need to work on, and then our dollars would be most impactful in these areas." And so those donors who had that foresight to put those dollars in unrestricted funds, we can respond to evolving and emerging needs and opportunities in the community with those. And then really, Give to Lincoln Day is anybody can be a philanthropist. So, anybody can use the Community Foundation for their philanthropy, whether it's \$10 or \$10 million and everywhere in between.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that saying, "anyone and everyone can be a philanthropist," because it's true. And Give to Lincoln Day is one of my favorite ways to do that because I usually, "Okay. I'm going to have a top ten list. I'm going to have a top 20 list. And I get to give to all of them and make a difference." And that's so fun for me. It's like Christmastime and getting the toy catalog in the mail, so you can go on the website and pick and choose which, "Oh, I forgot about that one. And I'm going to make them on my list and mark them up and figure that out." It's super fun to do that and have been doing that. I know that Give to Lincoln Day is probably one of your favorites, but do you have another favorite or a story to tell about something that touches you in the heart about what Lincoln Community Foundation has done?

Michelle Paulk:

Part of it is the Prosper Lincoln Community Agenda. That has been really, really interesting to see that evolve and come out of the Lincoln Vital Signs Report and be this community-wide, "Here are the things that we need to work on and to make our community even better than it already is." Recently, I've had the opportunity to be involved with our Community Builder Coalition, and that's a group of individuals who are working for many different agencies in Lincoln, and they are community builders or organizers in neighborhoods. So, they're working with residents, raising up resident voice, and really bringing that grassroots change up to the forefront in our community. And so that's been a really inspiring component of our work and of Prosper Lincoln's work to be involved with, to really raise up the voices of our neighbors.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow. I love that initiative. And that may be one that I'm new to hearing. Prosper Lincoln Vital Signs, you've mentioned some of those as well, are such great bodies of work that activate community members to have their voices be heard. It's such good work. So, all of this has happened already and will continue, but what's on the horizon for Lincoln Community Foundation?

Michelle Paulk:

Kelley, we just did a new strategic plan. We have a new leadership. As of about a year ago, Al Gorynski is our new president. And we really looked at it was a good time to look at our strategic initiatives, our strategic plan, and think through where we're heading for the next three years. It involved a new tagline, a new logo, a new mission statement. And so, I think our new mission statement really embodies what we're doing here. It's inspiring the community to give, act and lead. Very simple, but really gets to the heart at what the community foundation does and why we exist in Lincoln.

Kelley Peterson:

Michelle, you just said all the words that speak to my love language, all of that marketing stuff. What? New tagline, new logos, new strategy, those are all just music to my ears. Because when you have an opportunity to have that interjection of new energy within your organization, it just instantly changes the trajectory of where you're going to go. Of course, that new leadership and all of the leaders surrounding that strategic plan for the next three years is all great and phenomenal. I think what's fun too is that I used to be in strategic conversations, and they would say, "This is our strategic plan for the next ten years."

And then after a little while, it was like, "No, this is our strategic plan for the next five years." And I love it that we're at, "You know what? No one has a crystal ball and we shouldn't let this thing live on the shelf for ten years. We need to keep this active," which is a word you just used about the foundation,

"keep this active and going and address the needs that are happening now with a mind for the future." And I love that the Lincoln Community Foundation does that and is going to have a great, great future with all of that on the horizon. So, Michelle, let's switch our focus to talk about you for a bit. How did you fall into and fall in love with nonprofit work?

Michelle Paulk:

Well, I have a degree in history of all things, and so I am trained for anything and yet nothing specific. I thought about being a teacher, moved up to Lincoln to get teaching certificate, decided that was not for me, couldn't picture myself in the classroom. I set out to get a job and I applied at Martin Luther Home Society, which had their headquarters here in Lincoln at the time. I got hired there, luckily. My other prospects were as a receptionist at a veterinary clinic and a job at a library. So that's why I say I fell into nonprofit work. Martin Luther Homes looked like the best prospect at the time, and it was. I was an administrative assistant for several years. I learned databases and moved up, worked in the foundation there, and just loved the work. So, Martin Luther Homes then became Mosaic, which has a large presence in Nebraska, and they work with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Getting to interact with the clients we served and the employees we had. It was just fulfilling.

You went home every day feeling like you made a difference and feeling really good about the work you were doing. From there, I moved to the Foundation for Lincoln Public Schools. Public education has always been a passion of mine, and that's where I met Barb Bartle. She was the president there at the time. Barb was really a mentor and took a chance on a young person who had some database skills and needed some more experience. We did some wonderful things there. And then this opportunity at the Community Foundation came up and I was really excited to... Barb had come into more of a reactive, a little bit sleepy organization that the Community Foundation was in 2010 and really had a vision for it to be a community leader and an active participant in our community. I loved that excitement. And I had lived in Lincoln for a long time by then, and so I love this community and it was just a great fit. Again, I still go home every day feeling like I've done some good in the world at my job, and that's just the best feeling ever.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, you mentioned Barb, and I don't think about Barb Bartle without thinking visionary. I think it's just synonymous with that name. So, I love that. You also mentioned a four-letter word that is interwoven throughout nonprofit and for-profit business and you know so much about it, and that word is 'data.' So, can you help the listeners understand how important data is in your work at the Lincoln Community Foundation?

Michelle Paulk:

Yeah. We have a fairly significant database, and really, that's how we connect people to the causes, to the things they care about. And even at a nonprofit like Martin Luther Homes, it's the way we communicate to those donors. We keep track of what they're interested in and their email address, and we make sure we communicate with them. And so good data allows you to communicate with those folks who care about your mission, in our case, who care about Lincoln. And it allows us then to tell them stories, so tell them what's happening in the community, and give them opportunities to give.

Because donors do want opportunities. They want the opportunity to give and support the things they care about, and data helps us do that. And so, it's a really important component of what we do at the Community Foundation. It's really important to us that we have good data and do it right and do it well. And it's a customer service component too, of making sure that we're tracking all of that data in the best

way, in the most efficient way, so that we can talk to those donors and raise more dollars for our community.

Kelley Peterson:

I get in the visual, in the words so much, and sometimes forget to give a hats off to the data that we need in order to communicate, just as you said, too. There's a lot of data too, that goes into our cities to see what the needs are out there. And so, one of my favorite projects too is Vital Signs, and that is completely data-driven in all regards to the community to say, "Hey, these are some things that we're great at, and here are some things that we have challenges with and that we need to work on." And so, I always liked that project that the Lincoln Community Foundation supports too, to use data. As a nonprofit leader, what advice do you have for those who want to make a difference in the world?

Michelle Paulk:

That's a tough one. I really think just show up, work hard, and do something that's fulfilling. When you find your passion, it's not work. Most days, it can be very fulfilling, especially working in the nonprofit sector. But it is hard work and there are some ups and downs as well. But just showing up and showing up for our community is really, I think, the key.

Kelley Peterson:

I think that is key: showing up. And I appreciate you showing up today for our listeners to hear more about the Lincoln Community Foundation and Give to Lincoln Day as well. But as I've mentioned, I am in love with words. And so, Michelle, could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Michelle Paulk:

I talk to my kids sometimes about being a lifelong learner. I like to read. I always want to be learning and evolving and doing new things. I think about hustle. We want to get things done and work to our capacity and what we can do. And just never stop learning and evolving. The community and the world are constantly evolving. And to keep up, I think we have to be lifelong learners.

Kelley Peterson:

I'm going to write the word hustle really big and tape it above my computer screen because that is a brilliant word. And you're so right, just constantly learning and being open-minded and bringing the things in and hopefully sharing some of those things out that changed the world. So, I have to ask, you talked about learning, do you read for enjoyment, too? Are you just a reader reader?

Michelle Paulk:

A little bit of both, yeah. Fiction, non-fiction, a podcast every once in a while. Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

I hope you do podcasts too, because this is going to be a good one. So, Michelle, for our listeners who would like to learn more about the foundation and Give to Lincoln Day, how can they find out more?

Michelle Paulk:

We've got a website, very simple, givetolincoln.com. Go there to learn more about how the Giving Day works and all the nonprofits that are registered. But then there's just good information about how it works, what types of donations are accepted on Give to Lincoln Day, and lots of information there. And then I would encourage folks too to check out our website, lcf.org, and the ways that, again, anyone can be a philanthropist through the community foundation. And so, lots of information on lcf.org to about what we're doing and just the ways that you can give.

Kelley Peterson:

So great. And just to make this podcast a little more evergreen, that Give to Lincoln Day always happens in May, right? So, anyone that comes across this podcast can get those specific dates at any time by going to that great website and learning about the nonprofits that are involved for sure. So, as we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

Michelle Paulk:

I think it's that anyone can have an impact in their community. I talked about the \$10 donor to the \$10 million donor, and any of those, any donor can fit into the Community Foundation. But I also touched on the community builders and the work with residents and neighbors in our community. It's time, talent, and treasure. And there's all kinds of different ways that you can give back to your community, and I hope that the community foundation is able to help and convene and facilitate any of that that's happening.

Kelley Peterson:

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

Michelle Paulk:

Thank you, Kelley.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from, visit KidGlov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.