

Agency for Change Podcast: Denise Gehringer, Executive Director at Sheltering Tree

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Denise Gehringer

Make a consistent and relentless effort to make a positive impact in the world and the lives of others.

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

Hello 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 Denise Gehringer, Executive Director at Sheltering Tree. Incorporated. Sheltering Tree is dedicated to filling the critical gap in affordable, safe and community-centered apartment living for adults with developmental disabilities. Denise brings a wealth of knowledge and passion to the table as she leads Sheltering Tree and their mission to provide hope, housing security, and a sense of belonging to those they serve. Denise, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you're having.

Denise Gehringer

Thank you for having me, Lisa, and thank you for your interest in affordable housing for adults with developmental disabilities.

Lisa Bowen

Well, let's just start out, Denise, with you telling us a little bit about Sheltering Tree.

Denise Gehringer

Wonderful. Sheltering Tree is safe, affordable, consumer-controlled and community-centered apartment living for adults with developmental disabilities. We are apartments that have amenities that are attractive to the folks that we serve and it's a very unique concept. It is very different than any other living opportunities you'll see in our area and really across the country. There are very few, I believe, there are 18 similar types of living opportunities in the whole United States.

Lisa Bowen

Wow, that's amazing. So how did you come to focus on providing affordable housing for adults, specifically those with developmental disabilities? Was there research? Was it a personal need that you saw to fill a gap?

Denise Gehringer

Guest

02:09

Yeah, well, actually the concept of Sheltering Tree came from some parents, our founders, Shirley and Tom McNally. They have a son with Down syndrome and like most innovative programming or innovative solutions, there was a problem and they were looking to solve it. And the problem really was where will their family member live when they're no longer able to continue living with their parents? In a place where they could live independently, but not alone, a place where their son could pursue his own interests and really have agency over his own life, which is really a really important piece, because oftentimes people with developmental disabilities, as they work through programs and other residential supports, lose that autonomy, and all of us would like to be able to make choices about our own lives. And then, of course, most importantly, they really wanted him to have a place where he could be part of a community and experience meaningful belonging and really have connections with others.

Lisa Bowen

Gosh, I cannot even imagine the sense of peace of mind that brings to those parents. I never thought about it really from the parents' perspective I was thinking about the residents but that makes a whole lot of sense. What a great need you felt.

Denise Gehringer

Well, I can tell you and this may sound overly dramatic, but it is the truth and many people who have family members with developmental disabilities that are diagnosed at birth. One of the things that really does cross our mind at the time of having our family member is can I outlive this person? Will I be able to be here and be the provider and caregiver for this person? Because you know that maybe there's no one out there who will support them in the way that you can or in the way that you think that they should be supported, and so it's a really heavy weight on family shoulders, parent's shoulders, to try and outlive their family member so they can be there for them for their entire life. And you don't usually hear that as somebody's joyful birth story.

Lisa Bowen

Yeah, and not only outlive but, oh my gosh, who will take this burden on if I don't outlive? So let's talk about your personal path. What led you to sheltering Tree?

Denise Gehringer

So I'm also a parent of a son who has Down syndrome, so this work is very vocational. For me. It's meaningful. I do understand firsthand the concerns about ensuring that my son and others who have his

similar support needs have a place to call their own where they can function to their best ability, they're able to make those choices about their own lives but also be safe and be able to afford life expenses on their fixed incomes. And so, when the time comes and my husband and I are not able to be his primary support system, that he will have a system in place that provides him the supports he needs so he can live a meaningful and pleasant life.

Lisa Bowen

And as someone experiencing this personally, I bet it makes you a stronger leader of the organization and just fuels your passion even more.

Denise Gehringer

It's definitely a passion project and there's a tremendous need, and so I'm most definitely here, because I have skin in the game but also have a heart for the work.

Lisa Bowen

Yeah, so you talk about the apartments in your communities being intentionally designed. Can you talk a little bit about what that looks like and why it's so important to your residents?

Denise Gehringer

You bet. So a lot of thought and intentional design is put into the planning of our tree locations. We currently have three. We have a location in Bellevue, the location in the Benson area and then our most our newest location is in Papillion. So we have 3 campuses in 4 buildings and we have a 4th construction project, a development project slated to break ground early this summer. That will be in the Elkhorn area. That will have additional 2 apartment buildings, but the design features include materials that have sound absorbing qualities.

Many of our tenants tenants that are on the autism spectrum or anyone who has sound sensitivities really have difficulty feeling comfortable in a community space. There's a lot of sounds coming at them from a lot of different directions. So we use materials that are sound absorbing, some that are specific for that and some that just add for that. We've selected durable surfaces that are easy to clean and maintain for our tenants. All of the apartment units are designed so that tenants can age in place and it can accommodate as many of the tenants we serve. Many of them thrive on routine and consistency and they're very adverse to change, and so we want them to be able to stay in their apartment for as long as they choose to and are able to, and so all of our apartments are designed with those thoughts in mind.

Lisa Bowen

Another thing you really talk about is fostering community, a sense of community and belonging. Can you talk a little bit about what you do to make sure that that's part of the living experience?

Denise Gehringer

Yeah, for adult developmental disabilities across the board, one of the prevailing issues is profound loneliness and that comes from a lot of things. It comes from maybe not having social skills to make connections, it comes from having lack of transportation. It comes from, maybe, lack of employment and other opportunities. And so many, many people, many, many adults with developmental disabilities really do face an alarming amount of loneliness and we all learn through the pandemic how damaging that is, how damaging that kind of isolation can be for folks. It's just something that people with developmental disabilities have been experiencing for many, many years. Prior to that experience we all went through with COVID, but now many more people have a kind of a touch point or something to understand and compare more. But sheltering tree offers a vibrant activity calendar. It's managed by an activities director. Most of the activities are inspired by tenants interests and they range anywhere from simple events like thirsty Thursdays, where tenants can gather together for a fun drink and conversation and just some camaraderie, to really more elaborate happenings like a gardening club where our tenants grow their own vegetables, they harvest them, they bring them from the farm to table where they explore recipes as a group and other ways to utilize some of the produce that they've gardened. So we just do everything you can imagine, inspired by what our tenants would like to do, and although they are activities, they are also opportunities for connection, which is really the primary focus.

Lisa Bowen

That's great. What are some of the favorite events?

Denise Gehringer

Oh, holy cow, we just asked that question last night. Karaoke, they like really. It just really it spans across the board. As far as interests lie, we've got some friends who are anxious to have a fishing club started up. Everybody always likes things where you gather and there's prizes, bingo. We have a sewing club that gets together and sews things and make really practical, useful projects like odor eaters or cell phone covers, things that are really practical. So really it ranges from you know it widely ranges, just as widely as anyone's interest might range.

Lisa Bowen

So there's obviously a need for this. There's a waiting list and you're on, you know you're building a new location, but can you talk about some of the challenges that developmental disabilities, people with disabilities, face when they're looking for affordable housing and how you really help address them?

Denise Gehringer

Right. So we have to start by saying that the data tells that in Nebraska there's 46,000 people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As the silent generation and the baby boomer generation ages and passes on, there will be a significant loss of caregivers, and we are just not prepared for the housing crisis that is ahead, let alone the one that exists currently. Nationally, we know that 7.3 million people live with intellectual and developmental disabilities. 83% of them do not receive publicly funded residential supports, so that's like 6,000,000 people that have no supports and are depending on their very aging caregivers. So let's start about the just the mass number of people that need these housing supports.

Really, to compound matters, in Nebraska or in the metro area, One bedroom apartment is about I don't know \$1,100 a month for rent and for a personal income who has a monthly disbursement of maybe their social security or supplemental security income, their SSI of \$960.

They can't even afford rent, let alone food and whatever other things they may need just to survive, because the rent is so high and unaffordable.

And so places like Sheltering Tree accepts SSI's housing and that allows for the tenant to pay a third of their income as their rent and that leaves two thirds of their income, of two thirds of that \$960, as funds that they can use for food or clothing, and some really lean and meager funds for maybe some sort of entertainment. When you break all these numbers down, we know that in the metro area there's about oh, 10,800 adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities that are living with caregivers over the age 60. You know, if you look at the inventory and the numbers, they are very far from each other. So, aside from they're not actually being physical places, our friends can't afford rent. And then of course we think about the fact that, let's say, someone can find an affordable place you know allows for subsidized housing. They're able to use some sort of a subsidy. Then they're very isolated. So there's a lot of complications involved and we at Sheltering Tree are really trying to address those and solve those.

Lisa Bowen

Amazing. How do you think we got to this crisis point? Is it a lack of awareness? And then you know, my next question is what can people do to help?

Denise Gehringer

Right, I think people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are probably one of the most marginalized minority groups in our country. People, all of us seem to think that, oh, their families take care of them. There's someone that takes care of the situation and some of the information I just shared with you. I hope by now a person could see that well, that's only if their family outlives them. Not everyone has siblings. Sometimes it's difficult for siblings, because they live in different states, to take on their responsibility of supporting their sibling.

You have to remember, the person with intellectual and developmental disabilities may not like to be told or, you know, sent somewhere. They may have lives that they want to keep or they have their own ideas, and well, they should. And so I think, as our friends with developmental disabilities were seen as people with potential and the education system is now educating them as people with potential, and you see so many of our friends with developmental disabilities working part time jobs and being really contributing members of our community, we are finding ourselves in a place where we're just caught off guard. And here we are. We're not quite there yet, but as we move into the next 10, 15 years, we're going to have pretty substantial crisis on our hands.

Lisa Bowen

So you talked about a couple of the misconceptions. You know that their family takes care of them. You know they don't have you know these unique needs. What are some of the other common misconceptions about these individuals that you're serving.

Denise Gehringer

Yeah, you know, there's the old myth that a person with an intellectual or developmental disability has a cap to what they can learn or they're stunted at a particular developmental age. It's just simply not true. Just like all of us, people with developmental disabilities have strengths and weaknesses. They may have a few more support needs than you or I, but with proper support they can be contributing members of the community and they want to be contributing members of community and they have the same desires as any of us do. They want to feel like they have meaningful work. They want to be a part of something, just like everyone else.

I would say it's that phrase that everyone is more like than different, and that you know where you or I might ask for support, I don't know, when we're buying a house, we might ask our parent to give us their opinion, or when we're buying a car, we might ask a brother who's got expertise in that area. We all reach out to our circle of people for support. Just somehow for people with developmental disabilities it's seen as much, much needier, and it's really not. They just need a support system to help them through their daily lives as well.

Lisa Bowen

Can you tell us a little bit about how you showcase the talents and capabilities of people with developmental disabilities to promote that awareness and advocacy for the group?

Denise Gehringer

For what we do at Sheltering Tree, we really try to highlight people just living their lives just like others, coming and going, you know, from their homes, going to part-time jobs, going to activities, enjoying the company of others, sharing in commonalities with friends. Some folks like a sports team, so you'll see them participating in something surrounding a sports team. Some of our tenants have interest in musicals, so you'll see them finding that person and enjoying musicals together. We really just think it's very important that the world in general sees people with developmental disabilities as people who have same interests. They just may need to access things differently. Really for our friends with developmental disabilities, it's about accessing things that you or I already have easy access to, they just need an access point. They want to do the same things. You know that we do have the same common interests and so forth. It's had hurdles to get there, so it's about having an access point.

Lisa Bowen

Do you partner with local employers that are maybe near your communities to help connect your residents with work?

Denise Gehringer

We don't, because there are many wonderful provider agencies that do that work. We are laser focused on housing, and it really is something that we solely focus on, and that's necessary. This housing business is not for the faint of heart, and so we really know that having a safe, secure place to live is the foundation of anyone being able to then branch out, get employed, live their lives and so forth. So most all of our tenants work with a provider agency that does help them with supported employment or job

carving or any type of employment opportunities. It's not what we do, but everyone here works with an organization that helps them with those things.

Lisa Bowen

So what's next on the horizon for Sheltering Tree? You mentioned that new location coming up. Is there anything else you want to share?

Denise Gehringer

Well, for the organization strategically building that location in Elkhorn. We really hope to look at a location somewhere in the South Omaha area and then also somewhere in the Northeast Omaha area. We do have our Benson location. That's a little bit farther north. It's not quite northwest, but it's a 72nd in Ames. Because we know that people, just like you or I, want to live in the areas where they grow up, the areas where they're familiar, the areas where their churches are, the areas where they know folks. When they go in the grocery store, people say hello to them because they remember them from school or so on and so forth, and so we think there needs to be a Sheltering Tree in every area of the city so that every area has that place where people who have just a little bit more support needs can live their lives but still be close to all the things that they know and love.

On the shorter range, we have a golf tournament coming up. Of course, we are a nonprofit, so we sing for our supper and we also are raising capital dollars to build that location in Elkhorn, but our golf tournament is going to be held on May 20th. There is information on our social media sites as well as our website. Of course, we'd love any golfers who like to raise funds for nonprofits to join us and, of course, in the fall, we always have a Gala. This year it's on lucky Friday, the 13th, so everyone should mark them on their calendars and come out and support the work that we do there.

Lisa Bowen

Wonderful. So, beyond supporting that Gala and that golf tournament, if people want to find out more about your mission and support it, are there other things they can do? And also, can you tell us where we can find out more about you?

Denise Gehringer

Yes, 100%. We really love when people join us in our mission, especially volunteers. Oftentimes we have volunteers really get involved with our activities program. We have several agencies or organizations, I should say, or businesses that come in and host a Thirsty Thursday event. So they'll come in and they'll blend up some pina coladas and serve as the bartenders and really have a good time with our tenants. Some that will lead bingo games, some that share their talents. We have partnerships with local garden clubs who come in and help with some of the establishing of the gardens. We've got a Papillion garden club who's going to help us with some indoor potting plants that is coming up. So anytime anyone has a talent, like I said, we've got some friends who want to create a fishing club. So if there's some friends or if there's some community members who would like to participate and support our friends fishing, any talent you might have there's an activity that we could design around it and so volunteers oftentimes participate those ways and we really do appreciate that.

You can go to our website. At our website, there's a contact form you can indicate your interest to volunteer there. If you are someone who is looking to be on our waiting list. Right now we maintain a waiting list of over 200 folks waiting for this type of independent living. But you have to get on the waiting list in order to be considered. So if you're interested in the waiting list, you can inquire there. There's, of course, more information about the organization, about the apartments. We also have listed on our website what we call the road to residency, and many of our potential or future tenants want to know a little bit more about what does the process look like, and so it's listed there, which I think is very helpful for families so they can kind of understand the order of how things go once you're on the waiting list.

Lisa Bowen

Awesome. Lots of ways to share your time, talent and treasure. At KidGlov, we love a good quote and I'm sure you have some wonderful quotes that inspire you on a daily basis. Is there one that really stands out that you can share with us today?

Denise Gehringer

Well, I tell you, there's so many and I really struggled with trying to put a pin on what I wanted to highlight.

But what I thought I might share is that I recently went through an impactful leadership training where we had to design our own personal mission, and this is, I think, something that I live by, and it's really striving to make a consistent and relentless effort to make a positive impact in the world and the lives of others. It's very much along the lines of the do what you can however you can whenever you can, and I don't even know exactly what that quote is, but along those lines, and I think that really sums up a lot of what makes Sheltering Tree work. We have some volunteers who come in and do just a little bit of an activity, but it makes a tremendous impact on our tenants. And the same thing with donations. Some folks donate \$20, but that can be paint supplies for an activity, and so whatever you can do, however you can do it in whatever way you can do, it can really be like altering for some folks.

Lisa Bowen

I'm sure there are a million stories within the walls of your communities that inspire you and others on a daily basis. Do you have, can you share, one particular story that sticks with you? That kind of answers your why you do what you do.

Denise Gehringer

Yes, well, and this story is not terribly unique because it's everyone's story that lives here.

But we do have a tenant who recently lost a parent, and so it has become even more aware to the surviving parent that is part of the silent generation that there may be no place for this tenant to go.

And so this tenant was on our waiting list for a while. They moved in in December. You can just see a tremendous weight being lifted off of both the tenant, who doesn't have to feel so uncertain about what

happens. You know, having just had that experience of losing a parent, being very much in the forefront of her mind that she may lose the other parent sometime soon, and just that fear of where will I go, what will I do, where will I be really has lifted for her. And to see the surviving parent's just have that weight lifted off of her shoulders, knowing that her family member has a safe, secure place where they were people here really care about her family member's well being I can just see this tremendous weight lifted from them and, like I said, that is that is not an uncommon story, but just one that's, you know, more recently in the forefront of my mind.

Lisa Bowen

Wonderful. You shared so much great information today about Sheltering Tree and your mission. What is the most important thing you want our listeners to remember today as we wrap things up?

Denise Gehringer

Well, so many important things, but I hope your listeners will think about anything that they're involved in their place where they're employed, social activity that they do churches, they go to anything and think about how they see people with developmental disabilities being included there, because it really is about access for our tenants, for people with developmental disabilities, intellectual disabilities. They have those same wants, they have those same desires to be included. They have those same wishes for community as their typical peers do. They just don't always have access. So it's really about who is making a path for them to be included in the same things that we all have very easy access to. And so that's what I hope people take away from this conversation is you know we're doing how we are focused on housing, which one of us doesn't you know need, have that need to have that safe, secure place to live. So the hope streams, desires, needs very much the same, as all of us just have to go about achieving them some slightly different way.

Lisa Bowen

Well, that is such a such an important reminder and something that's actionable for each and every one of us, so thank you for sharing that as we finish up today. I just want to thank you for taking the time to be with us and for sharing more about your mission and the great work you're doing at Sheltering Tree. I hope this helps create awareness of your cause and your efforts and the need that's going to continue to grow.

Denise Gehringer

Well, thank you for taking some time to shine a light on what we're doing and on the tremendous need for housing for adults with developmental disabilities.

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 KIDGLOV dot 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.