

Agency for Change Podcast: Macala Carter, Executive Director, Center for People

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Macala Carter: 0:00

What difference will you make today?

Announcer: 0:06

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: 0:34

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome back to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today we are honored to welcome back to the podcast Macala Carter, Executive Director at Center for People. So Macala is here today to share valuable insights into the organization's evolution and the challenges and triumphs it has faced since her last visit. She'll also talk more about their unwavering commitment to building connections that break those cycles of poverty while empowering the people of Lincoln, Nebraska, to achieve lasting economic independence. Macala, I am always eager to talk with you. Welcome back to the podcast.

Macala Carter: 1:16

Thank you, Lyn, it is a thrill being here. Thank you for the invitation.

Lyn Wineman: 1:20

Absolutely. You know, I always love talking with you. You have such great energy and the last time we had you on the podcast, that episode aired in December of 2022. I know a lot has changed, but for people who maybe aren't familiar with Center for People or didn't listen to that first episode, can you just tell us more about the organization and the vital role it plays in the community?

Macala Carter: 1:48

Yeah, absolutely Well. I'm thrilled to be back, largely because I'd only been in my role as Executive Director and actually in the nonprofit space for only four months when I did that.

Lyn Wineman: 1:59

I forgot how new you were to the position.

Macala Carter: 2:01

I was so new.

Lyn Wineman: 2:03

Yeah, yeah, but I know you had a huge vision at that point. I also know so many pieces have really started to fall into place since then too.

Macala Carter: 2:15

They really have. And you're right, we did have a really large vision and two years later so in July it'll be two years that I have been in and a lot of them have come to fruition, which is really exciting to see. But if we look at the core of what we do at the Center for People, we help low-income families by providing basic needs and educational opportunities needed to become financially independent. So that really is our mission and we do it in a lot of different ways. And so, as we look at the Center for People as a mainstay here in Lincoln, if we look at those basic needs, we provide upwards of 700 kids every month with diapers. We provide over 2,300 unduplicated families every single week. So put that into perspective 2,300 unduplicated families every week with food options where they get to shop, our people's pantry.

Macala Carter: 3:09

And then we talk about that economic independence and we understand, at the core of that really is that education, that upskilling, that training component. Eighty percent of our population that we serve are self-identified as employed. They're just underemployed, and so we offer those opportunities for people to upskill, to train through our educational programs. And then new this year really is that career placement piece, so that it's kind of a trifecta, of really filling our mission statement. Our mission hasn't changed. It's the same mission that has always been in place for the last 21 years. We just feel like we're fully living it now, today.

Lyn Wineman: 3:49

Yeah, I love so much of that, Macala. Actually, I love all of it. I love how you are innovating as an organization and you know, I think sometimes people might think of an organization that does food distribution, that does health equity, and they might think they know what that means. But I'm curious how are you innovating in those programs and what does that innovation mean to the people of Lincoln?

Macala Carter: 4:19

Yeah, so on April 1st, we are now one month in. We first we opened our People's Pantry and when I arrived here we provided services, food distribution services in a really kind and compassionate way

with the environment that we had in front of us. But what we wanted is we really wanted a model where it was a grocery store model.

Macala Carter: 4:44

And so our board had shared that from the beginning, that this was really a vision that they had had. They wanted us to have a grocery store model and we went to Heart Ministry up in Omaha and were able to witness their operation, learn from them, see what they do, and then the magnificent work that they were doing with the Omaha community and we thought we can duplicate, we can replicate that exact experience so that we bring dignity and respect into our experience, and so on April 1st we opened up our People's Pantry, and it is a grocery store model.

Macala Carter: 5:17

That's just one component of it, though we also have a food equity kitchen, and so when we think about our community coming to shop with us, a lot of folks we talk about spaghetti squash often, so a lot of individuals don't either know what the vegetable is or they don't know how to prepare it. So we had an existing warming kitchen in our space that was being unused, and so we were able to really create an inviting space where we now can prepare foods, teach people how to prepare nutritious, economical, on a budget meals with the food we're providing in our pantry and be able to have demonstrations for individuals. So our food equity program really does bring in the pantry and then the education space from that cooking, and then to add to that is we have a greenhouse now that we have just opened up.

Lyn Wineman: 6:10

I love that so much.

Macala Carter: 6:12

I know, so do we, and so what we're able to do is a lot of different things. With our greenhouse, we're able to have our community grow from home. So we have bucket gardens for families to be able to take tomato plants home or pepper plants home that are already started, and they're able to take them home and grow them on their stoop, their patio, their porch, wherever it is. We have raised beds here for our ELL program, our English language learning families to be able to grow on site, so they're able to be pseudo farmers from our base, and then we're able to take those plants and harvest them and bring them into our kitchen and continue to teach around that food equity and nutrition component.

Lyn Wineman: 6:54

Oh, I love that. How many times have I said I love that in this episode already? And we're just getting started. And the spaghetti squash, such a great example. I have a spaghetti squash on my counter right now, something that I love to make. But if you just received a spaghetti squash and you didn't know what it was and you didn't know how to prepare it and all those things, that would be frustrating on its own and it could even be wasteful in that. You're just looking at the spaghetti squash going do I peel it? Do I roast it? Do I slice it up? What do I do with it? I put mine in the microwave, quite frankly.

Macala Carter: 7:36

But Lyn I love what you're saying there is because and food is such a connector and brings cultures together, it brings communities together, it allows people to have communion together in terms of how they're coming together, and we also want to from our kitchen. We want to learn from people like you. How do you cook your spaghetti squash? Share with us, because we're going to then integrate all those things too. So there's lots of iterations of what's to come. All right? .

Lyn Wineman: 8:03

Well, just since you asked, I microwave it, I use ground turkey and I put pesto on it. It's kind of a low carb pasta dish that I like to eat for lunch. So there you go. So, Macala, you've talked about so many innovations, so many visions. Are there other notable developments or achievements from the Center that you'd like to share since the last time we talked?

Macala Carter: 8:34

Yeah absolutely, we have a very large 80,000 square foot building here in the north side of Lincoln.

Lyn Wineman: 8:39

That is a big building.

Macala Carter: 8:41

It is a very large building, a lot of warehouse space, and in the past we were really in the back of the building and over the last two years well actually basically since August we were able to move to the front of the building. With that came greater visibility. We are able to gain greater accessibility for our community members. The bus stop is 100 feet from our front door. People can come to us if they need food, if they need educational opportunities, and really we designed it for at least a two year runway. So we had classrooms kind of. We had modular classrooms put up in the new space and computer labs and we really thought we had two years to to grow out of it. It's kind of that model you know, build it and they will come. And we are already at capacity in that space and so we're really, really excited.

Macala Carter: 9:35

Through a grant we're able to continue to build out our workforce development.

Macala Carter: 9:39

So when we talk about that cycle of poverty and breaking it again, we feel very strongly that that comes through educational opportunities and then career advancement, and so we're going to be under construction this summer and building another computer lab.

Macala Carter: 9:56

We're going to be able to have our ELL program and classroom expanded, and then our opening doors program, which is our reentry program. We're going to be able to also grow that out from a space aspect, and so we're just thrilled about those pieces of the puzzle. Also, we have launched our talent

marketplace, which is our career alignment with employers of choice here in Lincoln, with our employees of choice, so as we train and upskill people, we're getting them into those jobs. We're getting them into those positions where they have advancement opportunities, where they're earning not only a livable wage but hopefully down the road, a thriving wage. So we're really excited about that. We've brought on in-house clarity, which is a reporting system that is shared among other nonprofits here in Lincoln so that we have that cross-reference to better serve our community. And we've grown our community partnerships. Since I've been here for the last two years we have about 15 community partners that are coming into our space every single month complementing our services and providing additional services for our community.

Lyn Wineman: 11:04

You know that is something I love about nonprofits how collaborative you are. You already mentioned that you visited the Heart Ministry in Omaha to really learn best practices from them about the pantry program, but then these other partnerships that you're making. I think that's great because there's enough work to do. We don't need to duplicate or compete with one another, but partnering together is such a great concept. So you know how much, as a marketer, I love stories and I think stories really help people remember about the message and the work that you're doing. Could you share any recent stories or examples that showcase these services at work?

Macala Carter: 11:51

Well, I have several, and so I'm constantly learning new ones or I'm witnessing them, which is really special, and there's a couple I'd love to share with you, absolutely. Let's start with Isabella. So Isabella is one of our POP graduates, so that's People Obtaining Prosperity Scholarship Program. We offer a scholarship program to SEC where people can earn their associate's degree without a cost to them, and so it's a really remarkable program. We've been doing it now for 11 years strong, so we have lots of different case studies around it and really amazing successes around it. But Isabella is one of our most recent.

Macala Carter: 12:29

Isabella is a single mother of four. She's a first generation college student, and she graduated this last December with a GPA of 3.8. She secured a job with Lincoln Regional Center, and here's really the neat thing about Isabella's story is we're talking about generational poverty. Oftentimes, you know, sometimes there's that situational, but oftentimes the folks that we're serving that generational poverty is truly ingrained and embedded. And so Isabella, as a new graduate, her oldest child is graduated from high school this spring. Oh, that's amazing, and he's already looking at where he's going to college. Mom modeled the way. Mom showed him how to do that, and so, again, what we're doing is we're impacting generations, unbeknownst to us, unbeknownst to, but they're. They're modeling the way, they're leading the way, and so Isabella was a really, really neat story that recently was shared with me. I do like to highlight our ELL program, which is our English language learning program, and I thought these numbers were fascinating, and so they're not necessarily an individual, but it's

Macala Carter: 13:53

So in April alone we had 71 unique learners in our ELL program. Of those 71, they represent five different continents, 14 different countries, and here's where I was blown away, they speak 18 different languages. All in one class.

Lyn Wineman: 14:11

You know, I've never thought about that. I've never thought about when you do ELL classes, you always think about the English part of it. I've never thought of having to take people with 18 different languages and teach them English.

Macala Carter: 14:30

Absolutely. It's pretty stinking remarkable, and you know some of our community members that take our classes every single day. We offer Monday every day, Monday through Friday. They will take two buses. They will. It's just amazing the commitment that they have to their own success into the program. And so and again, we continue to grow out of our space. So we're excited, we're thrilled to be able to expand this summer with a new classroom to be able to accommodate more individuals in that program.

Lyn Wineman: 15:00

Macala. What I love so much about both of these stories together is that not only are you giving people a path forward, breaking cycles of poverty, helping generations to come, but on the flip side, we all know there's been a workforce challenge across the country, and particularly in Nebraska for the last several years, so you're benefitting the community in so many different ways. Good for you. I love that work that you're doing.

Lyn Wineman: 15:35

So, I'm curious then all the innovation, all of the new things, the new programs, all of the people you're serving, are there any misconceptions about the Center for People that you've encountered in your short time there, and how do you address them?

Macala Carter: 15:53

Yeah, so I like that question a lot because, yes, we have experienced them. So I'm going to I'm going to speak from the population that we serve first and say the misconception often is that our community is not employed, and that's false. Our community 80% of our population identify as employed, with many of them working more than one job and they're just not earning a livable wage. So that's often a misconception we get for the community that we serve.

Macala Carter: 16:30

When I took this job, I did a tour around to a lot of the foundations and I asked, I asked, what is, what's the perception of the center for people? What is that reputation? I wanted to know, very honestly, what were the things that I was going to bump up against and, more importantly then, how do I, how do I solve them? How do I solve? If there are misconceptions out there or perceptions out there, how do I

solve for them? And so, from that standpoint, there was a lack of transparency, is what I would hear. I would hear that we weren't always collaborative with other partners, and I would hear that funding was done by one stakeholder of the Center, and so it was a really amazing opportunity, and I have thanked those individuals that were so honest with me, because I can't solve things unless I know, and so with each of those we've been able to really unpack some of those misconceptions and the lack of transparency. We're now enrolled with clarity, so we are sharing our information across the Lincoln Network, United Way. Everyone is able to see our numbers, and so when we say we are serving 2,300 unduplicated families every single week, those numbers now are transparent to everybody.

Macala Carter: 17:56

So if there are questions on that, we can now see that and that number continues to grow.

Macala Carter: 18:00

So lack of transparency we feel like we've countered that, but we're always willing, if there's other suggestions, to battle that yet again.

Macala Carter: 18:08

The lack of partnership with other agencies Like I said, we have 15 different agencies that come in or partner with us on a monthly basis, so we really feel like that collaboration is strongly tethered to who we are as an organization and how we serve our community.

Macala Carter: 18:24

And then the funding piece. And so the funding piece has been one of those really challenging components of my role, and it is for any nonprofit, so I'm certainly not going to dispel that for other nonprofits, but for us we did have a very large stakeholder that did fund us and was such a generous donor that funded our in-need program, so our food and our diapers, and since that person is no longer funding us, and so this year really is a pivotal year for us in terms of how we're letting people understand that we do need. We do need funding to be able to continue those services, and what is unfunded is our food and our diaper programs. I challenged our board last board meeting with this question If we closed our doors tomorrow, would our community notice, would there be an impact and for those 2,300 unduplicated families every single week, it would be a monumental impact.

Macala Carter: 19:24

It would be monumental. And so this year is really a year for us to, to grow, to challenge ourselves, to really reimagine what we can do, and so we're really excited about that. There's also a small contingency of folks. We did a name change a year ago and we did it from the voice of the community we serve. We heard on repeat that people would say they felt like there was a lack of dignity and respect within need. We were Center for People in Need and we still are as an organization, as a legal name that is still our legal name, but we shortened it because of the voice, because of what our community was sharing with us. That they said there was a lack of dignity in that, that they wanted us to drop that, that they asked for us to because they wanted us to understand that that's not the position that they want to always be in.

Macala Carter: 20:18

They wanted to be a growth model around it, so as a shortened nickname or as doing business, as we now are the Center for People, and so I think that there's been a little bit of a thought process around that that we're no longer serving people in need. I can say with a hundred percent accuracy that we still are serving people in need. So in order to qualify for our services, you have to be at or below that federal poverty level.

Macala Carter: 20:45

And so we continue to serve that community. We continue to serve that community in numbers that are greater than when I started two years ago, but without a doubt, we're serving an in-need community. We just are doing it with everything around dignity and respect.

Lyn Wineman: 21:01

Absolutely. You know, Macala, we like to talk at KidGlov when we think about branding. When you're working with a nonprofit, particularly in the human service space, we want to make sure there's nothing about your brand that re-stigmatizes the people you serve, right? We want there to be dignity, head held high as you walk through the door, because, honestly, for most humans it is hard enough to ask for help anyway. And then if there's a big flashing light above the door that makes you feel bad about walking in, whether that's a virtual door or a physical door, that's not a good thing. It's going to be a barrier for people to get the services that they need. So, even though it seems like a small shift, words matter and it's a big shift. So I congratulate you for making that one of the first things that you did when you became the Executive Director. So, even though it hasn't even been two full years yet, you've done a lot. I have to ask like, do you ever sleep, Macala? Like it feels like you have jumped in here and just been working, working, working.

Macala Carter: 22:17

So when I started I told my husband just give me six months, let me get me. Give me six months to get my feet under myself. Another six months, six months. And finally I keep telling him another six months. And finally I think the last time I told him I just need another six months, he said just just stop.

Lyn Wineman: 22:32

There's just so much work to do, and you're an idea person. I know that about you. You're an idea person and there's always going to be new ideas. So I'm curious in this short time, what are a few key lessons that you've learned, both personally and professionally?

Macala Carter: 22:53

So for me and I think it really comes back to know your why I was in banking for 21 years. I had a really great career in banking. I wanted to make the shift into the nonprofit. I knew my why and really that's been the guiding light for me, the beacon that allows me to continue to make the decisions that I make. Really, my personal mission, vision and values need to align with the organization that I'm with, and knowing my why, knowing that they are strongly connected personally and professionally, is so very

important, and so that keeps me grounded every single day during this time lessons. It's okay to make mistakes, yeah.

Lyn Wineman: 23:39

You know, I think I used to tell people you can't be an entrepreneur without making mistakes. I think you can't be a leader without making mistakes. Right, at some point you just have to go out and make the best educated decision you can and try, but you're going to make a mistake. Learn from it, of course correct. Apologize. You know, yes, people are so afraid of making mistakes or saying the wrong thing. But if you've made a mistake, yes, apologize, of course correct, and move on. Great advice, great advice. So, as you reflect upon your journey, what aspects of the organization continue to inspire and motivate you most, kind of tying back into your why, Michaela?

Macala Carter: 24:25

Oh, absolutely so. From the standpoint of my why, it's the people. It's the people that I serve. I get to serve and it really is I get to serve. So it's the community that I get to serve, but also it's the community that supports the work that we're doing. So it really is twofold. And that's what keeps me going every single day.

Macala Carter: 24:48

So even on those most difficult days, even on those days where I'm feeling discouraged or we're not making the headway that I'd like for us to make, I put my pen down and I close my computer and I go out and I visit with our community and I interact, and I make it a point to do that regularly because, again, that keeps me grounded to my why, but also it keeps me inspired. It keeps me understanding why I do this work and why others support the work that we're doing. Cause I do take it's a great responsibility. When people give us their dollars, you support the organization. I take that as such an honor and I want to make sure that I'm so respectful of that commitment that people provide us. So I want to always be responsible with what we have, and so making sure that I'm always connected and grounded with the people, the people we serve, the people that support us.

Lyn Wineman: 25:48

Absolutely. It's a different relationship than a product or service, where you give somebody people give you your money and you give them something in return. Right, that is. There's accountability required there. But when you are a nonprofit and you are asking people for money to invest in your cause, you want to be able to show that you're using that money well and that you're making a difference. So I love all of these things that you're doing and I want to ask what's next? I know people can't see you because this is a podcast, but I can see you and I see this beautiful whiteboard behind you with pie charts and notes in different colors. What's on Macala roadmap for Michaela and the Center for People?

Macala Carter: 26:37

Well, what you can't see behind me, Lyn, is a column on the far right side that says future considerations, because these are the things that I want. But here's the last two years we've doubled in terms of our federal grants, in terms of allocations, and so we don't want to do something unless we're

going to do it really really well. And so this year I have promised I am an ideas person and I've got plenty of them in my back pocket and I'm just, I'm just eager to share. But what I'm looking at for 2024, and the commitment I have made to our Director of Finance and to the board, is that this year really is going to be a year of stabilization and stabilization comes in a lot of different ways.

Macala Carter: 27:24

For us, stabilization is going to be that financial stabilization. Stabilization is going to be really built around, we have a couple of different revenue streams that we are rolling out. In the past we never had a revenue stream, and so, down the road, not only do we want stabilization, but we want sustainability. So those are two really big words that we're focusing in on, and so this year we are going to really define and roll out our revenue streams and get those up and going and then deepening our programs. We have added a lot of programs. The pathways that we offer today are around skilled trades, technology, healthcare and business, and so we want to get those pathways deepened, strengthened and really we want to have a model that when we bring on other programs, they just fit in there nicely and comfortably. So this year is all about stability.

Lyn Wineman: 28:21

You know that makes so much sense. I mean any organization, for-profit or nonprofit when they've gone through such a period of growth and innovation as you have. You need that moment to like, take a breath and let it settle in and then start to work on that future considerations list, because me too, being an idea person, I know what that's like. Mine is on my desk here, so you can't see it behind me, but it's a lot of fun to think about that. So, Macala, for our listeners who have been hearing about all the great things that you're doing, if they'd like to find more connect with the Center for People, maybe make a donation or volunteer. How can they connect?

Macala Carter: 29:06

Yeah, absolutely Thank you. So our website is [wwwcenterforpeopleorg](http://www.centerforpeople.org) and it's a beautiful website that our friends at KidGlov helped us with.

Lyn Wineman: 29:21

That was our honor. We love that website and the new brand.

Macala Carter: 29:25

It was such a neat experience, both in rebranding and everything, so it's beautiful. So visit us on our website. But also I love talking to folks that want to learn more about us or want to be introduced to us again, because we have changed so much. Just because you knew what we did four years ago doesn't mean we're doing the same thing. We're doing it a little different. So come out, see us again. So reach out to me directly. My email is mcarter@centerforpeople.org. I love taking people on tours. I love meeting people for coffee, so I I any speaking engagement. I invite people to reach out to me because I want to connect. I want to connect with people. That that is what fills my cup.

Lyn Wineman: 30:10

Macala, that's very bold to give out your email on a podcast and, if you don't mind, we'll put both your email and the link to the website in the show notes so people can easily connect. So that's very bold, but also I do. I do understand also how you love connecting with people as well. So, all right, the last time you were on, we asked my favorite question was for you to give us a few original words of wisdom to inspire our listeners. Do you remember what your quote was from 2022? Because I looked it up and wrote it down. It was one of my favorites.

Macala Carter: 30:52

I don't, but I'm guessing it's probably. I'm big on the notion of few burdens are heavy when everyone lifts.

Lyn Wineman: 30:59

That is what you said that is what you said. I love that, so so much so I wrote it down. December 12, 2022, Macala Carter. Few burdens are heavy when everyone lifts, so if you want to be consistent, we can use that quote again, or if you've got a new one you'd like us to insert into our hall of quotes, we'll do that as well, that one's always.

Macala Carter: 31:23

That's always my tried and true, my steady Eddie. But on my computer screen I have a yellow sticky note. It's nothing fancy, but it's a reminder daily and it reads what difference will you make today? And it's not a quote, but it really is an accountability question and it's something that I model every single day in the work that I'm doing what difference will you make today?

Lyn Wineman: 31:47

I love it. I'm going to definitely count it as a quote, Macala. I'm attributing it to you, and what I love about it is it just goes right back into your why, right, and the making a difference and helping people and finding innovative new ways to connect and make that happen. So what difference will you make today? I love it, and I love that you have it on a sticky note on your computer. That's fantastic. So, Macala, every conversation with you is always full of energy. I love to connect with you, but as we bring this podcast to a close, I'd love to know what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing.

Macala Carter: 32:33

Oh gosh, the most important thing. You know that it's not done alone. It's not everything, both from the team that I support, the community that shares feedback with us, the donors that believe in us. Nothing is done alone. One person can make a difference. So that is important to note, but when you have a community or when you have a bunch of people with that same goal, wow, it's amazing what can be accomplished.

Macala Carter: 33:04

And so that's really what it is is we can't I can't do this work alone. I certainly don't pretend to, and it's pretty remarkable what we accomplish when we have a united group.

Lyn Wineman: 33:16

Macala, that is beautiful. I just have to say I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more organizations like the Center for People. Thank you so much for sharing this story today.

Macala Carter: 33:32

Thank you, Lyn, it was a joy.

Announcer: 33:36

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.