

Agency for Change Podcast: Dana Wockenfuss and Donny Larson, The Well

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Dana Wockenfuss: 0:00

Wherever you find yourself, always leave it better.

Donny Larson: 0:03

Our greatest strengths are our greatest weaknesses, and our greatest weaknesses are our greatest strengths.

Announcer: 0:12

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of change makers 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: 0:35

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Joining us today are two incredible guests Dana Wockenfuss, Director of Development, and Donny Larson, Executive Director of The Well in Norfolk, Nebraska. The Well is not your average mental health and substance recovery agency. I know that because Kid Glov has had the honor of helping them recently with a rebrand. What we know is their commitment to treating all people with dignity and care, regardless of financial resources, truly sets them apart. Dana and Donny, welcome to the podcast.

Donny Larson: 1:23

Thank you, Lyn, we're glad to be here.

Lyn Wineman: 1:28

I always love talking with the two of you, and I'd like to just start by having you tell us more about The Well, who'd like to start with that question?

Donny Larson: 1:39

will start us off with that one, Lyn. So our agency was established back in 1991. So we've been around over 30 years now. We started as a halfway house just for women in the Norfolk community. So our name at that time when we started was Women's Empowering Lifeline. It is a great name and, you know, I think it really fit the work that we were doing and our mission to try and serve the underserved. At that time, you know, when the organization was first established, a lot of addiction treatment was really for men, by men and catered to the way that men get addiction treatment. And so when Women's Empowering Lifeline was established, we were looking at doing something different. We really found a need for women getting treatment in our community and that was where we went.

Lyn Wineman: 2:34

You know, recovery and mental health treatment is such a vulnerable time, a vulnerable thing to go through, that I imagine knowing at that time that it was a program for women, by women, was probably a really important part of your journey. I'd love to hear more about the inspiration behind founding the organization and the mission that drives the work that you do.

Donny Larson: 3:05

Absolutely so, like I said at that time, you know there was Men's Halfway House in the Norfolk community, and it was actually the board members involved with the Men's Halfway House that said you know, we need something like this for women in our community. We have women that we know need the help and there's no place for them to go, and so it was that board of the link here in Norfolk that decided that they needed to establish a women's program.

Dana Wockenfuss: 3:31

We also have many team members with lived experience who have had substance use disorders, mental health disorders or co-occurring disorders. So really, what drives the work that we do is the passion that our team has in serving and helping others, incredibly actually, 48% of our team identify as in recovery. Also, very impressively, about 15% of our team's makeup, are alumni from our residential programs. So not only are we, you know, bringing people in and helping them with their wellness, but also, after they complete their treatment, getting them on the team and just having them reinvest their energy back into that community.

Lyn Wineman: 4:31

That lived experience from your staff has to really be comforting to the people that are coming through the program. And also I'm really interested because there is so much stigma around both of the issues you treat mental health and recovery. I'm really curious what do you do as an organization to help combat those stigmas that surround these topics?

Dana Wockenfuss: 4:53

For sure. So the people that we serve are traditionally underserved and they come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. So a lot of times, I remember a team member actually saying I had been to every treatment facility, I had used every resource and I had burned every bridge when I came to the well. And so a lot of times it's people who have tried to get better and they're just looking for that non-

judgmental treatment where they can feel like they belong and they're validated. One of the things we do just internally is we know that the words that we use matter, so we provide training for those

Dana Wockenfuss: 5:42

So instead of saying you know a drug addict, you would say a person who suffers or who struggles with addiction, or you could say a substance use versus substance abuse. So there's terms that the industry has used that's rooted in bias and stigma, and so we actively try to make sure that our team is using the correct terminology. We also have several team members who were just certified by the Addiction Policy Forum for a study on breaking down stigmas within our own communities through education, and it's called the Anti-Stigma Initiative. So we're pretty excited about that to get that study going here in Norfolk.

Dana Wockenfuss: 6:29

Yeah, the last thing is really advocacy, which is kind of a new thing for us to do, but with this new brand and name it's been a lot easier to like put ourselves out there in that capacity. But there are just outdated policies that have been in place at the state level within Nebraska and at our federal level and the policies are rooted in biases and impact individuals within Nebraska and their ability to get better our care and giving them a voice, because oftentimes they have not been empowered in the past to do that. So those are just at the forefront of our advocacy efforts.

Lyn Wineman: 7:12

Dana, because this is a podcast, people can't see me, but I'm smiling ear to ear because I love everything that you just said. First of all, I had no idea that there was an anti-stigma initiative and I love that, and I do believe that words really do matter, and figuring out how to honor people by using the words that are respectful and empathetic, I think, is also really important. And in a couple of questions, I'm going to ask you about your brand, but before I do, you opened the door because you started to mention stories, and I love stories because what I know is that stories open up people's hearts and minds and they're memorable. Can you share a success story? Either one of you share a success story around the impact you make and The Well makes on someone's journey to recovery?

Donny Larson: 8:13

Absolutely, Lyn. I would love to share a story with you. I think the one that I'll use is a gal, we'll call her Hope, for the purpose of this.

Donny Larson: 8:32

And so she had been calling, trying to get in. We'd been trying to return her phone calls and just were having a hard time connecting with her, which isn't unusual for someone who, you know, is struggling with active substance use. And so, you know, when we finally were able to get her on the phone, it was a member of our crisis response team and she thought, okay, we've got to get her in, you know. So same day, the same day that we connected with her on the phone, we had her sitting in our chair getting an initial diagnostic interview, so a mental health assessment done by a licensed counselor in our office. And then, as we're doing that so it was one of our counselors and outpatient, as she's doing the

assessment with Hope, she realizes that, like Hope, has a lot of gaps right now, a lot of barriers that are keeping her from being successful in her recovery. So she's had legal issues. She had the death of her husband a couple of months ago. She had ran out of medication and hadn't been able to pay to get more of her psychiatric meds, you know. So it was kind of like everything was working against her.

Donny Larson: 9:36

So we got her involved with our crisis response team, we got her involved with our emergency community support services. We get the whole team on board and we make a great plan for what we're going to do to be able to help Hope. And so that same day we were able to get psychiatric medications in hand, we were able to get her set up with a plan for services, with counseling, with community support, all of those things. And then when Hope goes to leave, her car won't start.

Donny Larson: 10:07

And so the facilities director, director of facilities, David, comes in and jump starts her car, make sure that it's running smoothly, you know, so that when she leaves our program she's leaving in a safe way. And so you know you think about all of those different pieces of that puzzle. You know outpatient counseling wasn't enough, crisis response wasn't enough, psychiatric meds wasn't enough, you know, I mean, getting a car that worked wasn't enough. It was all of those things in just that one day to be able to set her up on a path where she could be successful. There's so many pieces that go into behavioral health that I think we don't always think about, and that's what I love about working at The Well is. No one said that's not my job.

Donny Larson: 10:50

You know, I don't know what to do with cars. I mean, she's going to have to go across town to this other program to get that.

Donny Larson: 10:57

Well, I don't know how we're going to get her meds. You know she's got to go over to this other place. Oh, she's got to fill out these forms. Oh, she's going to have to wait three days to see if the form gets approved. That's not how we do things. You know we jump in everybody as many people as possible that it needs to be able to help that person, and we make it happen so that we give people like Hope their best chance at recovery.

Lyn Wineman: 11:20

Oh, that story gives me chills and the thought of the sense of overwhelm someone must have to have all of those things happen, and then the sense of comfort that you're able to bring by pulling this together.

Lyn Wineman: 11:35

And you know I'm excited because I'm going to ask you. My next question is to talk about your recent rebrand, but hearing your story makes me want to share something, and that is when we worked on the rebrand for your organization and we did the surveys that we normally do as part of our brand

advancement process and we developed your brand archetype profile. Do you remember what your number one brand archetype was? It was the hero, and I remember you all saying how humble you are. You were like we're not heroes, we just help people, and that story to me, is the ultimate hero brand archetype story. So I'm so excited to hear you say that, and so I just want to say Kid Glov was very honored to help you with your recent rebrand and I'd love would one of you share the story behind the why of your rebrand journey and maybe the motivation behind it as well.

Dana Wockenfuss: 12:35

Yeah, I'll take that one. So up until 2022, all of our services and programs were designed to meet the needs of women in recovery, and so, under Donny's leadership, the team took on the task of opening up a men's dual disorder program, a long-term residential facility, and since then that basically opened the gate. So now we have several programs for men, and then we also have added children and family therapy, and then also we purchased an old elementary school building that has been repurposed for a childcare program. So yeah, it's. It's just been really like a natural progression that once we expanded services to men, children and families, that Women's Empowering Lifeline didn't fit who we actually serve. It wasn't that inclusive agency that that we know we are and so we want. We didn't want someone who doesn't identify as a woman to be put off by reaching out for services just because of our name. So, yeah, we just wanted, basically, our outward appearance to match who we are as an agency and being inclusive and non-judgmental. You know.

Lyn Wineman: 13:56

A lot of nonprofits that we meet at KidGlov have a similar journey. They started with a very specific service and they had a name that was the perfect name at one time, but then, because they're all so oriented to provide care and help people, the mission expands and when the mission expands you have to re-evaluate where your brand is and build on your history, but make sure you're opening the door for your vision. So I'm curious how has the rebrand helped better reflect your expanded mission, your commitment to inclusivity, and also what are some of the key considerations and challenges that you felt during this process?

Dana Wockenfuss: 14:44

Yeah, so well. First, we've had amazing feedback from team and clients that now everybody is excited to wear a t-shirt with a new logo and name, and I guess some of the things that went into the thought process is we got some really great publicity last year during our efforts to purchase the Northern Hills Child Care Building and also, in addition to that, the 30 plus years of people within our community knowing us as so Women's Empowering Lifeline. We used it as an acronym for The Well. We didn't want to lose that credibility and and the acknowledgement from the community. Some of the things that we were like as, as someone who my forte is marketing, the previous logo and font were definitely more feminine.

Dana Wockenfuss: 15:42

And so, you know, trying to go out and and communicate very easily who we are and what we do was difficult. So, yeah, we are in love with our new logo and brand and we feel like it's a lot more gender neutral. And the Kid Glov team and how you developed those trauma- informed colors. You know, not

everyone would automatically think, oh, we need to have trauma- informed color palette, but yeah, you guys helped us with that. But yeah, you guys helped us with that.

Dana Wockenfuss: 16:29

So it really allows the leadership team and our board of directors to dream big and not hold back about where we're envisioning The Well will be in three, five, 10 years, different rebrands, and so it's been such a cool experience and I was at a totally different point in my career, so I just wanted to share a quick story about our brand launch and we had it, like earmarked for the end of January and then we pushed it to we were talking about the week of Valentine's Day and so we got on a call you and Lexie and we were talking through the launch and I was ready to just you know, based on my training, I guess, from previous roles and previous companies to push, push, push to meet that February 14th deadline and, even though it was very stressful, I was going to like muscle my way through it and instead you were like the voice of reason and said let's just move it.

Dana Wockenfuss: 17:31

You know, I think today within business there's like this push, push, push to arbitrary goals and deadlines, and so, like as a professional and as a client, that piece of advice was what I needed to hear in the moment, and so I just really really appreciate you. All right, is Sage? Is Sage one of KidGlov's archetypes?

Lyn Wineman: 17:54

Uh, no, but Lover is so. Lover is all about like having the passion and like meet you where you're at and to say, hey, you know we can do it, we can make that date, but we also could take a little more time and make sure you're ready. What we know is most people, most organizations, will only go through one brand relaunch during your career and you've got this one opportunity and really figuring out how to make the most of it is so, so important when you can. So I'm going to give that back to you, Dana, and say thank you for asking us and thank you for listening, because I do think it was just able to give us that little more time to round out the edges and make it smoother and really make that launch so strong for you.

Dana Wockenfuss: 18:52

Yeah, yeah, it actually turned out better. The launch was better than what we originally planned because we had that

Lyn Wineman: 19:02

Yeah, you know, thank you for saying that and thank thank you for the nice words. The KidGlov team really loved working on this brand and what I appreciate that you said, Dana, is we have seen in working with over 100 nonprofits on their branding. We have seen how it opens the doors. It's kind of like when you put on a great suit or you have a great haircut and it fits you well, how you just kind of strut down the street with your head a little higher, a little bit more confidence, and a brand has a lot of similarity to that. When you have the right brand, it just opens the doors to make it easier to speak about yourself.

Lyn Wineman: 19:44

People want to wear the t-shirt, they want to hand out the card, they want to make their referral. And I am going to say, finding a new name for an organization, particularly one that's been around for quite a while, like you, is usually a very challenging process. But, honestly, your community kind of came around you and had started using that new name, so it made it a very obvious choice to go in this direction, this in this direction. So along those lines and I just want to say the KidGlov team once again very happy to have been able to help you with this process, but I'm really curious how has the new brand impacted your visibility and engagement both within the Norfolk community and beyond, because I know you serve the entire state of Nebraska?

Dana Wockenfuss: 20:36

Yes, and we actually have less than two months of exposure with this new brand and name, so it very much feels fresh and like a brand new outfit that we're still trying on, and I think that that's a really cool perspective, because I joined the team over a year ago, so I did have that old name and brand and I, as someone within marketing, I almost hesitated to put ourselves out there because with our name, we inadvertently excluded almost 50% of the population and so it feels very exciting, like it's just such an exciting time within The Well, because I feel much more confident putting ourselves out there on social media and also the creativity of playing with the brand that you guys gave us in

Lyn Wineman: 21:46

I love that. What I love, too, is that it's just shining a light on the great work that you do, and, based on that, I'm really curious what's in the future for The Well, you know, what goals and initiatives do you have that you'd like to share with us today?

Donny Larson: 22:07

Yeah, I'll take that one. We have a lot planned, Lyn.

Lyn Wineman: 22:15

Of course you do, there's no surprise there. You're not going to just sit back on your laurels and take it for a while.

Donny Larson: 22:23

Absolutely for sure. And so, yeah, our really big, hairy, audacious goal if we look 15 years into the future, we will be a catalyst for cultural change and behavioral health. Our goal is to decrease the reported serious suicidal thoughts in young adults and adults by 1% each in the state of Nebraska. And so we're I mean we're looking at, even though we are an organization based out of Norfolk. We know that the things that we're doing, the initiatives that we have going, all of those things are feeding out into the rest of Nebraska: our anti-stigma efforts, the services that we're providing, the people that we're touching, the lives that we're touching. We know that that extends outside of just The Well. And when we really thought about what's that big impact that we want to make, what do we want to do as The

Well? Because we do so many things. We do outpatient treatment, residential treatment, we look at behavioral health in all sorts of different capacities, even adding childcare recently.

Donny Larson: 23:22

Really, at the end of the day, what we decided is serious suicidal thoughts. That's what happens when people have untreated mental health disorders, when people have untreated substance use disorders, when people don't feel supported by their community, when people don't feel like they know where to go for help or how to ask for help or what help looks like. That's the end result of that is people start thinking about killing themselves, and so when we look at the big impact that we want to have, that's what it is. Our end goal is absolutely about ending substance use disorders and ending mental illness and all of those things, but at the end of the day, it's about decreasing serious thoughts of suicide in people who live in Nebraska, and so to do that, we're gonna need more real estate, more programs, more services, all of those things.

Donny Larson: 24:10

So we're looking at what gaps are still out there, what are the things that we haven't done, what are the things that we haven't filled or the needs that are still there, and the more that we dig, the more that we find, and so you know, we're trying to get as inclusive as we can. We're looking at making sure that we have a leadership team, counselors and providers that are representative of those we serve, so racially representative. They speak the language of those that we serve, that they identify. Maybe their gender expression is that of those that we serve that we're really looking at. You know, how can we have the breadth of services that we need to be able to meet people where they're at and help them to find their own recovery. And then how can we make it the highest quality possible, like what really works, and how can we bring what works to those people who need it?

Lyn Wineman: 24:59

Wow, wow. That is big, that is hairy and that is audacious. It's also amazing, I mean. I can't imagine who on your team wouldn't want to jump out of bed every morning and go: this is what my work is all about. So wow you guys, good for you. So next question for our listeners who would like to learn more about The Well about your work maybe see that fancy new website how can they find more about you?

Dana Wockenfuss: 25:31

Yes, well, if you have a browser, you can go to www.thewellne.org. We are also on social media channels LinkedIn, instagram, facebook and YouTube and all of the handles are either backslash or at sign TheWellNE.

Lyn Wineman: 25:53

Fantastic. We'll get links to all of those in the show notes for this episode as well. So there. So talking with both of you is extremely inspirational. But I want to take that one step further. I mentioned to you when we started that this is episode 198 of the Agency for Change podcast, and on every single episode we have asked people to share an original quote to inspire our audience. So I'm hoping at least one of you could share an original quote with us.

Donny Larson: 26:31

By original, do you mean gathering a few quotes from other people?

Lyn Wineman: 26:35

No, you guys have to give us one of your own. One of your own. I saw the look in your eyes.

Dana Wockenfuss: 26:44

So mine takes a play off of like Boy Scouts kind of. It's very much a mantra that I have lived by, which is wherever you find yourself, always leave it better. So, whether that's, you know, a work environment or a plate, a physical place that you are, time and life is fleeting and there's always going to be the next, you know, next step of your journey. So when you're leaving the place that you're at, just always leave it better.

Lyn Wineman: 27:20

Dana, I've come to know you as a very positive person too, so I would say you live by that. Even if it's a zoom meeting, you leave. It better. Donny, you're on the hot seat. Can we have a Donny Larson original quote?

Donny Larson: 27:38

I'm not totally sure it's original, but one of the things that I say often is our greatest strengths are our greatest weaknesses and our greatest weaknesses are our greatest strengths. And so I think that's the reason I say that so often is because in the work that we do at The Well, so often people get very, very stuck in their weaknesses I'm not good enough, I'm not strong enough, I'm not tough enough, I'm not smart enough, all of those things. And we have to remember that you know we're there are two sides to every coin and you know, whatever your weakness is, if it's that you feel like maybe you are having a hard time getting along with family members because you're too opinionated, Gosh, having opinions is great. We should all have opinions. Everyone should shout their opinions from the rooftop. If you feel like you've struggled with addiction treatment in the past because maybe you weren't compliant enough for the program, Well geez, we need rule breakers in the you know, recovery community.

Donny Larson: 28:43

We need people who are going to stand up and say, no, that's not the way for me. I need it this way. I mean, that's essentially how our agency is evolved, by those people who have struggled with compliance and treatment or struggled with being able to follow the rules. You know, if we I think, if we look at each human being as someone that is coming with something amazing for us all to learn from and us all to grow from and us all to be able to experience, we see people as whole people, no matter where they're at, if they're at the beginning of their recovery journey, at the end, in the middle, around the block and through you know all of the different paths that recovery takes us. At every point in that stage, they're bringing something to the table and it's our job at The Well to be able to make sure that they see what that is, that they're bringing that's going to help them in their recovery program.

Lyn Wineman: 29:34

Donny, that's awesome, and I've never heard someone say that exactly like you. So so that is your quote from here on forever. So you two so great to talk with you. You are both so inspiring, and I'd love to wrap up our time together today by asking each of you what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing. And, Donny, how about if we start with you?

Donny Larson: 30:05

Sure, I think the most important thing to remember you know, because we do face so much stigma in the field that we work in is to remember that the opposite of addiction is not using. And so I mean, there's a great Ted Talk about what addiction really is and what treatment needs to look like, but we have to remember that fighting addiction or overcoming addiction or recovering from addiction is about connection. That's how people build resiliency so they don't develop substance use disorders, and that's how people recover from substance use disorders is it is all about connection. It's about connecting with people, it's about connecting with the community. It's about having a place to belong, someplace where you know you're not going to be judged and people are going to see you for who you really are, past your substance use disorder, past your mental health disorder, and connecting with another human being.

Donny Larson: 31:01

That's what recovery is about. And so what I would really like to say to anyone listening is you know, if you have someone in your in your life who's struggling with a substance use disorder or a mental health disorder, the most important thing that you can do is just connect with them and be aware of the things that we do that disconnect, Things like suspending kids who tested positive for substances, taking them out of extracurricular activities, not letting people participate in things that keep them connected, thinking that it's a punishment for substance use and that people will stop using because of that. That feeds the addiction. The thing that hurts the addiction, the thing that keeps us closer together and builds the recovery, is the connection.

Lyn Wineman: 31:49

Wow, mic drop. That is so powerful, Donny. I've never thought about it that way, but but it makes so much sense. All right, Dana, final words. What's the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember?

Dana Wockenfuss: 32:10

So I bring a different perspective, and so I think the perspective I would like to share would be for people who have never struggled with substance use disorder or who don't know of anyone who has had those lived experiences, one thing that I think is important and that Donny actually said when I first started, that kind of was like oh a jolt. That kind of was like, oh a jolt, and I'm going to use some stigmatized words here but nobody wakes up in the morning deciding, oh, I want to be a drug addict. I think it's really easy to have an image of a person in your mind and have them be other and have them be. It's almost like that addiction is their fault. And so I think, just at the end of the day, we are all

human and we all have struggles, and certain struggles are often exacerbated by other life themes that are out of our control. So I think just that perspective would be what I would want listeners to remember.

Lyn Wineman: 33:33

Al right. What a way to end with two such powerful statements. Dana and Donny, I want to thank you for taking time out today. I'm so honored to be able to share your story. I fully believe the world needs more people like the two of you and more organizations like The Well.

Announcer: 33:55

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.