

Agency for Change Podcast: Nancy Petitto, Senior Director of Programs, Civic Nebraska

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Nancy Petitto: 0:01

It's never too late to get started.

Announcer: 0:05

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: 0:35

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. So picture a vibrant community where every voice matters and where people of all ages and backgrounds come together to make a difference. This is the vision that Civic Nebraska is bringing to life by striving to create a more modern and robust democracy for all Nebraskans. So today we're exploring their vital work with Nancy Petitto, the Senior Director of Programs. Nancy, I am eager to talk with you and learn more about the great impact you're making. Welcome to the podcast.

Nancy Petitto: 1:15

Thank you so much for having me, Lyn.

Lyn Wineman: 1:18

I am excited to talk to you because I am fresh off of coming to the Civic Nebraska event that happened recently, called the Strengthening Democracy Awards. And just for those maybe who haven't heard about Civic Nebraska, can you tell us more about the organization?

Nancy Petitto: 1:39

Absolutely so Civic Nebraska was founded in 2008 and started out primarily as an organization that was focused on voting rights and getting folks registered to vote. We are a nonpartisan nonprofit and our mission is to create a more modern and robust democracy for all Nebraskans, and really what that translates to when I talk to people about Civic Nebraska, we want to make sure that people are involved. We want to make sure that all Nebraskans have an opportunity to participate in our

democracy, that no matter what age, what background, what experiences you have, you are informed, aware and you have the capacity and capability to participate in all things democracy going on at the level of our state. And to a lot of different people that means a lot of different things and we'll talk more about how we do that more specifically at the organization.

Lyn Wineman: 2:57

Sounds good. You know, it's fascinating to me because it always hurts my heart a little bit when I see voter turnout reports. It's like, really only that many people. Like I even when I'm going to be out of town, I get that absentee ballot. It seems like, and me, being in the marketing profession, it seems like anything we could do to get more people involved would make a lot of sense. But I'd love to hear it from you. Why is the work of Civic Nebraska so crucial right now?

Nancy Petitto: 3:34

Well, you said it just now, seeing those voter turnout results, they are low. They're low in Nebraska, they're low across the country. I think Civic Nebraska is taking a little bit of a different approach with our work. We are not the only civic engagement organization in the state, but I think what we're trying to do with Civic Nebraska is really build relationships with individuals across the communities that we work in, make sure that people do feel like they have a voice and they can make a difference.

And that's what I hear a lot of with the folks that I work alongside is sort of is it really going to matter? You know is me showing up in this one election going to make a difference? And I truly believe this when I respond to them and I say yes, it is going to make a difference, whether that is a local election or a ballot initiative. But even more than that, it's that responsibility that we all have as you know, Nebraskans and right now we're seeing a lot of division, a lot of polarization across our country, and it's happening in our state as well, and I think that you know Nebraskans are just built a little bit differently. We're tough, we want to solve problems, we want to work together and I think that right now, the mission and the vision that Civic Nebraska is focused on it's all about getting back to the work and putting aside some of those you know, those disagreements and the things that are dividing us, and rather focusing more directly on what difference can each of us make and how does that impact the people that we live next to and work with and, you know, share dinner with at the dinner table every day.

Lyn Wineman: 5:40

Yeah, I love that you say that, because I have this foundational belief that most people are doing exactly what they believe is the right thing to do most of the time right, and we get so angry at each other over these political divides and you know, just being able to have conversation and be friendly about it. I think I even saw a statistic recently that said people are less likely now to date those who have political beliefs that are different than their own, and I'm like, wow, that seems so complicated. I think that's really, really important work that you're doing, and I know you didn't come on this podcast to talk about politics, nor did I, but I just want people to get along right. So, Nancy, I'm curious about you specifically, like what inspired you to get involved in this work, because I know, with your background and your training, there's a lot of things you could choose to do.

Nancy Petitto: 6:49

That's a great question. It's something I get asked a lot. I was working at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for about a decade and didn't really have any plans of leaving until I really started working and volunteering in my community and just taking a different approach, getting to know my neighbors, getting to know some of the amazing organizations that we have in Lincoln and I started serving on a nonprofit board and I just I fell in love with it. I fell in love with the opportunity to meet so many different kinds of people, to hear their experiences, to share my own experiences as well, and while I had no intention of leaving the University and the work that I was doing in higher education, you know, I also knew that there was something else out there that I wanted to be involved in and it was more of that community building approach and something aligned and a job opened up, a position opened up at Civic Nebraska, and I had never heard of this organization before but in 2018, I took a chance and it was something that I'd always sort of said I wish the work that I do, I wish the volunteering, I wish all the community engagement work could be a full-time gig. And then it became that, and now it is, and here I am still doing it, and I'm so grateful to be able to do this work alongside so many amazing individuals.

Lyn Wineman: 8:38

I love that KidGlov shares that love of nonprofits with you. I mean, we have found that it's pretty fun to get up in the morning and come to work when you know you're doing the work that's making a difference in people's lives. So I hear what you're saying and I can imagine there were some people in your life who said you are leaving a stable job at a Big Ten higher education institution to go to a nonprofit. I bet there was some head shaking there, right.

Nancy Petitto: 9:13

Oh, yes, I had to explain some things a little bit more in depth to my parents.

Lyn Wineman: 9:20

Absolutely. Six years later, though, it's been the right decision, so I'd love to have you tell us, maybe more specifically, about some of the vital programs that Civic Nebraska offers, and touch on the impact of those programs, if you would.

Nancy Petitto: 9:39

So we have three main program areas. The first that I'll chat about is our youth civic leadership program. So we are the lead agency at three after school programs here in Lincoln.

Lyn Wineman: 9:55

I did not know that. Wow.

Nancy Petitto: 9:57

So we're at we're at Campbell Elementary, Lincoln Northeast High School and Lincoln High, and then we're also the lead agency at three schools in Omaha: Sherman Elementary, Lothrop and Lewis and Clark Middle School.

Nancy Petitto: 10:13

And it's been such a cool experience to figure out how do we bring young voices into civics work and how do we get them excited and engaged and understanding the importance of all of these different elements of being civically and community engaged. And so, you know, we've been able to build relationships and bring people into this work in a way that I think goes above and beyond a lot of other elements of what that youth work can look like in schools. And we've done, you know, leadership trainings for young students. We've done mock elections. Campbell Elementary now has a student council, which is, a the most adorable thing I've ever seen, and, b shows them what it is like to have that responsibility and, you know, to make decisions that impact those around you. And so building those skills at a young age is just really vital and crucial to a lot of our work, and so that's one of our main program areas.

Lyn Wineman: 11:29

And Nancy, before you go on, I just want to give a shoutout to that programming because when I was at your recent event, you gave an award to a young woman named Chloe Patzloff who, when you read her bio not you specifically, but when her bio was read and when she got up and spoke, I was just so impressed and amazed. And this young woman, I believe, is still in high school, not even in college yet, but her you know her dedication to get involved in the legal process, which can be intimidating for adults, right. And to have firm beliefs and stand up for those beliefs. I just was so impressed. So if she came through your youth programming in any way, shape or form, I have to give you a shoutout for that one.

Nancy Petitto: 12:25

That's and she is. She's been a part of our, our CLC program and the, the youth civic leadership program through Lincoln Northeast for a number of years and and there's so many other Chloe's and it's hard because you have to narrow it down and, and you know, pick one for the award. But you know that's that's really the ultimate goal of that program is to be able to think critically, to be able to navigate those very complex government systems and processes so they can be a part of that and understand how it does impact them and the communities around them. So Chloe is 100% a rock star and we just want to keep building up more of those individuals.

Lyn Wineman: 13:07

That's awesome. Now I interrupted. You talked to me about some of your other program areas.

Nancy Petitto: 13:12

Sure. So we also have a civic health program, which for a lot of folks that can be a little bit more nebulous of a program, but really civic health is the work that we do that brings our communities together. It looks at the social connection that we have amongst residents across the state. It looks at the level of confidence in institutions that we have, our political activity and then our community engagement. So Civic Health broadly is such a huge piece of all that we do at the organization and it is really that foundation and that sort of underlying base for every other piece of work that happens at the organization. And so we know that the stronger civic health that we have in our cities and our towns and

our neighborhoods across the state, the more connected we can be to each other. And so we have some specific initiatives that fall under that civic health program and one that I'll, I mean I wish I could plug them all, but I know we have limited amount of time, but one that we have that's been just has grown drastically over the years is our Capital Experience Day program. And you know, every fourth grader goes through the state capitol and gets a tour right. That's kind of you know, that's the cool, you know part of being a student in Nebraska. But the Capital Experience Day goes well beyond that. You don't just learn about the building itself, but you learn about all of the elements within that building.

You learn about the unicameral. You get to meet your state senator. You get to meet, potentially, someone from the judicial branch. There's a ton of activities that we offer to those Capital Experience Day participants. One that I think is amazing is our mock committee hearing, where students choose an issue that they care about and they draft testimony and they role play as both the state senators that are on a committee, testifiers either in support, in opposition to the legislation that they're pitching, and sometimes it's not as serious, sometimes it's you know it's really big issues that we know that our students are dealing with in Lincoln and in Nebraska. It's not just limited to Lincoln folks, so we also do that for community groups, we do it for nonprofits, we do it for the cultural centers for new Americans who are not as aware of our governmental structure here in Nebraska. So it's really a unique experience that again speaks to sort of the civic health of our communities and how we can get folks engaged in that.

Lyn Wineman: 16:15

I'm glad you shared that, because when you said the word civic health, it sounded like something I wanted, but I had no idea what it meant. So that is a great explanation, and I think that the experiences you're putting together I could see how they would be really helpful.

Nancy Petitto: 16:27

Thank you. And last but certainly not least, I'll talk about our voting rights program, which, again, is really what you know the organization was sort of founded upon, is this notion that everyone should have access to the polls, and so our voting rights team and that program really works hard to make sure those barriers are removed. Obviously, it's a presidential election year, so we're doing a lot of the vote work. We're making sure folks are registered regardless of political affiliation. As I mentioned before we're a nonpartisan nonprofit so we just really want as many individuals that can vote to be able to do that. And you know, I think for a lot of people, going back to what we were saying, does it matter, so many before us fought for this right and you know we would be remiss if we didn't continue those efforts, and especially locally. That's where you see those changes happen. That's where you see people come forward, exercise that right to vote and then start to see that change happen in their community. So our voting rights team has their work cut out for them every single year, whether it's a presidential election year or not because we know those local elections are important as well.

Lyn Wineman: 17:51

I imagine this year too, Nebraska, as with many states, is implementing voter ID laws for the first time, so there's a whole new process for people who aren't accustomed to having to bring that ID to the polls. I imagine you're involved in some education there as well.

Nancy Petitto: 18:12

Absolutely, and we partner very closely with election commissioners across the state to make sure folks understand how that policy works. You know, after it passed on the ballot and then went through our legislature, and so we provide all kinds of education to make sure people understand that process.

Lyn Wineman: 18:31

That's fantastic. So I'd love to hear you know just kind of hearing all the work that you do, talk to me one more time about why is this work really important? Why do we need to be working on strengthening democracy and promoting that civil discourse in communities?

Nancy Petitto: 18:55

That's a great question. It's something that I think I ask myself a lot, because this work can be difficult, it can be challenging and every day that I wake up and see national news or see something happening locally, it reminds me that I know we're stronger when we work together and for all the individuals that come to Civic Nebraska or have been a part of our work in some way, I have seen the changes and the impact that has been made, and I know that that's not just a few individuals or one or two school groups that come to the Capitol. That has reverberated throughout communities across Nebraska and I think, in a time where a lot of folks I mean, let's be honest are feeling hopeless, are feeling overwhelmed, and it does feel like sometimes you just sort of want to see what happens and say, well, I'm, I'm out of it now, I'm not going to try anymore. I think that's going to get us to where we want, where we know we can be.

And I'm not originally from Nebraska. I grew up in upstate New York, but I moved here to go to college and I stuck around because there's something really special about this place. There's something special about Nebraska. There's something special to me about Lincoln, because this is where, you know, I created my home as an adult and you know, I know this is a time where we're seeing, our democracy is at stake, and we are much better off coming together, working together, finding a way to bridge those divides, have those hard conversations that we've been putting off or we just don't want to do because we don't all have to agree on everything.

That's not what we're trying to say, but we have to be able to have those tough conversations because, at the end of the day, it comes down to okay, what do we do about it, what's the solution and how can we make this better for everyone? And so, when we talk about civil discourse, when we talk about bridging those divides, I think it's important to get back to this place of seeing each other as dignified humans, seeing that humanity in each other again and looking past some of the things that have really just been again pushed on us and not really a part of who we know as sort of our fellow Nebraskans in our state.

Lyn Wineman: 21:59

Yeah, yeah, I love that, I love that. So, Nancy, what does the future hold for Civic Nebraska? Anything on the horizon for you guys? I asked that knowing there's a few things on the horizon.

Nancy Petitto: 22:17

It's hard to narrow it down because we have so many exciting things coming up for us. But one thing that I want to plug that I think is really, really cool, and something that we're sort of getting back off the ground, is a program called Documenters, and this is something that's nationwide, and it was in Omaha for a bit, but Civic Nebraska is partnering with the Nebraska Journalism Trust and Flatwater Free Press to recruit what are called Documenters, and so these are everyday citizens, everyday Nebraskans, that will be trained to go to public meetings, whether that's a school board meeting or city council or town hall, take notes and then report that out. And that doesn't really happen anymore in a lot of our local media, and so we know that there's a lot of small town newspapers that have closed, radio stations, there've been a lot of cuts in the journalism world, and so this not only gives individuals the opportunity to know what's happening in those public meetings, but these are folks who sign up to be a documenter usually want a little bit more than just the pay that comes with it.

These are very engaged individuals. Civic Nebraska is going to take it a step further and provide a lot of that training that comes from the civic engagement side. We are going to sort of have this dual system where we provide systems literacy, asset mapping and really just building that understanding of civil discourse and civic health, with the documenters that are going to be reporting back on these meetings. We're relaunching it in Omaha, which is where it originally started. We're also going to be launching it in Lincoln and then we want to start looking at some rural communities in other parts of the state that we know are going to be interested in this as well.

Lyn Wineman: 24:23

Yeah, that sounds like a fantastic initiative, very exciting. I'm going to keep an eye out for that.

Nancy Petitto: 24:29

Yes, and one other thing I want to mention from our youth civic leadership program, which I think this is this is just a super cool thing. Again, it's a national project, but we were approached by the founder. It's called Kid Governor. I don't know if you've heard of this.

Lyn Wineman: 24:48

I haven't, but it sounds like fun. I suppose I'm too old to participate in the Kid Governor program.

Nancy Petitto: 24:56

You got to be in fifth grade. So, yes, I think we're both well past that point. It started in Connecticut and a lot of other states have enacted it, and so you go across the state and talk to different school districts and classrooms and a kid governor gets elected by their peers. It's just such a cool program showing youth how they can get involved, how they can get engaged both either as the student who wants to be the kid governor or as a constituent who is going to vote in that process and bring your concerns to that, that person who's going to be in that role. And so right now our Youth Civic Leadership team is working on getting that launched here in Nebraska so we can have our first Nebraska Kid Governor.

Lyn Wineman: 25:45

I love that so much. That's just awesome. That's great. So, Nancy, it feels like I would be remiss if I didn't ask you, what is some insights or advice that you have for people who want to get more involved in their communities or want to get involved with Civic Nebraska?

Nancy Petitto: 26:07

Great question. One thing I always tell people is show up. I know that sounds really simple and plain, but usually the hardest step is just that first one.

Lyn Wineman: 26:20

You got it.

Nancy Petitto: 26:21

Just showing up and it can be one of our events. I mean, you came to our Strengthening Democracy Awards and you got to see all the incredible work that you know local folks are doing in our community.

Lyn Wineman: 26:32

It was such a great event and such great energy in the room, such great stories. So kudos, Nancy, to your whole team at Civic Nebraska for that event.

Nancy Petitto: 26:45

Thank you. And the other thing I tell folks is you know there's different levels of engagement. It's not everyone doesn't have to run for office, everyone doesn't have to show up and testify at the legislature or, you know, really put yourself out there in a public facing way. There are a lot of things that you can do, having conversations with those around you, the people in your circles, and, you know, look for the events that we're hosting at Civic Nebraska if you want to know more and just understand what it can look like to be part of this work.

Lyn Wineman: 27:18

That's pretty cool, pretty cool. So, for those who want to show up, how can they find out more about Civic Nebraska?

Nancy Petitto: 27:27

Of course, yes, we have a website. It's civicnebraska.org, that's pretty easy to figure out. It should be pretty easy to find. We have a whole listing of events. We have an events page. We have more information about all of our programs that I've talked about today. We're also on social media. You can find us on Facebook, on Instagram, and you know we have a pretty, pretty wide presence there and you can find us in a lot of different places.

Lyn Wineman: 27:59

That's fantastic. For those of you who are maybe driving or didn't get that down, we'll have those links in our show notes. I do have one question for you that's a little off the wall. Nancy, when I was at your event and looking at your slides, I was looking at your logo on the screen and it's the circular logo, which makes a lot of sense because you're bringing people together and it looks very official. In the middle of your logo is a bee. Do you know why that bee is there? Does it have a purpose?

Nancy Petitto: 28:31

It does. We rebranded Civic Nebraska rebranded right before I joined, right before 2018. And we were Nebraskans for Civic Reform and then we became Civic Nebraska. But the honeybee was always the logo, and a part of that is because those honeybees make decisions as a collective and in a democratic way versus, you know, versus monarchies and those kinds of things. And so it's all about that consensus building.

Lyn Wineman: 29:01

I had to ask because obviously I'm into logos and branding. I love a good nonprofit rebrand, but the best ones are when they're purposeful. And even when I didn't know what the bee was for, I kind of made the story in my own mind, which was also a good story, but it had something that it stood for. So I had to ask. All right, I am going to put you on the hot seat. Next I'm going to ask you the question that I bet you prepared for, because I've asked 210 podcast episodes. I've asked every single person because I am inspired by motivational quotes. I get to talk to such interesting people like you. So, Nancy, could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom to inspire our listeners?

Nancy Petitto: 29:48

This was really tough, I'll admit. It was hard to sort of narrow down, you know, to one thing, and I think for me what I focused on is it's never too late to get started.

Lyn Wineman: 30:04

Very nice. I think that's really meaningful and I can see how that applies to your story. So, I love it. All right, Nancy. As we wrap up this great conversation today, I'd like to end with what is the most important thing you would like people to remember about the work that you're doing.

Nancy Petitto: 30:27

I think the most important thing to remember is that we have to do this together. This isn't about Civic Nebraska, the organization. This isn't about one individual that becomes an elected official and makes policy change. This is about everyone coming together, working together, finding the ways that we can support each other through these sometimes difficult, sometimes wonderful times.

And knowing that that impact and that change, if needed, can happen. But it's going to take everybody coming together to get there and maybe that sounds cliché but honestly that's what it comes back to for me.

Lyn Wineman: 31:18

I think it's true. I think it's true. We're all the honeybees in the honeycomb, right. Making it work. So I love it, Nancy. I have so enjoyed this conversation. I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more organizations like Civic Nebraska. Thank you so much for sharing with us today.

Announcer: 31:44

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