

Agency for Change Podcast: Sofia Iuteri, Founder & President, Hats4Healing Corp

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Sofia Iuteri: 0:00

Respect the goals you are passionate about achieving.

Announcer: 0:06

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: 0:21

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. So I'd like you to start today by imagining a world where a simple hat can be a beacon of hope for a child battling cancer. Today, we're chatting with Sofia Iuteri, the incredible young woman behind Hats4Healing. So, from the warmth of her mission to craft handmade hats for young patients, Sofia has woven together a story of warmth, strength and community. Get ready to be inspired as we explore the origins of Hats4Healing, its impactful initiatives and the power of community involvement. Sofia, I can't wait to talk with you today. Welcome to the podcast.

Sofia Iuteri: 1:20

Thank you so much, Lyn. I'm so excited to be here and share a bit more about Hats4Healing.

Lyn Wineman: 1:26

I am excited to hear a bit more, especially since this is going to air in September of 2024, which is Pediatric Cancer Awareness Month, so kind of your holiday, so I'm glad to celebrate that with you. And let's just start, Sofia, by having you tell us more about Hats4Healing and its mission.

Sofia Iuteri: 1:48

Yeah, absolutely. Hats4Healing is a non-profit dedicated to providing handmade hats for pediatric cancer patients, and our ultimate mission is to provide warmth, comfort and unity to patients locally, nationally and even internationally.

Lyn Wineman: 2:07

I love that warmth, comfort and unity. I think we could all use a little bit of that, but especially kids with cancer, right? So, Sofia, people can't see you because this is a podcast and we're recording, but you're a relatively young woman. I'm curious to hear the story about how you founded Hats4Healing and what drives your passion behind this cause.

Sofia Iuteri: 2:33

Yeah. So knitting's always been a passion of mine, a hobby, a way to connect with friends and family. I remember when I was younger just knitting up some gifts and projects and showing my family, having them try on hats or whatever I had created. But I got a little bit more serious in about 2020, when I was doing about 35 hours a week of gymnastics. I was a level 10 competitive gymnast, and I did competitive gymnastics for 10 years. So at this particular point in my training, I was practicing a lot and just coming home in the evenings and wanting to unwind a bit. So I found myself knitting and I started to make hats, a lot of them and I was just talking with my family and we kind of brainstormed ways that maybe I could, I could do something and make an impact with these hats. I also felt particularly connected to the cancer community, as my grandmother unfortunately passed away from liver cancer.

Lyn Wineman: 3:36

I'm sorry, Sofia.

Sofia Iuteri: 3:38

Thank you. When I was seven years old, so I felt at the time I couldn't really do much. But when I started to get more serious with knitting at 16 years old, I realized I could make an impact. So I just started making more hats and donating and people caught on and got really involved in the mission and I just kept going from there.

Lyn Wineman: 4:02

I love it. So, Sofia, a lot of us just watched the Summer Olympics in 2024. And there was a famous athlete that was shown several times in the stands. I don't know if you saw Tom Daley the diver. He was also knitting to calm his nerves. So I've heard that knitting is very calming. And tell me about the experience of knitting. Does it just calm you and focus you?

Sofia Iuteri: 4:30

Yeah, well, definitely, and I also saw that knitter in the crowd. I thought that was so cool. It's definitely very calming. It's a repetitive motion. Once you get it down, it doesn't take a lot of brain power, so it's just the perfect evening unwinding activity. I would put on like a show or a video and it would usually be a gymnastics documentary or something. Get enough of it at the time. But before I knew it, I was making hats like crazy.

Lyn Wineman: 5:06

I love it. I love that knitting is something that can help others, but it also can help the people who are doing the knitting too. That sounds like a fantastic activity. So talk to me about what makes the work of Hats4Healing so impactful for these pediatric cancer patients and their families even.

Sofia Iuteri: 5:31

Yeah, Hats4Healing is so much more than the simple creation and then exchange of a hat. We have created a community of volunteers and patients who are all affected by cancer in various ways, either directly, or maybe volunteers who had a family member or friend who has been affected by cancer. And on the volunteer side, they're able to make a hat and feel like they're making a difference and they know that it's going to a patient who is appreciating it so much and can feel supported and like someone is hoping for their recovery. So a big focus of our organization is just creating that unity and a sense of community.

Lyn Wineman: 6:17

I love that so much, Sofia. I talk to so many people these days that want to give back. They want to do something purposeful, but maybe they don't feel like they can make a donation or they don't have a lot of time to go and volunteer. But this is something you can do in your own home while you're unwinding in the evening, and it really makes a difference for people, so I love that. Now I've heard that you've got some key partnerships and initiatives that you're involved in, and I'm curious about those things and I'm curious how people can contribute to your mission.

Sofia Iuteri: 6:57

Definitely. One of our initiatives, especially this summer, has been to develop the nonprofit in a way that both enhances volunteer activity and allows us to be a more sustainable organization in the long run. So through my university, I applied for a grant known as the Johnson Opportunity Grant and we received \$6,000 to develop the nonprofit this summer, and my main focus has been both enhancing volunteer activity and establishing revenue streams, as up until now, from the time I was 16, now I'm 19, I've have been self-funding it with minimal donations and it's not sustainable for the long term and we want more. So I started meeting with a professor of social entrepreneurship at my university, Washington and Lee, in Lexington, Virginia, and we just began brainstorming ways that I can continue developing this nonprofit, and we even started with the question of if I wanted to keep growing it or if this was just a three-year project that I learned a lot from, obviously, but we concluded that I did really want to keep going and I just have been learning so much about developing businesses and building something from from the ground up and not taking no for an answer.

Lyn Wineman: 8:34

Good for you. Those are important lessons in all kinds of entrepreneurship, but shout out to Washington and Lee University for giving you this opportunity and that mentorship, and even for having a social entrepreneurship program, because that's a relatively new concept and I think it's fantastic that you have that going. So, Sofia, I know you've got a key partnership. Can you tell me more about that?

Sofia Iuteri: 8:57

Absolutely. One of our key partnerships is with an organization known as Heart Care International, which performs heart surgeries for children in underserved parts of the world, and we have partnered with them to donate our hats to pediatric oncology units at the hospitals that they are performing heart surgeries. So we have donated to Mexico, Lima, Peru and the Dominican Republic through them, which has been an amazing opportunity.

Lyn Wineman: 9:27

Sofia. What I love about that is not only are you a college student who has started a nonprofit, that's making a plan to make this nonprofit sustainable, you've now found a partnership that takes you international. That is so cool. Congratulations to you. Here is something. So, Sofia, I remember when I was a little girl, my both of my grandmothers were excellent knitters and crocheters. I used to have all these little knitted and crocheted outfits. I never really learned, right, like I never really learned. And I hear there's a common misperception that you have to be an expert in either knitting or crocheting to make a difference. And I'm curious, can you clarify how donating to Hats4Healing works and how people can get involved? And could I even do it, even if I'm not an expert?

Sofia Iuteri: 10:23

Definitely, we have knitters who are just starting out, who've never knitted before, who are able to make hats up all the way up to like expert knitters who donate a lot of hats to us. So, as a part of my project this summer of developing my nonprofit, one of the things I did was create knitting kits which is targeted towards volunteers and we just launched those and actually had a launch event for them, and we're able to sell about 15 kits. The kits feature loom knitting, which is a very easy way to get started. Anyone can learn. We also created educational knitting hat tutorials on our YouTube this summer so anyone can access those and easily learn how to loom knit a beginner hat and donate it. Anyone can get involved. We're creating more avenues so that anyone can feel like they can contribute and make a difference.

Lyn Wineman: 11:27

Ah, Sofia, you just gave me an idea. I mean, Christmas will be here before we know it. I bet those knitting kits would make some great Christmas gifts. And not only are you giving the gift of learning how to knit, you're maybe giving somebody the gift of serenity and stress reduction, while also helping someone else. So, outside of hats, does Hats4Healing donate and support pediatric cancer patients in any other ways?

Sofia Iuteri: 12:00

Yeah we accept almost all knitted or crocheted items, including scarves, slippers, socks, blankets, even little stuffed animals. We've collected or accepted a wide variety of items and donated them.

Lyn Wineman: 12:21

That's awesome. That's fantastic. So what's on the horizon? Sofia, You've accomplished so much at a young age. You're building out this nonprofit to be sustainable for the future. What is next?

Sofia Iuteri: 12:35

Yeah, well, first of all, we're excited to continue marketing our new knitting kits and selling those so that we can both increase our revenue, so that we can keep developing as a nonprofit and also reach a broader audience of volunteers, including those beginner knitters. We hired our first employee this summer, who was a social media marketing and outreach intern. We're looking to hire our first full-time employee soon. And then also, as I head back to campus this fall, I'm going to be bringing Hats4Healing to campus, which I'm super excited about, and teaching hat-making workshops and hosting hat drives, both on campus through a club that I'm an outreach officer for it's the knitting club on campus, as well as locally in town at a at a yarn shop that professors and just local residents frequent.

Lyn Wineman: 13:34

I love that. That sounds like such a fantastic idea. So we've been talking about these knitting kits and we're talking about how people can help for our listeners who would like to find out more. Where can they find more information about Hats4Healing?

Sofia Iuteri: 13:50

On any of our social media platforms Instagram, which is at Hats4Healing. Facebook, YouTube. Our website is a great resource with all of our previous donations listed. A little bit more about me place. You could purchase a kit, donate, fill out a volunteer sign up form to become a volunteer, and we've also been featured in the Greenwich Free Press, my university newspaper, which is called The Columns. The Westfair Business Journal, which is a local paper to me, just covered our launch event, so anywhere there too.

Lyn Wineman: 14:29

That's fantastic, Sofia, for our listeners too, we'll put all of those links in the show notes on kidglov.com as well. So thank you for that and for anybody who's trying to search, the four is the number four Hats4Healing not F-O-R, but the number four. So once again, we'll have that link in the show notes. All right, Sofia, I'm going to ask you a question that I've asked on every single podcast so far, because I feel so blessed to get to talk with inspiring people like you, and I'm going to ask you for a Sofia Iuteri original quote to inspire our listeners. What do you have for us today?

Sofia Iuteri: 15:14

Definitely. I share your love of inspirational quotes as a gymnast and pole vaulter, so I would say respect the goals you are passionate about achieving. Only you are in charge of respecting your own goals and following through on them.

Lyn Wineman: 15:32

Wow, that is powerful. Respect the goals you are passionate about achieving. I love that so much. And since you mentioned being a competitive gymnast and pole vaulter, I'm looking over your shoulder Once again our podcast listeners can't see this but a full row of medals. Wow. Are those your gymnastics medals or your pole vaulting medals, or a little bit of both?

Sofia Iuteri: 15:59

That is all gymnastics. Pole vault I just started last summer, so not too much there yet, but got it.

Lyn Wineman: 16:07

You got some wall space open to add those pole vaulting medals, though. So obviously you're extremely accomplished and passionate and motivated, Sofia, and I appreciate that so much. As we wrap up our time together today, I'm going to ask you one more question here. What is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Sofia Iuteri: 16:31

I hope that listeners leave this podcast feeling empowered to pursue their own goals, whether they're entrepreneurial or not, and no matter how primitive the idea is, as I mentioned, I started this from practically a passing hobby, a side project, and it's grown into a powerful organization that evidently impacts so many people. A huge fulfilling moment for me is receiving letters from volunteers about how thankful they are for an opportunity to make a difference, and I hope that the listeners are empowered to do the same in their communities.

Lyn Wineman: 17:13

Sofia, that's amazing. You are so inspiring. I love what you're doing with Hats4Healing. I truly believe the world needs more people like you. Thanks so much for sharing with us today.

Sofia Iuteri: 17:27

Thank you so much for having me. It was lovely chatting.

Announcer: 17:30

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.