

## Agency for Change Podcast: Katie LeDoux, Founder, Sunflower Grant Writer

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**Katie LeDoux: 0:01**

It is a competition. Always put your best foot forward.

**Announcer: 0:07**

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: 0:30**

Hey everyone, Welcome back to the Agency for Change podcast. I'm Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov, and today I'm excited about talking about unlocking the secrets of successful grant writing and business development. So, our guest is Katie LeDoux. She is the founder and executive director of Sunflower Grant Writers. So I think you are going to hear through this interview, Katie's passion for helping organizations. It shines through in everything she does and she has raised a lot of money for her clients. She's got a fresh perspective and a ton of experience that will help empower organizations to navigate funding both confidently and successfully. Katie, I can't wait to talk to you today. Welcome to the podcast.

**Katie LeDoux: 1:26**

Thank you so much, Lyn. It's great to be here.

**Lyn Wineman: 1:28**

I can't wait to talk to you today, Katie. Let's start by having you tell us more about how Sunflower Grant Writers came to be.

**Katie LeDoux: 1:38**

Sure, I love that question. You know my first job out of college, I was so lucky to work at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It was a dream job and I was in charge of public programming.

**Lyn Wineman: 1:53**

Katie, that's a great first job out of college, yeah.

**Katie LeDoux: 1:57**

It was unbelievable. It was like for an art history major. It was a dream, a dream come true. So I did some grant writing at the Smithsonian as well, and one thing that I found was that it was the projects that were the fun projects that always got funded. So, programming, you know, galas like openings, things like that you know people were always really excited to fund that. But things like, you know, renovating the bathroom which is really important, actually or replacing the roof, like no one really wanted to give money for that because it wasn't as fun and splashy.

And so I always thought, if I had the opportunity, I would love to start my own company to be able to help as many people as possible reach whatever their goals were. You know, whether or not it was something in the splashy category or something more mundane like a roof, which is still essential if you're doing, you know, any kind of programming, you need a roof to be able to do that. So, yeah, that was kind of how it started. And then my husband and I moved to Omaha in 2017. And in 2019, I decided to step back and start Sunflower. So that was sort of the beginning, and so we're on year six now. We just had a five-year anniversary celebration this summer and we're just full steam ahead.

**Lyn Wineman: 3:25**

Fantastic Congratulations. Not a lot of small businesses make it to that five-year mark. So good for you. And you started right before the pandemic, Katie, what was that like?

**Katie LeDoux: 3:39**

I know, you know it was hard. And it was even harder because I didn't know anyone in Omaha. My husband and I had moved here sort of sight unseen and we had no friends or family at the time. So those first few days, those first few weeks and even months were hard, because I would make all these cold calls and then I would be sort of done with my day at you know 10:30 and I would have all this empty space. So our house has never been cleaner during that period and I got a lot of books read.

But it was hard and, like you said, it was the pandemic and just you know. So it finally things started really taking off when I could start to go to meetings and networking events again and sort of introduce myself in person, because I think people love that personal connection, which I do too, and so that was definitely a game changer, was being able to get out and about and go to meetings and events and things like that, start to see some of the people I'd been cold calling for months. So that was really nice.

**Lyn Wineman: 4:45**

That's amazing. Good for you, Katie. So, Katie, one of the terms I know you use is the term grant-ready, and I'm curious if you could just tell us what does that mean, to be grant ready, and why is this important for organizations that are seeking funding?

**Katie LeDoux: 5:03**

Yeah, definitely. So we actually have a free course on our website that you can take to help get grant ready. But in a nutshell, it means that you have certain building blocks in place that can really set you up for success with the grant application. So the first piece is budgets, and so you'll want sort of an overall

organizational budget and then also a budget for the project you're trying to raise money for, and you know we can help with that, anyone can help you with that, but you just need at least something for us to start with. You know, with number, you need to think about your numbers and put that together.

The second part is you need to have a board in place. You need to have at least three members of a board to work with, and I have this funny story where I worked with a client and it came time where I needed to reach out to the board members, and so I called the first person on the list and there was this long pause and he said I have never heard of this organization, I am not on the board, and so I was shocked that had never happened to me before. So I called the other two people that were listed and they said the same thing that they were not aware of the organization. So these young entrepreneurs had just sort of picked people in Omaha they thought would be good fits. And that's not how you're supposed to do a board. It's supposed to be a very close collaborative process. So make sure when you're picking your board that your board knows they're on your board.

The other thing you need to be grant ready is, if you're a nonprofit, is your 501c3 letter from the government, from the IRS, and I always tell people this will look like the most boring letter you've ever gotten. You'll have to wait six months for it and then you feel like it should have gold stickers on it or at least be like sealed with a wax stamp or something. But it's just a totally boring looking piece of paper. But you need that. You need a sustainability plan, so you want to be able to talk to people about how you're going to fund your organization besides grant writing, because that's really important.

You don't want to rely on grants. And then the fifth building block is a digital presence. You just need a basic website to start. But you know, just as you go out and look at funders, they will be going out and looking at you. So you need to have something they can find and learn a little bit about you from.

**Lyn Wineman: 7:44**

That's really really great advice. And you're right, if you wait until the grant application comes out to become grant ready, you're going to be really scrambling. So if you have all of those things in place, you get that grant application. Then you can just focus in on that grant application. So, Katie, you have been very successful in hitting that goal which you stated as your purpose for founding the organization of helping organizations and projects achieve their goals by acquiring grants, even on the non-fund projects, which I love. You are right, nobody's lining up to update roofs and bathrooms, but yet they're essential core needs for these organizations. But tell me more about your approach to grant writing and how you really work to ensure both clarity and accessibility in the grants that you put together, or grant submissions, I would say.

**Katie LeDoux: 8:49**

Yeah, no, that's a great question. I think my team and I we always aim to sort of think about the fact that you want to write at more of a like a high school level, like, so you want to write the grant so that a senior high school could pick up your grant and instantly understand what you were trying to communicate, get excited about your project. You know, I think that some people get stuck trying to use big fancy words and flowery language and that just takes away from the core of what you're trying to express. So I think you know clear, like clear is kind, right, so it's just, it's good to be clear and you know concise and you don't want to fill it in with a lot of stuff you don't need.

I think, especially, it's important to keep in mind that a lot of the family foundations, which are a little smaller but still give a very significant amount of money, they're probably run by volunteers, so it's people who've worked a full day and then they're going in to look at grant applications and you just sort of have to. I picture that person in my head when I'm writing and I think you know I want it to be easy for them to understand what I'm trying to say. So that's really something that we take seriously and you know, sometimes you have to get technical. For example, we've done some grants to help with drought in Western Nebraska, and so you do have to be able to talk about the engineering pieces and things like that, and that's, of course, important, but there are definitely places where you can keep it more, you know, dialed back and simple, just easy to understand. I just think that's just you know really important.

**Lyn Wineman: 10:34**

That's great advice, Katie. You've given us a lot of great advice already, but I think about it this way when you are filling out because I am not a grant writing professional or expert, but every once in a while, I find myself filling out one of these forms A lot of times it's to pitch, to speak at an event or something like that right, and I think you have to think about the people who are reading and evaluating that application as a target audience, right, like I love that you said, because I've been in that position before too, reviewing applications or submissions and, yeah, I've probably already worked a nine or 10 hour day, right, and I'm probably doing this very early in the morning or very late at night, when I've gotten my other work done and my family things done. And the easier you can make it for me to understand the value of your project and to find the information that matches up with my judging criteria, the more likely you are going to be to achieve your goal. So, really, really great advice. So, Katie, I'd love to ask you you know what fuels your passion to keep going in grant writing and with this organization that you've started?

**Katie LeDoux: 12:00**

You know, I think it is just truly such rewarding work. I mean it's been 25 years. I've been doing a lot of this work and I you know you just it never gets old. When you get that call or email that says your grant has been awarded, it's just the most exciting feeling to know there's so many people working so hard with great ideas and great projects and to be able to support them is just incredible. And you know, Nebraska is a really kind of special place to be in this field because we have the most nonprofits per capita in the country, in the state of Nebraska.

**Lyn Wineman: 12:42**

Is that true? Katie, I did not know that. The most nonprofits per capita in the country. Well, you know, I've always known Nebraska was a generous state where people like to do the right thing and take care of their neighbors. But that kind of proves it, doesn't it?

**Katie LeDoux: 12:59**

You know, I, like you said, Nebraska does love to take care of its neighbors and things like that too, and that's the thing it's like. It's paired with this large number of nonprofits but also this extremely generous group of people that's very large, that wants to support the work that's happening in their state and you know, see what's happening and all that. So it's very, it's just a very exciting place to be, I think, right now for nonprofits in particular, with all of those things kind of coming together.

**Lyn Wineman: 13:38**

Fantastic, Katie, we have a lot of nonprofit executives and marketers and board members that follow this podcast. I'm curious, beyond what you've already told us, because you've already dropped some really great information, what advice would you give to organizations preparing to write a grant application?

**Katie LeDoux: 13:54**

You know. Again, I would definitely recommend GrantReady, which we've already talked about. You know, I think we have developed, for example, a questionnaire that we send new clients and I think that anything you get like that from anyone you're working with, just the more completely you can fill it out, you know, the more information you can give, that will just be helpful. We really pride ourselves on getting to know an organization very well and sort of feeling members, even if we're contractors, and so just you know little things like that, like I said, like filling out, you know, the application is really important. Just knowing the importance of starting the process with research, which is what we do. So finding those funding sources that are a lot of your mission.

I think that's such an important step to take because so many people will come in and say, oh, I've heard of the such and such foundation and they might be, they're a wonderful foundation, but it might not be a good fit for you.

So just taking that first step, like stepping back a little bit and looking to see what's out there, that really with your particular mission and goals, is really just a nice pause to take and make sure you're applying to kind of the best places you can, based on the information that we have. So I think those kind of three things are just really important. And stay open. You know, if it's a foundation you haven't heard of, just be open to applying to that and trying it. And you know, and having realistic expectations too, you know, if you're a first-time nonprofit applying, you're probably not going to get a \$50,000 or \$100,000 grant right away. You've got to build a relationship with that foundation and that organization and, you know, invite them to your programs or invite them to something to see and just kind of start slowly. So I think just kind of having all those things in check as you get started really helps make the process.

**Lyn Wineman: 16:00**

I love what you said about relationship building because I think many nonprofits recognize relationship building is extremely important when you're looking at donor development and making that donor ask, but also very important for grant applications and foundations as well. And the more they know about you and the more you build that relationship over the years, the more likely you are to get to that big award that really is difference making. To get to that big award that really is different making. So, Katie, being a professional in this space and really being deep in this space, do you foresee any trends or changes in the world of grant writing and funding in the coming years?

**Katie LeDoux: 16:50**

Well, I do. You know it'll be interesting to see what happens in 2025. The last couple of years there's several foundations to cut back on the amount of funding they're giving. So you might still get funding from the organization you've gotten funding from in the past, but it might be at a lower dollar amount

than you're expecting, and that's just. You know the economy and a bunch of other factors and things like that. So again, it'll be interesting to see how that starts to maybe turn around in the next year.

And I think also, some foundations in Omaha for example, there's a large foundation, the Holland Foundation, they sunset this year which means they are sort of ending their giving and that was always part of the plan, they wrote that into their bylaws when they founded, but a lot of organizations in Omaha, especially artistic organizations, receive money from the Holland Foundation, so they're now having to think differently about where are we going to go to fill that gap. So I think, as organizations do that type of thing, it's interesting.

And then I think, you know, in the political landscape, it just it affects things a little bit Like if, if the sort of picture of landscape is more liberal, there tend to be more federal grant opportunities available and things like that, and then, if it's more conservative, there tends to be more like private foundation grants, I would say, and that's a very broad generalization, but just something to kind of think about in terms of, like the federal versus foundation kind of grant landscape.

**Lyn Wineman: 18:40**

That really makes a lot of sense, Katie, and I think what you're saying about grants actually also holds true for a lot of things that are happening to nonprofits right now. We're seeing individual donations go down a bit from previous years, and we're seeing corporate sponsorship dollars. Maybe your sponsor still sticks with you, but maybe they come in at a lower level than they did before. So I think there's a lot of like belt tightening and pencil sharpening going on right as we kind of think through what other options are out there for us. So I think, in particular, what I hear from you is an organization that's maybe been very heavily donor funded or sponsor funded in the past, you know this is the time to get grant ready and maybe start to look at that as a supplemental income, and I'm sure that you can help people with that. So this is probably a good time to ask you for our listeners who want to learn more, where can they find more information about Sunflower Grant Writers?

**Katie LeDoux: 19:46**

Absolutely. Well, we have a great site. I think it's great, but that's probably the best place that has all of my contact information, how to reach us, articles, things like that. So that is just [sunflowergw.com](http://sunflowergw.com) and, like I said, you can get all information you need there read about our clients, read about our team and then easily contact me right from there.

**Lyn Wineman: 20:10**

Beautiful and we'll have that, Katie, and for all our listeners. We'll have that link in the show notes on the KidGlov website as well. And, Katie, I imagine that's where they find the grant ready information as well for people who might want to go and check that out.

**Katie LeDoux: 20:28**

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

**Lyn Wineman: 20:31**

Great Katie. One thing I love to ask. I've asked this on every single Agency for Change podcast episode, but I am personally inspired by motivational quotes and I'm hoping you can give me a few Katie LeDoux original words of wisdom for our listeners.

**Katie LeDoux:** 20:52

Absolutely so. My quote is inspired by an actual quote which I have a vase on my mantle that says this, which is In case you're wondering, it is a competition. So my quote would be I love it. It is a competition. Always put your best foot forward. I think it's really important for organizations to remember that. You know, even if you're applying to a foundation, you've already gotten funding from, you know you don't want to just phone it in. You want to again put your best foot forward, put together an application, give all the information, do your reporting, all of that. You just want to shine every time right and just keep in mind that it is competitive. I mean, grants are competitive, so you want to do what you can to stand out in the crowd.

**Lyn Wineman:** 21:44

Katie, I love that. I have to ask is a competition in your Gallup strength finder top five? I bet it is.

**Katie LeDoux:** 21:54

No, I have not. I will take that and let you know.

**Lyn Wineman:** 21:58

I bet it is.

**Katie LeDoux:** 21:59

I will let you know about that. That's great. I love that. I hadn't thought about that, but I bet it is. Yes, yes.

**Lyn Wineman:** 22:06

A lot of people that find themselves, I think, in marketing or grant writing in this field, where you're just trying to gain that slight edge right Like that slight edge can be the difference between getting a big award or being left off the list. And, and that's what I hear you saying I'm going to give you credit for a couple of quotes today, because I also wrote down. You said earlier clear is kind, and I don't know if you're the first person that's ever said that, but I think that's a great quote and something to remember. But also, shine every time. I could see it would make a great water bottle sticker, wouldn't it shine every time. So, thank you, thank you for overachieving.

**Katie LeDoux:** 22:44

Yes yes, the author, Brene Brown, said clear is kind and I I just try and keep that in mind. But yeah, the other the other ones are mine, but I think she did a great job of saying that when she said clear is kind.

**Lyn Wineman: 23:07**

We all love Brene Brown, so that is a really good one. Katie, as we wrap up this great conversation today, I just have one more question, and that is what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing.

**Katie LeDoux: 23:21**

Oh, great question. I think just that it's that it's important just to keep in mind how many amazing people there are who spend their lives working to make the world a better place and that you know our work in grant writing is get them the funding they need and connect people with funds that can do that to these just amazing individuals that are, like I said, giving their life to make the world a better place, and that's kind of special. So the more you can help support them and do things like that I just think is great through volunteering or connecting someone to a foundation or you know, whatever your skill set is, but I think it's just really important to help all these great people and organizations.

**Lyn Wineman: 24:07**

Katie, that is fantastic and I'm just going to say I fully believe the world needs more people like you. I'm glad you had the opportunity to start up Sunflower Grant Writers to do such good work for nonprofits in the community and across the country. Thank you for taking time to share with us today on Agency for Change.

**Katie LeDoux: 24:28**

Thank you so much, Lyn. This has been great. I've loved talking to you, so thank you for taking the time.

**Announcer: 24:38**

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