

Agency for Change Podcast: Kyle Van Frank, Executive Director, FIRE Foundation of Denver

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Kyle Van Frank: 0:01

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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: 0:21

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, President and Chief Strategist at KidGlov. Welcome back to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. So today I am going to talk to somebody who is very passionate about the work that they do. As a matter of fact, you know, when you talk with somebody who is on fire for their work, you can just see it in their face, you can feel it in their voice and I think that you are going to feel it today when we talk with Kyle Van Frank. He's the Executive Director of the FIRE Foundation of Denver, and the FIRE Foundation is all about championing the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools in the Denver area. He's going to talk to us about why this work is important and how it benefits the education process as a whole. Plus, he's got some great tidbits for donor relationships and development work, as he is a real rising star in this space. Kyle, welcome to the podcast. I can't wait to talk with you today.

Kyle Van Frank: 1:41

Thank you so much for having me.

Lyn Wineman: 1:43

I'm really looking forward to talking to you more about this great work that you're doing, but could you start, Kyle, just by telling us more about FIRE Foundation of Denver and the work that you're doing?

Kyle Van Frank: 1:57

Absolutely so FIRE Foundation of Denver is a nonprofit based here in Denver, Colorado, and we have a mission to champion the inclusion of children with disabilities in Catholic schools through fundraising, educational resources, and promoting a culture of belonging.

Lyn Wineman: 2:14

Kyle, I love how that mission statement just so nicely rolled off your tongue. I could tell that you have done that before, but since you yeah, you have a bit, haven't you?

Kyle Van Frank: 2:25

Yeah.

Lyn Wineman: 2:26

Yep, so since you opened the door to it, this sounds like a silly question, but I really want to hear your answer. Why is championing the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools so important to you and to the organization?

Kyle Van Frank: 2:43

Yeah, you know, we work with Catholic schools and we feel very, very strongly that Catholic schools are an extension of the local church, the local parish, what happens in the sanctuary, and we believe that those Catholic Christian communities should be providing schools that are a home for everyone. And so, you know, we believe, just from that very basic level, that the schools should really be a home for everyone, and what's the great news about it is that there's also some really great academic reasons. We know that when kids of varying learning abilities all are educated in the same classroom, test scores go up.

Lyn Wineman: 3:25

Really, that's awesome.

Kyle Van Frank: 3:27

Yeah, yeah, we know that social emotional development is really key. Students learn to interact with other students that face adversity in different ways than them, and they grow in compassion and empathy.

And there's lots of statistics that show as well that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities that were included growing up are more likely to seek higher ed and have long-term employment and fulfillment in life

Lyn Wineman: 3:40

You know what I love about what you just said, Kyle, and you don't know this, but last week's episode I spoke with Jay Wilkinson, who's the founder of the Do More Good movement, and he has been working on a research study of the top leaders in the world, the top corporate leaders in the world, and what he said is he asked them what the important traits were and they put them into a word cloud and in the top five is empathy. So when you match up the fact that you and FIRE Foundation of Denver and Catholic schools are working on something that increases empathy and then the top leaders in the world are saying empathy is one of those top five characteristics, that matches up pretty well, doesn't it?

Kyle Van Frank: 4:51

Yeah, that's fantastic.

Lyn Wineman: 4:53

Yeah. So, Kyle, tell me this you are a young man and you're an Executive Director of this very dynamic organization. I'm curious how did your career journey lead you here?

Kyle Van Frank: 5:09

A windy path around a lot of over the hill and through the woods. So I, you know, I studied musical theater in undergrad. I went to the University of Alabama and I worked as a professional actor and director and teaching artist for a few years. And while I was working at a theater in Florida, during the pandemic, we were all, I mean we went from this team of, I mean, 200 people down to 60.

Lyn Wineman: 5:37

It's even amazing that you could hold 60 during the pandemic in the entertainment space right.

Kyle Van Frank: 5:43

Absolutely, absolutely, yeah. I mean to have been able to do as much as we did was really a testament to their financial acumen. But we had to find ways to gather income because we didn't have shows and so everyone was sort of wearing new hats and the little bit of development that I had done philanthropy in college and volunteering I always loved it, but it was really amazing to kind of see behind the curtain to that development office, and I really fell in love with it, and so I went back to school, got my master's at the University of Denver in nonprofit leadership and was working in alumni relations and fundraising at the Catholic high school where I went in Memphis, Tennessee, and, as fate would have it, a girl had come out to Denver and I knew that I needed to follow her out here.

And it's working out, because we're about to get married

Lyn Wineman: 6:39

Congratulations on that as a matter of fact, I think this podcast launches on the day you return from your honeymoon. So, congratulations.

Kyle Van Frank: 6:48

Thank you, thank you, yeah. But it was just this amazing moment when I, you know, was looking for jobs and this posting popped up and it was like, okay, education, fundraising. And then, you know, while I had actually been teaching in the arts, I taught a lot of different things. My favorite class was teaching young adults with disabilities music, and I always thought, wouldn't it be amazing to do something more for this community? And just that was always in the back of my head. And it was just this check, check, check. And I found out later it was actually the last day they were accepting applications.

Lyn Wineman: 7:26

Wow, that sounds serendipitous. Fate, god thing, whatever you want to call it. It sounds like this was supposed to happen.

Kyle Van Frank: 7:32

Right, yeah, yeah, and so that's how I ended up here almost two years ago.

Lyn Wineman: 7:37

That's amazing. So, Kyle, one thing you said that really sparked my attention is the fact that you love development work and fundraising, and for many people it really even for a cause that you love and believe in it can be kind of uncomfortable to ask for money, but yet it's the lifeblood of nonprofits. So I'm really curious I know we have a lot of nonprofit leaders who listen to the podcast. Do you have any strategies or insights that you found really effective for engaging those donors and building that support?

Kyle Van Frank: 8:17

I think I've always approached fundraising with the knowledge that there's a lot of wealth in the world and there's a lot of problems in the world. And my belief in humanity is that people want to solve those problems. And you can have all the money in the world, and if you don't have the right ideas and the right people it can't make the change. But we also know that we've got a lot of great nonprofits out there with a lot of great people and ideas that need the money, and so I think that you've got to break down that barrier of chances are, if you've made it, especially in major giving, if you've made it to that one-on-one lunch, the person wants to give.

Lyn Wineman: 8:55

Yeah, that's right.

Kyle Van Frank: 8:57

I think you just have to tell yourself that right, you have to approach it from that perspective of the wealth is out there, the problems are there and our job is just to connect those means to that need. But I think that what's crucial to that is relationships. I think that whether you're doing a campaign that's going to be going out to hundreds of thousands of people or you are meeting one-on-one with that major donor, relationships still matter. Treating people as people matters, listening and really coming to understand why is this donor interested? What about our mission sparks their interest? And if you really, I tell you, when I go to lunch sometimes I mean I'm running out of time before I make the ask because I'm just enjoying getting to know a person.

Lyn Wineman: 9:45

Right. I bet you hear a lot of wonderful stories too, right, Like when you sit down with that donor and you really talk about their interest in the cause. My experience has been that a lot of times there's a

through line to I'm interested in this cause because I was touched by this event in my life, in my family, in my community, and I bet you hear a lot of great stories.

Kyle Van Frank: 10:12

You do and you learn the person that you didn't even know, in our instance, serving young people with disabilities. You never knew that this donor had an adult child with a disability.

You never got to experience inclusion and you know, maybe it's something they keep a little closer to their chest because maybe it is a sorrow that that didn't happen. But you get to know them and you learn that. Or you learn that they're passionate about a particular aspect of education and that goes back to that full sort of cyclical nature of development is, when you meet with that person again, can you share a story that actually isn't just the great stories that you share in your campaigns that are for everyone, but can it be something that's really personal, because this person loves that they're interested.

Lyn Wineman: 10:59

All right, you opened the door and you, Kyle, are a self-described passionate storyteller. Do you have any great stories you can share with us about kids or families that maybe have benefited from the work of the FIRE Foundation?

Kyle Van Frank: 11:15

Yeah, I do, it's my favorite part of my job is getting to hear the stories and the. You know. There's one student in particular that sticks out who she was. I think this might have been when she was in the fourth or fifth grade and she had just started going to school with other kids in an inclusive environment, previously had been homeschooled, and she it's her birthday's coming up and so mom is going to invite. There's two homerooms at this school. She's going to invite the girls in her homeroom. And another mom says no, you got to invite all the girls in the whole grade. They all have to, that's what you do. And she said okay, all right, so here's these 30 girls.

Lyn Wineman: 11:54

Oh my gosh, I'm overwhelmed by the thought of that. Yeah.

Kyle Van Frank: 11:59

Exactly 35th grade girls on a Saturday afternoon eating hamburgers and having a great time, you know, in the backyard at the house and mom sees her daughter leave the room where all the girls are and she says are you okay? And she said, yeah, it's just too loud in there. She has, among other things, some real sensory sensitivities. And so two girls, without skipping a beat, follow in and they say what's wrong, what's going on? And she said you guys are just too loud. And they said well, what if we had a whisper party? And she said, okay. And so for the rest of the party, including singing happy birthday, these 30 girls on their own, without an adult telling them to, without anyone intervening, said what do you need? How can we help you? And they did it.

Lyn Wineman: 12:43

Wow that's so cool. It kind of gives me chills a little bit. Yeah, you know, that's a wallet opening story right there right, I love that and you know that I think that's fantastic. So can you talk a little bit more specifically about, like, how does the foundation come in and support a school or a community to make this possible?

Kyle Van Frank: 13:08

It's a great question, and we're kind of a unique foundation in that you know a lot of foundations grant money and you hear back in the reports or a nonprofit maybe runs programs, but they don't give funds away and we really do both, and so what's crucial, though, is when we partner with a school, we're telling them you're a school, you know education, we want to support what you're doing and we just want to give you the resources to help, and so our grants really are an investment in the school and they fund staff salaries so that they can hire special educators, paraprofessionals, professional development maybe to send a teacher through a higher ed program or to do a training for the whole school.

And lastly, adaptive technology and equipment. It could be a communication device for the playground, headphones for a sensory basket in a room, a desk for a child that needs a physical accommodation. So we really are investing long-term in the school through those three ways. Those are what our grants fund. But we're a model of, we're an affiliate of FIRE Foundation, the original FIRE Foundation based in Kansas City, Missouri, and we're a network of 10 independent foundations across the country that are all doing the same thing, collaborating with each other.

And something they learned in Kansas City about 15 years in was that the grants are amazing, they change the game, but that PD component's really key, and so we work with our local archdiocese to bring in nationally renowned educators, trainers, consultants, to put on professional development for the schools so that teachers can learn and get up to speed on some of these topics. And so you know those are our two largest programs are the school grants program and the professional development, and that's really allowed us to invest in schools, long-term through that financial investment, but also in the short and near term, to say OK, what are the topics? Is it behavior regulation, is it modification, curriculum, universal design for learning? What are the kind of hot topics that you need that we can come and fill in the gaps quickly for you?

Lyn Wineman: 15:14

Yeah, I'm sure the schools also appreciate your posture of support and coming alongside them versus telling them what to do, so I think that's really neat too. Kyle, I know you just had a big event and by the time this comes out it will have been a couple months out, but you had a big event. It was really successful for you. Would you like to share a bit about the event?

Kyle Van Frank: 15:41

Yeah, we hold two events every year our Bonfire Gala in August and Hearts on Fire, which is our Valentine's cocktail hour.

Lyn Wineman: 15:50

So that's coming up.

Kyle Van Frank: 15:56

It is, it is February 6th, so we're very excited about that event. But our gala that just happened really is our largest fundraiser of the year. We had about 375 people.

Lyn Wineman: 16:05

That's a pretty nicely filled room. Yeah, good for you.

Kyle Van Frank: 16:10

We were excited. You know we've been around for three years and so to have a crowd that size. We've outgrown our venue and are moving somewhere else next year because of it and it's really fantastic. But, yeah, it's our annual gala and through sponsorships and a live auction, ticket sales and and just regular donations, it provides the bulk of our funding. But we were really just blown away by the support. This year we raised over \$600,000.

Lyn Wineman: 16:37

Wow, that's great.

Kyle Van Frank: 16:39

It's \$150,000 more than we were expecting.

Lyn Wineman: 16:43

That's amazing.

Kyle Van Frank: 16:44

And it's allowed us to really respond. Last year, when we were going through the grants process, the schools that applied asked us for \$1.7 million. We were able to give away half a million.

Lyn Wineman: 16:56

It's hard to say no to right. It's so hard because the cause is so good, the need is so great, it's for kids who are vulnerable, right. So the more you raise, the more you can say yes.

Kyle Van Frank: 17:12

Exactly.

Lyn Wineman: 17:13

Congratulations.

Kyle Van Frank: 17:15

Thank you. Thank you, yes, it was a wonderful night, yeah, and always, always just a great community night. We're spread apart that, you know the schools we serve all across Northern Colorado, and we usually have at least a parent or a teacher or somebody from every school there, and so it's just a really cool evening, because it really only happens that one night a year.

Lyn Wineman: 17:34

Yeah, yeah. So, Kyle, you're doing such good work. You're on a path for success, which I have to say, kudos to you, because this is in a year when a lot of people are seeing donations trend down and sponsorships trend down, so really good for you. What's on the horizon? What are you looking forward to in the coming year?

Kyle Van Frank: 17:57

Yeah, well, because we have been blessed to have a great year and continued growth, we are looking forward to increasing our impact to schools next year by almost \$300,000. Which is just very it's very exciting to know that we're still not at that 1.7 million. I know we will be one day.

Lyn Wineman: 18:18

Yeah, I have faith in you, Kyle. I have total faith It'll be before you know it for sure.

Kyle Van Frank: 18:25

But it is, it's just great to know that we're going to be able to grow a little bit and increase our investment in professional development. We're going to be taking about 30 teachers to a national conference in February.

Lyn Wineman: 18:36

A national conference can be so energizing and what I love about it too, if you're taking 30 teachers, they're going to network with each other, they're going to network with people from other communities. There's going to be like lifelong kind of support that's happening and conversations and in addition to the education. So I think that's really cool.

Kyle Van Frank: 19:00

Absolutely. And you know, just in kind of talking to the teachers, as we're registering them and getting them ready, we're learning, I mean, there are some teachers that have never been to a conference.

Lyn Wineman: 19:10

Yeah, Well, it's expensive, right. Conferences are expensive and it's also if the conferences happen during the school year then there have to be subs and lesson plans and all the things. So I think it can also just be such an energizer for those that get to go, sometimes it can just be hard and I've got to imagine you hit springtime as a teacher. You're like, how many more months till summer?

It has to be very, very energizing. That's really, really exciting, Kyle. So, Kyle, we've got a pretty good listener base for Agency for Change in Denver and in Colorado, but also for people across the country who might want to support you, send you money so you can hit that \$1.7, just check into what you're doing. See pictures from your event register for the upcoming event. How do they find you?

Kyle Van Frank: 20:06

We keep it all at firefoundationdenver.org and, yeah, there's a lot of great stuff out there. If you're a teacher looking for resources, if you're a donor interested in giving, if you just want to learn more about what is inclusive education, it's a great place to go to start to learn all those things.

Lyn Wineman: 20:25

That's awesome. We'll make sure for everyone to have that link in the show notes on the KidGlov website as well, so that's easy to find. All right, Kyle, I'm going to switch gears here and ask you my favorite question, and I ask this question because I get to talk to so many people on this podcast who are so inspiring but yet so humble, right, and so I want a Kyle Van Frank original quote to inspire our listeners. What do you have for us?

Kyle Van Frank: 21:00

Yeah, I would say listen to what your community says it needs.

Lyn Wineman: 21:05

Ooh yeah, listen to what your community says it needs. Wow, that's got to work for fundraising. It's got to work for support. It's got to work for so many levels. That is a gem. Thank you for that, Kyle. I love talking to you and I'm sad that we're coming to an end of this conversation, but as we do wrap this up, I'd love to tie a bow on this by asking you what is the most important thing you'd like people to know about the work that you're doing?

Kyle Van Frank: 21:43

That inclusive education works. It doesn't just, it's a great thing to talk about because it gives us the warm fuzzies and it's beautiful to look at, but it really works. Educational outcomes improve, it changes lives and it really transforms the trajectory of young people's lives.

Lyn Wineman: 22:02

Things that we all want for our kids or the kids in our communities. That's lovely. Kyle, I'm going to say I fully believe the world needs more people like you, needs more organizations like the FIRE Foundation

of Denver. I just I appreciate you talking with me today, especially when you're so close to that big wedding event. So congratulations on that as well.

Kyle Van Frank: 22:28

Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me and for all you do.

Lyn Wineman: 22:31

Absolutely.

Announcer: 22:34

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