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Oral History Conversation Teresa Smith (Dreams for Change)

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TERESA SMITH (DREAMS FOR CHANGE)

with Charlie Gunn, Cole Davenport, Marissa DiBlasio, and Melad Youssofi

Marissa: Along the lines of doing things different, for example the safe parking, can you give us another example of how you go doing things differently and what process you take?*

Teresa: That goes along with my whole life I never do the standard norm, very different from everyone else. A lot of it is the programs itself that we do. If it's being done we don't want to do it or if we are doing something similar it is because we have a new innovative idea. Safe parking was in Santa Barbara but very different from ours. Safe parking is new idea, allows people to park here, while we try to move people out of their cars. We have become the lead model in how this program operates, our model is replicated the most. Focusing on rehousing solution. I am a very solution based person. Evaluate the problem not too much time, how do we solve this. From there focusing on nutritional needs. Very simpler approach Let's get the research done. We know there is some gaps in the food and in the nutrients within the homeless population. Took time to map all the meals being provided in downtown area. See how much food is being provided what days and what times, behind closed doors, how many people they were serving. What groups from schools and youth groups. In essence, we mapped it out to find root of meals. Business partnerships were saying there is too much food being provided, food everywhere. A meal and a half per homeless person. A lot of hot dogs and pb&j's. NO MORE HOT DOGS! There is a gap because no one can really live of a meal and a half a day, that being that they have the capacity to get down and get that food each day. So once again, how do we tap into existing resources, all these great benefits for the homeless, but they are just not using them. How do we bridge that gap?

Problem: How do we get more food off to the homeless? They came back with a food truck, while they came back with many ideas. Food stamps were difficult because you couldn't buy hot food with them.

One of my big things is to be an avenue for learning and opportunities for student. Part of that direction for students is that they came up with a sustainable project, and we decided to move forward project. Once again just being in tune with what the listening to what the clients want, what exactly is going on out there. The food truck project takes a look at many different levels of homelessness, but focusing on bringing some dignity and choice to them. Taking more of a consensus organizing approach. Allow them to choose what they want to eat. No one in the nation doing it at them time. Now others have popped up. Doing the research behind it is key.

Marissa: Really talking to the people you are dealing with to see what they want.

Teresa: Exactly and that's part of the research that people forget. Research isn't just looking at books and articles. Applied research is not the right term, but it is about taking that research

into the field and doing that qualitative type of work into the streets. A lot of time it was a group environment as we would walk up to a group of tents, and say hey what are your thoughts on this? But doing it with a very specific intent, we went in there with very specific questions, so we could do the backside evaluation on it to do the scientific evaluation on it. And I think that gets left off, quite a lot, they look at the numbers, the business, the reports, but they don't get down and get the qualitative information, where you found out the key things that matter like the dignity aspect. You can't get that out of the numbers the importance of being treated like a dignified person. They came from going out and talking with people.

Charlie: I saw on your website, one of your goals is to create measurable outcome, how do you measure whether a person feels if they have more dignity.

Teresa: Those kinds of things are hard to measure, but that goes back to having some of those conversations afterwards. Just by their responses back and being recognized and seeing the impact we have. That brings up a very good point, I should probably take an intentional measurement of that, we really haven't in years because it is there. I see it first hand, it is the feedback I get from the community, and sometimes from the non-homeless people. "People are gathering around your food truck" in essence, saying "they seem too happy", not really saying it in those words. We want them to be enjoyable and converse with the people working at the truck and each other. And take that moment to feel normal, like any other person standing outside the food truck, just waiting for your food.

Melad: What is the turnaround time to get benefits after applying for Cal fresh?

Teresa: They will have benefits loaded within 24 hours if they go down and apply. All they have to do is identify that they are homeless and they automatically are loaded with emergency benefits.

Melad: Okay

Teresa: So they walk out with a card in hand and within 24 hours – you know, because it's an electronic document on the card - so whatever the time is for that kind of thing they dump the money.

Melad: What is there, what is there budget?

Teresa: For a single individual it is currently I believe 189 [dollars] is the max benefit. So if you have zero income, during the recession they had increased it. It was up to two-twenty-something [dollars] but...

Charlie: Is that monthly?

Teresa: It's monthly.

Melad: So it's around 5 or 6 dollars a day?

Teresa: Yeah, so they cut it back to 189, back to the original amount after the recession time.

Charlie: Right.

Teresa: Now you get more based upon children, you get more dollars. The average benefit for a child is around 250 [dollars]. So there's families with children that can have food stamp benefits of up to 1500 dollars or more depending on how many kids they have in the household.

Melad: And this is good for any kind of food related – hot or cold?

Teresa: No, there is restrictions. For food from a grocery store, not prepared food, not from the deli. When it comes to prepared food there is restrictions. Either it has to be what's called the restaurant meal provider program – so there's a program now that restaurants can buy in to. They buy a license from the county and then they can get registered to accept EBT. But it's only for homeless, senior or disabled.

Melad: Okay.

Teresa: So the cards are electronically tagged so that you as an individual have your card electronically tagged – one of those – then you can use it at a restaurant meal provider program. Now when I say restaurant it's Burger King and fast food joints.

Melad: Right. There's like a big sign outside of Jack In The Box which says...

Teresa: Yeah, that they take EBT. But there's also a difference. They can take EBT but not food stamps because they can take the cash benefits which can be used for anything that the person wants. A lot of restaurants are doing that now

Melad: Yeah.

Teresa: So they're saying, "I might as well take the cash benefits".

Charlie: Well, they're trying to take advantage of it.

Teresa: Yeah, but they may not be able to take the food stamp benefits. They have to be specifically identified as a part of the restaurant meal program. Now, since we're a non-profit we do not have to follow the meal restaurant program guidelines. So we don't have to pay that fee, we can accept it all. We fall underneath a different program as a meal provider program. As a non-profit we're still also limited to homeless, senior and disabled but we're not limited to the tagged cards. They just have to self-identify that they're one of those and we just have to target that population. So by us going to the East Village it's very clear that...

Charlie: Right.

Teresa: Our population is homeless and that's why we can use our EBT cards. So now I can't roll into a fair and say, "use your food stamps here!" You couldn't do that because it's not the target population.

Melad: So for my own sake and knowledge, what is the difference between the food stamp and the...

Teresa: Cash benefits?

Melad: Yeah.

Teresa: So the cash benefits is for the children. So basically it's the welfare; it's what people used to call welfare and it's just the cash. You get so many cash dollars based upon your child and, you know, how many kids you had when you entered into the system. And it's limited to so many years and those kind of things, so you know... and if you get income then it scales where as food stamps is solely for the food stamps.

Melad: Is it also limited to people who have been incarcerated recently?

Teresa: For the cash benefit?

Melad: For the food stamps.

Teresa: No, the food stamps have a lot looser regulations.

Melad: Okay.

Teresa: You can get them as a single individual, you can get them as a – there's several felonies that do prohibit you because it is a federal program and there's several felonies you can but I'm not sure where that line is. I know those who do not, or others who receive social security because do not get there food supplemented on social security. So...

Charlie: Another question along the lines of that; so keeping in mind the fact that many of these programs are federally sponsored, you have lived in San Diego and different parts of the country so you can attest that there are different costs of living in different places. Not just in terms of what you pay for rent but also in terms of what you pay for food. Is there a noticeable difference in the quality of... not, not quality but the amount, I guess that you can get with the same amount of government funding?

Teresa: Yes

Charlie: Do you understand what I'm trying to ask?

Teresa: Yeah, yeah. Does your dollar go further in other places?

Charlie: Right. Yeah, exactly.

Teresa: Very much so.

Charlie: Okay.

Teresa: Very, very much so.

Charlie: Because I would imagine that contributes to the issue here in San Diego.

Teresa: Very much so. Well San Diego, yeah that is. Current issues around food accessibility which goes hand-in-hand, you know. People are making these choices every day, you know. Food or rent?

Charlie: Right.

Teresa: You know, period. That's probably the number one choice between our low income families. So am I getting food or am I paying rent? Our cost of food [in San Diego] is definitely much higher. It's amazingly different, you know. Our standard fast food meal right now is 7 or 8 dollars for a burger fry and a drink.

Charlie: Right.

Teresa: You go back to the Midwest they're still like 4 or 5 bucks.

Charlie and Marissa: Yeah.

Teresa: You know, kind of living in different parts. So yeah there's obviously a big difference in the actual cost of items. And the stagnation of wages are still the same. You know, what we make here is still the same as what we make in other parts of the country which have cheaper cost of living so that definitely plays into it. And, you know, we have those conversations all the time with our clients in our safe parking program, because obviously people who have cars we do see a contingent that hops on the highway, it ends here in San Diego and they're here. That's how they look at it. "The highway ended and here I am. Help." And that's our conversation we have with them – getting them to understand what the cost is to be in this city versus anywhere but here or Miami. Basically, right now you could live cheaper. And that's hard for someone to hear. I had a lady that was very upset with me this last week because she moved here from Arizona thinking that she was just gonna get all of this instant help and someone was just going to help her get an apartment and get disability – well we can help you get disability but it's still not going to be enough to get an apartment.

Charlie: People think that California is such a liberal state...

Teresa: Yeah. Exactly. And you know, it's like, I'll be more than happy to help you get that income but you're still not going to be able to pay for an apartment here. Now what are you going to do?

Marissa: Mhm

Teresa: And you know, she just basically freaked out going, "I-I-I'll figure it out!" Yeah we will, but it's not gonna be the answer you think it's gonna be. So there is those situations, but a majority of our clients are not from out of town. There are San Diegans that are being pushed out and they end up homeless and on the streets and so that's different, you know, it's a different kind of conversation. How do you tell someone that the community that they've known and loved and lived in all their life may not be their community anymore because of the cost? It's a loss for them.

Marissa: So along the lines of that, you had experienced that kind of hard conversation to have with her – I don't know if that would go along with hurdles you face every day – what... could you give us some examples of that?*

Teresa: We face all kinds of hurdles, we face all kinds... We face all kinds because what we're doing is so different.

Marissa: Mhm

Teresa: So we're constantly fighting a different fire. It's a different hurdle each day, I feel like. I never can get a handle on it. Or right when you think you do it all collapses again. It's like, "ughhh, now this.." But you know we face these – political, you know – we've been kicked out of cities. We've had to stare... we've had community meetings with our clients and community members. We've had community members just barrage our clients that don't even know them, you know? And we're talkin', you know, our clients, they represent our community. They have college degrees, they have kids, you know a lot of our clients have average lives and it just breaks your heart, seeing that kind of stuff, you know, seeing people being treated like that for no reason or for horrible reasons. And it's the constant having to fight for them. Not only for them but for the programs; for the dollars and for the resources to have the programs; I'm fortunate enough that we have been somewhat successful so we can have outcomes to kind of say, "yes, look, it really does work. We really have helped these people." But we run into struggle with clients. You're dealing with a very difficult group of clients. You run into trouble with systems. We deal with families. We see domestic violence, child abuse – all that kind of stuff that you would see in an average community. It's frustrating trying to deal with the system when you know a mom who tries to take off in the middle of the night to do drugs and leaves a 3... a 3 year old and a baby in the car for hours on end. And you can't get child welfare to come out because it's after 5. You know, and you make 5 or 6 calls and it's like, "well, do you know where they are during the day?" No because our program runs 6 to 6. "Well that's after our hours." You know, it's that kind of frustrating and you're impacting children... severely impacting children... because of a system issue, you know? And it's not because there is anything it's just that they won't work after 5.

Marissa: Yeah.

Teresa: It kills me! You know, those kind of things are getting really frustrating. In essence they're somewhat hurdles. They're personal frustration hurdles of, you know, not being able to fully help an individual. You know, we have hurdles around this whole issue of homelessness. There are 'not in my backyard' people and we're trying to deal with those types of issues and constantly mediate, or mitigate, some of those conversations and not pushing them. You know, locating ourselves so that we don't have to deal with that.

Marissa: When times are tough are there any things in particular that you think about to keep you going?*

Teresa: There are two things, it bugs me to say this because this is where all the money goes in the nonprofit world, kids and animals, and that's why, cause those two populations are where all the money goes, those are what pull on people's hearts it holds true to me too when I go down to the program and see those kids living in there cars running around the parking lot

enjoying themselves to some level, and knowing they can do that, at that moment because we have the program and the response that the kids, know me, they come up and race, just having those moments is that regenerative, and the pets too, we are one of the only homeless programs that can have pets with them, I like seeing the animals in the program, its those two pieces, knowing if we weren't there where would they be, those pets get relinquished, the kids aren't safe cause they are trapped in the car, moms to afraid to let them run around, but in our area they are in a gated community they can run, they can ride their scooters or whatever they have, whatever they want to do. And that's what keeps me going, going down, I just go to visit to reconnect with the clients to know why I'm doing, cause there's always that one client every time, that tells me why I'm doing it. They need this, they need this program, and that's why I do it, because after them, there is gonna be someone else who needs it. I get a lot of support from my wife, my spouse that encourages me obviously, sticks up for me, which allows me to do this, doesn't hound me to make money, she puts up with all of it, that helps a lot, she has a big heart for the community, and she does right by supporting me. Staying connected to the people were serving is the main reason why

Charlie: What is the distinction between Clients, and Participants, when referring to the people who use your services?

Teresa: We usually use participants, not clients because they are re participating in our program cause client sometimes in this field comes with a negative connotation, in a business world it's a mutual ground in this community its different, it's a therapist model, a sense of judgment that comes with that word, the disabled community gave up that term a while ago specifically for that reason, they used consumer, because they are consuming the services that they are being offered. We call our clients participants most of the time, because they are re participating in the program, and its their choice to be there, there choice to participate or not, this is what we have to offer, and its there choice, the more they participate the more we have to offer. Most people use client, but it means differently in this context. But 'participant' is very intentional; all of our forms say participant agreement

Cole: Do you have any advice for us, or anything you want to tell people interested in something like this?*

Teresa: Though the work is difficult, it is difficult its hard to start something to see it through, to grow you know for us to be where were at for as many years we've done it, and able fairly successful its been a ton of work and stress, it is worth it, but when I talk to people starting different ventures, starting to grow, I tell them that it is difficult you start working with people, and peoples issues, you need to be able to commit and see it through because you are affecting people's lives that's probably why I do it, cause if I close those programs down its going to drastically impact peoples lives, so I needed to be committed, committed to peoples lives. This work is a big deal, it can have a small or big impact, so I tell people to take it seriously, its great to have ideas, but do your research make sure you're committed before you make promises, I've seen people make promises that they can't commit to, and communities fall apart making it harder for the next person, very hard work, but rewarding. Its possible to have business with a social conscious, I encourage people to do that too.

For us were at an interesting growth spurt were adding on a another large component of our workforce development, moving from a family small non profit, to one that has a large infrastructure. Were moving on from funding, from local grants to government types

of dollars, but it's the business infrastructure that's partly my fault, in the sense that it's hard for me to pay someone to sit in an office, when they can go out and actually help, so I run all of the business operations, that type of thing, but having that switch, I have to switch that mentality, because we have to build the infrastructure, so we need to get compounding type of growth, but that's been the scariest step of doing this thing, is taking that, because you can float some dollars, but now you have a large payroll and people's salaries and a pay roll, we've doubled in size the past two years, and we need to build that infrastructure so it can last long term

Marissa: Do you have any volunteer opportunities?

Teresa: We have lots of volunteer opportunities, and we integrated volunteers and interns and programs across multiple backgrounds, we take a ton of interns, I believe in the learning opportunities, I believe in the open book policy, so come in and learn something.

— End of Transcription —