

Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 1 Feat Celina Alvarez (Date)

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Ashanti: Welcome to Doing What Works: Innovations, and Homeless Services, the podcast that takes a closer look at one of our community's most urgent challenges. I'm your host, Ashanti Blaze Hopkins, Interim Associate Dean at Santa Monica College's Center for Media and Design. Each episode, we'll engage with experts, policymakers, and educators that will uncover the history, explore effective policies, and highlight the efforts of those working to create change. Joining us on the podcast today is someone who has worked on the front lines of Homeless Services, and now serves as a leader in the space. She is also an activist, an innovator, and thought leader on the issue of homelessness in Los Angeles County and across the state of California. She has a bachelor's degree in social work from Cal State Los Angeles, and a master's in nonprofit management from Antioch University. Currently, she is the executive director of Housing Works, a nonprofit whose mission is to create housing and service options that model with respect and dignity sustainable, environmentally sensitive, affordable communities for people of limited resources. Celina Alvarez, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Celina: Hi, Ashanti, thank you. This is such an honor to be here with you today.

Ashanti: Listen, our first question for every one of our Doing What Works podcast guests is always the same. What was your first job ever? And how does what you learned at that position inform doing what works for you in your current role?

Celina: That is a great question. And it's something that I always ask new staff when they come to Housing Works. I always ask them, what was your first job and how old were you? And it's

amazing to me how that one question can spark so much conversation. So it's interesting now that it's being asked to me. My very first job was at the age of 10 years old. I was a newspaper carrier. So I delivered newspapers and I was responsible. I grew up in rural West Texas. I grew up in a town with two traffic lights, lots of oil, a federal prison, a Walmart, and lots of Catholics. And my job at 10 years old was to roll up 84 newspapers every day, and get on my boys BMX bike and go riding through town with a route that was assigned to me because of my ability to connect with elders. I was assigned the older adults and my job was to make sure the newspaper landed right on their front porch so they didn't have to walk down the steps to get to their yard, to get to their paper.

Ashanti: Was this your West Texas? Was this near El Paso?

Celina: Oh, yes. I was born in El Paso and I grew up. I was raised three hours in the desert east of El Paso.

Ashanti: I lived in El Paso for two years. So I know that area very well.

Celina: There you go. Yeah.

Ashanti: So why don't we shift a bit? I know you've worked in the homeless services sector for much of your career, even working on the front lines on Skid Row in Los Angeles. Talk to me about that experience. And what did you see that made you want to keep doing this work? And what did you see that also frustrated you?

Celina: Yeah. Wow. Well, yes, I've been doing this work. This is my 31st year. I often call myself a non-profit lifer. I first came into the human services work when I was 18, just moving here from West Texas. And by that was 1993. In 1993, I was working very close to Skid Row across the street in the Doctor's Towers from California Hospital, which is on 14th and Grand. And it was at an HIV clinic. And many of the people coming into the clinic were individuals who were coming from Skid Row. HIV positive folks from Skid Row. And by 1999, I received a job offer to go work in Skid Row, in the heart of Skid Row, on 5th and Crocker. And it was basically that's where it really took off for me, because I had an opportunity to work alongside folks who were giants in the sector. Particularly a woman named, Molly Lowry, and also a gentleman named, John Best. And working in Skid Row, there was a lot to it. And it was the late 90s, early 2000, really when I was in the trenches doing direct service, homeless services work in Skid Row. It was one of the most beautiful times of my career. Actually, there's a documentary called, Lost Angels that was a film that was produced after the movie, The Soloist. The Soloist was a movie about Nathaniel Ayers, the violinist, the cellist, and Jamie Foxx and Steve Lopez. Well, yeah, Jamie Foxx played Nathaniel, and Robert Downey Jr. played Steve Lopez. But anyways, this film was made. And at the same time, the idea was to create a documentary called Lost Angels to really emphasize the sense of community that happens in Skid Row. So if folks haven't had a chance to watch that film, I really don't know where they'd be able to find it, because I have it on CD. But it's one of those films that really makes me remember the beauty of working with what we have known in the sector as the outliers, folks who were living in Skid Row. Skid Row was created as a

containment zone in 1975 as part of the City of LA's policy to create a space of a region of Los Angeles, basically, where folks were being moved from any part of the city that they were living outside at and moving them into Skid Row. So my experience working in Skid Row really, at first, I didn't know what I was getting myself into. But once I became part of the element and got to know people and got to understand all the things I didn't even know, I didn't know at that time, I realized what a beautiful community Skid Row could be outside of what everyone thinks it was or still is in many ways. When I moved to LA, my mother held a grudge against LA because she said LA had taken her baby and I was never going to go back home. And boy, she harbored some resentment against LA. And then one Christmas, they came to visit. And when I worked in Skid Row, I worked every holiday because that's important. And so my parents, one Christmas, went with me to work and we took a walk down Skid Row. And then we had Christmas lunch with the people living in the interim housing that I was working at. And my mother, at the end of the day, after she witnessed people coming out of their tents to greet me, she witnessed drug dealers stopping to tell them how much they appreciated my smile every day as I was walking down the street. And just getting to know the people we were serving and the people who were doing the serving. At the end of that day, my mother turned to me and she said, "You know, I will never say a bad thing about LA again. You are here because God wants you here. He needs you here. And I am not going to get in the way of that anymore." And that was the last time my mother ever said anything negative about LA because she experienced the sense of community that I experienced.

Ashanti: That must have been something that you keep with you all the time. Every time you kind of question, why am I still doing this, you remember your mom saying that I'm sure.

Celina: Well, that's the thing. There were so many beautiful things to experience in Skid Row and so many beautiful aha moments. And there were also times where there was a lot of suffering that you witnessed as someone coming in and out of the workplace just doing what we were doing back then and experiencing a lot of vicarious trauma without the support systems that would have been really helpful to have as a frontline worker. And just also working in a scarcity environment where resources and support of all areas were just really centralized to the Skid Row area, which means if you needed anything that wasn't provided in Skid Row, then you really had to understand how to navigate systems outside of that zone in order to be able to properly support and serve the people we were serving.

Ashanti: Let's talk about Housing Works. What is so different about how your nonprofit is addressing the issue of homelessness and outreach to those who find themselves without the resources and support that they need on a daily basis?

Celina: Well, this is something I think a lot about, especially over the last couple of years, because COVID taught us a lot of lessons. Lessons that a pandemic happens, and there's still people that need that human connection. And it was really hard to do. Basically, Housing Works, what makes us different? Housing Works, I believe, is a different organization, partly because I come from the frontline. When I've been at Housing Works for 17 years, of the 31 years I've been in human services in Los Angeles, 17 years here at Housing Works, 10 years ago, I became the executive director directly from the frontline. And when I became the ED, I

was able to start connecting many dots related to all the things as a frontline worker I wasn't privy to. And there was a lot of questions in my mind about why workplaces function a certain way. And there was a lot of effort on my behalf to figure out how can we be an organization that reflects with our workforce what we're also doing with the people we're serving. Because in many instances, the people that work at Housing Works are also people who are folks that we have served in the sector and that we're still serving in the sector. So these are folks that in many instances, they come to work, and this is the only outside connection that they get that's consistent. So it was important to me to figure out, how do we create a work setting where we take care of the workers, because when I believe when you take care of the people doing the serving, the people you're serving will be well. It's harder to do when you're suffocated often by contractual deliverables and demands that strip you of your ability to do the human engagement piece in a more intentional and personal manner. But I can say that at the end of the day, it's taken 10 years of my leadership here to really keep sounding the alarm and blowing the whistle in ways where I'm bringing attention to subject matter that I really hadn't seen other leaders in the space elevate. And I really not to toot my own horn because I am not comfortable with that, but I really do believe that this is an area that I need to be proud of and own in terms of my own advocacy, because I personally understand the barriers and challenges and frustrations that frontline workers experience, and working under leadership that in many instances thinks they get it, but really doesn't get it.

Ashanti: Because they haven't been there. They haven't been on the front lines.

Celina: They haven't been there.

Ashanti: Or been in need.

Celina: Exactly. It doesn't mean they're not good people and not trying to do like amazing, and they are doing amazing things. But I'm a firm believer that in leadership, you really need to understand who your team is and who the audience is that you're it's not solely about the people we're serving. It's a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity.

Ashanti: This feels like a good time to talk about the partnership with Santa Monica College in the launch of the institution's homeless services program. Tell me how that came about and walk me through how we got to the creation of this program that starts in the fall semester and also how LA County is involved in this.

Celina: Wow, the Santa Monica project. That was just the way that came about. I still can't fully wrap my head around it. It was a lot of conversations around what was needed in the sector. There were several conversations that took place and some of the conversations were between myself and Vanessa Rios, who is the senior workforce advisor over at LAHSA who was the co-creator of the curriculum with me.

Ashanti: LAHSA is just for our listeners who may not know the acronym LAHSA is.

Celina: LAHSA is the LA Homeless Services Authority. So Vanessa and I have worked in homeless services for extensive period of time and so we would go on hikes when I first became the executive director and we would just kind of talk about some of the things that for me were really boggling me in a position a new position of leadership and just kind of thinking about like the challenges that we that I was seeing back then. I mean this was 10 years ago and I was like seeing all these flags go up where I was just thinking there's got to be a different way to orient folks and then time passed and we kept talking, and about 2018 we kept talking to whoever would listen to us about the needs of the workforce. And finally at one point a woman named Meredith Berkson, who at the time worked for LAHSA, she wanted to hear more and so she called us in and said like let's talk well I want to understand what you all are talking about because I think you're on to something. And so we had conversations and before we know it she brought in a board trustee from Santa Monica College, Dr. Nancy Greenstein and talk about a powerful force in the world. That woman is such an honor to know because once Nancy got in the picture she was like, "Oh yeah, this makes total sense what can we do at SMC to make this like what do y'all need what do y'all want to do let's talk about it." And it was really the four of us just kind of sitting in conversation and really talking about like what Vanessa and I were dreaming would be helpful for the workforce and I'll tell you before we know it we're getting approached by Dr. Greenstein saying Santa Monica College wants to meet with y'all and there's a possibility that we might be able to figure out a way to support you all creating a curriculum for frontline workers based on everything we've been talking about so the conversations ensued. And by 2019, we were catching momentum 2020 came and it covid happened and so we were still having conversations but now it had moved to virtual so we're gaining steam and going going going and then all of a sudden in 2022, I got diagnosed with breast cancer I had a stage three breast cancer diagnosis and it just like threw a wrench and everything because I was like listen y'all I y'all might need to move on without me because I can't right now and I'm in the fight of my life and I can't do this and SMC said we'll wait for you.

Ashanti: That must have been so special.

Celina: They said we'll wait for you and they did I went through chemo I went through breast removal I went through radiation, and now I'm two years in remission, and after like the most invasive year of my life I came back to SMC and said all right I think I'm ready I made it through and can we start talking again and they were like yeah we're ready to move this along and so that's where it just picked up speed and we just started really planning coordinating and facilitating, and all of a sudden the curriculum was birthed.

Ashanti: how did that feel because you know it it was a long journey to get there your own personal struggles and barriers your health you know the barriers of just getting it through curriculum and all these things coming back and seeing that this thing is happening yes what did that moment feel like to know that this thing you've been talking about for years was finally coming to fruition

Celina: I have to admit that it didn't feel real until the KCAL 9 news clip came out recently. Because even as we were going through all the motions, I remember finding myself in a place

where I'm like wow I thought we were the most bureaucratic sector in society but oh academia has got their own stuff going on. And so it just I remember a lot of light bulbs going off for me and just again, I'm I'm always a student wherever I'm at there's always something for me to learn so I always place myself in the position of like being the student. And so, I remember there were moments where it felt like, yeah! We did it! Because we'd celebrated in a text thread with a bunch of us, the deans and the other faculty and everyone that was really putting forth all this effort, Dr. Patricia Ramos, there were so many, Salveas, and and I mean there's there's too many to name. But we were just like celebrating every milestone that we were hitting and I think for a lot of it I don't I can't speak for Vanessa but I can speak for myself in that there was a part of me where it's like I'm just kind of like celebrating these things that in some instances I don't even understand where we're at in this process but we just accomplished something that means something in academia so okay this is great. And then the KCAL 9 news clip actually aired, and it was like, "oh yeah this is happening," like this I mean we knew all along it was happening and it was it was moving forward but when it actually like got out there and it became like public news on it made it real.

Ashanti: It made it real

Celina: it made it real, and I'll tell you there was that moment where I was like "hey, I'm part of that." Right and I think it's still surreal but I'm just like I'm still kind of like maybe there's a little bit of me that's still in shock and disbelief that and then I'll tell you what does come up for me is sometimes there's that looming thought like "oh my god who's going to criticize the curriculum because it's not gonna like what did we miss what did we forget what should we have added" and then I have to tell that little voice just shut up leave me alone we are gonna make we're gonna make changes to it after the first year we're gonna learn a whole lot and once we replicate it because that's the goal to replicate it in the other 19 community colleges then we're gonna really be able to tailor it in a way that is gonna be ever-changing really. because the work that we're doing in human services it evolves and so we can't remain stagnant in saying this is what's gonna fix it right now, because the work that I did on the front line 10 years ago is doesn't look the same as what it does today.

Ashanti: How important is it to have a homeless services program like the one at SMC and how important is it for this program because you mentioned duplicating it, right, how important is it to duplicate it at other community colleges across not just LA county but across the state of California even across the country?

Celina: Well I think it's extremely important for it to be duplicated throughout the county. Number one, for just front on a race equity tip, this is an area where you know Santa Monica is Santa Monica, and it's wonderful in a lot of ways but it's just not accessible to a lot of folks and so we're excited at this idea that what would it look like if southwest college is offering this opportunity for folks who in many instances in in that surrounding area close to southwest colleges close to where southwest colleges, you know many of the folks just like in east LA at east LA college come from households that are on the brink of homelessness or have experienced homelessness themselves, so there's going to be, and not that that's not going to

be the case at SMC as well, but I'm talking about like the prevalence of folks in certain demographic areas where the likelihood of folks who would be interested in east LA or southwest college are folks who could in higher numbers relate to some of the stuff that we're hoping folks are going to walk away with and really utilize in the world after they get their certificate.

Ashanti: If you had a magic wand and you could solve the issue of homelessness what would you do if there were no barriers in your way talk to me about what that dream state looks like

Celina: I would address isolation, because I believe housing is a first step housing is absolutely necessary in order to work on moving folks towards a level of stability that is necessary for humanity. The thing is is that housing itself will not solve homelessness. It's housing and trust, housing and relationships, housing and addressing isolation, housing and, there's so many "ands" that we need to couple with the roof over folks head that I would address, if I could just wave my wand and say, "be gone unhoused dilemmas," we would be addressing humanity through a holistic lens that is culturally relevant it would involve food, it would involve music, and dancing, and drumming, and singing, and storytelling, and you wouldn't be able to tell who the front line is versus the people being served because we're all part of a community. I would really really bring back that sense of what community does for us as human beings, because we could be housed and be off the streets but if we don't have a sense of purpose and connection to other humans and a sense of value in the environments we're living in, then we're not thriving and we're going to be all alone.

Ashanti: What do you think needs to happen for that dream state to exist, and do you think we can get there?

Celina: I always see the glass half full, I have to, otherwise I could run the risk of being in a potentially negative mindset all the time. I do believe we can get there. I do believe that we are in a place today, especially in LA where there is more drive to do the right thing now than I've ever seen in the 31 years I've been doing this work.

Ashanti: Does this feel like a moment where you as someone who has had the experiences that you've had in this sector talking to someone who is considering entering into this sector? Do you feel like this is the moment and this is the time and what would you say to someone who was considering going into homeless services?

Celina: I get calls, calls all the time from people in my personal life and people who are strangers that are introduced to me who want to riff and just ask me questions around what does it look like to work in this in this field? And, I take my time usually when folks are introduced to me I ask them to put an hour aside so we can talk, because I really want them to understand. I want to talk to them about the things that they're not thinking about because they don't know to think about it, and I want to be a resource for them in making this decision in ways that I would have appreciated someone ushering me in warning me, listen, here's some of the things you're going to likely experience and here are some of the ways that it's the system's not

going to support you as a frontline worker there, first of all, you're not going to get paid a livable wage, are you ready for that? And are you ready to witness human suffering on a daily basis? There's a lot of conversations I have with them around like, "okay let me talk to you and tell you what you're getting ready to sign up for," and then once we're clear on that, now I'm going to tell you about all the beautifulness about what this could look like, because I mean what drives me every day to show up are the what we would say small victories, but they're really huge because, I'll tell you I had an experience last Friday where one of our longtime participants moved in to housing after having moved out and lost his housing at one point and we stayed with him and he got rehoused and moved in on Thursday and Friday took a whole effort of about eight staff to oversee an intervention and just keep at it. And I'll tell you what I witnessed with our team that day reminded me of what we still have the possibility of doing. See, sometimes I can get really caught up in the minutia and the feelings of resentment towards the system for bogging us down and suffocating us and constraining us in doing the work that I know makes a difference in the people that in the lives of the people we're serving. When we're working with people and we're really being purposeful with our presence in their life, and the conversations we're engaging them in, it's possible to move people into more productive and constructive behaviors which moves them further away from less destructive and behaviors. So they move from destructive behaviors, to more productive and constructive behaviors it's filling out paperwork and doing all our documentation, like I understand why that's necessary, that's not I'm not saying like, oh there's no purpose for it, but it has really moved in such a direction that it has moved us further away from the people work because we're so focused on the paperwork. But when you see little things like little big things that happened like last Friday, where eight staff mobilized and just it was lockstep, nobody hesitated, no missteps, no pushback, no complaining, no nothing, but showing up and saying I got it I'm doing. This everyone just fell into play, oh that rush I felt was like, yeah that's that's what also keeps us going this, when you, you feel that and you see it happening and the beauty is just revealing itself in the whole relationship piece. And then you get a call on a Saturday, from that same participant saying, "Man, Celina they were amazing, thank you! I slept so well last night!" That's when it's like, yeah, that's what it's all about One life, one relationship, one person at a time.

Ashanti: I feel like Celina your mother was correct, you were born to do this this is exactly where you're supposed to be. Celina Alvarez, thank you so much for sharing your insights and expertise with us and thank you for joining us on doing what works innovations and homeless services we hope today's conversation has shed light on the complexities of homelessness and inspired ideas for change. If you found value in this episode, please subscribe, share, and leave us a review. Together we can continue the dialogue and support the efforts to create lasting solutions stay tuned for more insights from the experts leading the way, until next time