

Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 7 Dr. Ryan Smith (Date)

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SPEAKERS

Host: Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins

Guest: Dr. Ryan Smith

[00:00:00] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Welcome to Doing What Works, innovations in Homeless Services, the podcast that takes a closer look at one of our community's most urgent challenges. I'm your host, Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins, interim Associate Dean at Santa Monica College's Center for Media and Design. Each episode will engage with experts, policymakers, and educators to uncover the history, explore effective policies, and highlight the efforts of those working to create change.

[00:00:33] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Joining us on the podcast today is someone who knows firsthand about the impact of homelessness. For him, the impactful work he does and has continued to do in the homeless services sector is personal, as he himself experienced homelessness as a youth. He has a bachelor's degree in political science with a concentration in international relations and a doctorate in education, both from UCLA Go Bruins.

[00:00:55] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Currently he is the president and chief Executive Officer of St. Joseph's Center, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide working poor families as well as homeless men, women and children. With the resources and tools they need to become productive, stable, and self-supporting. Dr. Ryan Smith, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

[00:01:15] **Ryan Smith:** Thank you for having me.

[00:01:16] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** So 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 in that position and form doing what works for you in your current role?

[00:01:29] **Ryan Smith:** Oh, I love, love, love, love this question. And I'm excited, to be here with you today.

[00:01:36] **Ryan Smith:** And I'd love to start at kind of the beginning of my career. So my first job was a youth organizer. I was 15 years old, and I got a fellowship, in South Los Angeles, to help organize and educate other youth on how they can advance their power, their understanding of policy, their understanding of change.

[00:02:01] **Ryan Smith:** So I literally knocked on doors. I went to high schools. I talked to folks, particularly people my age about the history of activism and civil rights and the social justice movements that, have preceded us and how we can continue to do that good work moving forward. And honestly, it was that fellowship that has led to my career of really giving back and thinking about how we support marginalized communities.

[00:02:31] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** 15 years old is such a young age and in a formative age. So to be able to do that work that soon, I'm sure, really just ripple effect throughout your entire career.

[00:02:41] **Ryan Smith:** Absolutely. My parents really, believed in the value of community, and, they actually believe in this idea of linked faith.

[00:02:48] **Ryan Smith:** They taught me really early that, no matter what you do in life, you could never really be successful if your brothers, your sisters, your communities, people who look like you fail. So, real success is collective success, making sure that whole communities, are vibrant, are active, are engaged, not just thinking of yourself individually.

[00:03:11] **Ryan Smith:** And that has really left an impression upon me and continues to do so, at my role here at the St. Joseph's Center.

[00:03:19] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** I mentioned in your intro that the work you do is very personal. Can you talk to us about your experience with homelessness as a youth and how that led you to the work that you've done and that you continue to do now?

[00:03:31] **Ryan Smith:** I appreciate this question. As we're celebrating Women's History Month, when folks ask me who do I honor during this month, it's really my mother. When my mother and father separated, it was my mother who took care of me. And she did everything possible to thrive. A brilliant woman who spent her life savings to move from South Los Angeles to Culver City because she heard the schools were good and that young black men, could go to college from the high school and thrive. So, she spent all, she had, was able to have a really amazing home, that she raised me in. And we had that home for 10 years until I came home as a high school student and saw an eviction notice and saw in my mother's eyes, sadness. As she handed me trash bags and told me the home that we had made in 10 years, we'd have to vacate in 10 hours.

[00:04:33] **Ryan Smith:** I will never forget the experience of having to take all of my belongings, all the things that we treasured, put them in bags and whatever we had and put them in my car. And, my mother and I drove around and. Until she found a neighbor and asked them, "Hey, can

you open up your home, for me and my son to potentially live in your living room? Or if you have a spare room, I'd like Ryan to finish high school in the community that he lives in."

[00:05:09] **Ryan Smith:** And if it wasn't for that dear neighbor, I probably wouldn't be here. And if it wasn't for my assistant principal and counselor, who pulled resources so that I could apply to college, I may not be a Bruin that went to UCLA both undergrad and graduate as a graduate student.

[00:05:27] **Ryan Smith:** So what I can say is that I believe in the power of community, of a continuum, of care, of people wrapping their arms around you in the spirit of beloved community. And I'm a product of what happens when people live into the values of charism, compassion, and upholding your dear neighbor.

[00:05:46] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** I can hear how proud you are of your mother.

[00:05:49] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** I am. I am almost insanely sure that she is equally proud of you and everything that you've been able to accomplish, under circumstances that weren't ideal, in the beginning of your journey.

[00:06:01] **Ryan Smith:** Yeah, I will say that, and thank you for that. I am very proud of my mom.

[00:06:05] **Ryan Smith:** There's not many folks who could do what she did. I'm here because of her. I will say now, she lives with me and she suffers from some behavioral health challenges and I'm her caretaker, so, I get to pay back, the care that she showed for me as well. And, I think that's so much embedded in the work that we do to solve in homelessness is really thinking about how we center care in our work.

[00:06:33] **Ryan Smith:** So this is both to your point, a, professional mission of mine, but certainly a personal one as well.

[00:06:40] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** I think it is kind of embedded in you to be a caretaker in the fact that it connects to the work that you do. Makes so much sense. I wanna talk about the St. Joseph Center. There are four pillars that your organization kind of lives by.

[00:06:54] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Take me through those pillars and how that kind of approach differentiates your organization from others that are doing this work in the space.

[00:07:02] **Ryan Smith:** Yeah, I'll be truthful. There's nothing that makes me more excited and energized than to talk about my beloved St. Joseph's Center, because of its rich history and because of the work that it does.

[00:07:15] **Ryan Smith:** So, St. Joseph's Center was founded nearly 50 years ago, by, some really dynamic social justice centered sisters. And when I say sisters, I do mean nuns. Who taken social justice classes and believed that they couldn't just learn about the work they had to

be about it. That we had to empower communities, through the belief of hope and charisma and compassion.

[00:07:40] **Ryan Smith:** So they purchased a storefront in Venice, which became the headquarters back then, and now we thrive 50 years later supporting 15,000 people across LA County. As you mentioned, we have four pillars, to do that work. They spell out home. One is our housing pillar, so we think about the entire throughput of housing that we support.

[00:08:05] **Ryan Smith:** We support a number of interim housing facilities, through permanent housing facilities as well. And our belief that we want to ensure that every Angeleno has a place that they permanently call home in our pursuit to, end homelessness. the "O" stands for "outreach and engagement." We cannot solve this issue if we do not meet people where they are at.

[00:08:29] **Ryan Smith:** So I have an amazing team of ambassadors, registered nurses, folks who have experience in homelessness themselves who go out , throughout the day, even at nighttime, to give the folks who are outside the resources they need, in order to come inside, as well as the resources they need to thrive.

[00:08:51] **Ryan Smith:** And I am always really honored. I've been out with those teams and they really are doing lifesaving work, day in and day out. So shout out to the amazing outreach team. "M" stands for "Mental Health Support." Given all the things that are happening across the country right now, there's nothing more valuable in my mind that we are thinking about then mental health of people, how we are ensuring that their physical and mental health needs are met.

[00:09:18] **Ryan Smith:** And we have folks who are therapists, who are licensed, who, are specialists, who have dedicated their life to bring those resources to people experiencing homelessness. And I have to say, they could work any place else and get paid twice as much but they dedicated their lives to help address this issue.

[00:09:37] **Ryan Smith:** And we're really lucky to have those heroes who work with us. And then "E" just stands for "Economic Mobility." We have a Dynamic Workforce Development Programs really dedicated, to bringing high quality jobs to the people who've experienced homelessness. We have 75,000 people outside. Why are we not talking about how we provide jobs as well as homes for those folks?

[00:10:00] **Ryan Smith:** So we have a dynamic bread and roses Culinary Institute, that trains the next cohort of amazing culinary artists and creative artists who are doing work across the food sector in Los Angeles. There's an amazing cold talk program that supports women experiencing homelessness. Learning technical skills, adaptive skills, learning the soft and hard skills so they can thrive.

[00:10:24] **Ryan Smith:** I know folks who are working in tech right now, and they, one young woman is a graduate and now she's a donor of ours. She's probably making more money than all of us on this podcast. But experienced homelessness and went through our cohort, which is really amazing. We also have a program very similar called Fortify, which, provides code, coding

skills to people who are formerly incarcerated. So the workforce work, the economic mobility work is really important as well. So those are our four pillars, "Home."

[00:10:51] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** when you think about the two social justice nuns that created this center. Mm-hmm. And, you know, I understand that they are still around, so they do have an opportunity to come back and be able to see how their vision has evolved through time.

[00:11:08] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** What do they feel about how the St. Joseph Center has been able to grow and change and evolve with time and with the needs of the populations that you serve?

[00:11:20] **Ryan Smith:** Oh, what a brilliant question. So the founding order of ours the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and so that congregation of sisters still exist. Our two founders were sisters, Louise Bernstein and sisters Marilyn Rudy, unfortunately, sister Marilyn Rudy did pass, but Louis Stein is 96 years old. And one thing I will tell you about sisters, about nuns, they all look very young for their age. I was walking with one of them and she was walking a little faster than me.

[00:11:50] **Ryan Smith:** I'm like, oh, you're, that's really amazing. Like you're, how old are you? And she's like, oh, you know, I'm a Spry 80. I said, 80 years old. And they say, you know, the sister, nun-life is good. And I have to say given the time I've spent with the sisters that it must be, but they, they really are pride and joy for a couple of reasons.

[00:12:11] **Ryan Smith:** Once again, this is Women's History Month, we would not be here without the foundation that these amazing women laid. They laid a foundation that was absolutely connected to community and to making sure that we provide hope through empowerment. They created that tagline, which is still our tagline today.

[00:12:30] **Ryan Smith:** They created our logo, which is an amazing tree with its roots that we still have, but they kind of are connected to where my life started, where my parents said, we can't be successful if our communities fail. And they believed that as well. And have really made their lives dedicated to charism and compassion.

[00:12:50] **Ryan Smith:** So when they just came back last week and they hung out, had a good time, the staff embraced them and hugged them and them for all the work they do. They hold me accountable. They text me every week like, Hey, we're making sure we're doing the good work. I said, absolutely, sisters, we are. But they are like our beacon on a hill to remind us to continue to do the work.

[00:13:09] **Ryan Smith:** We're really fortunate to be working in partnership with them.

[00:13:12] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** It's nice to have that gut check on a regular basis. I'm sure the work your organization does day to day, it's not easy work, right? But I'm sure it's both challenging and rewarding. What drives you and your team to, to keep doing that work?

[00:13:27] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Overcoming the barriers and just showing up each day for the populations that you serve?

[00:13:32] **Ryan Smith:** Yeah. This is where I have to shout out our staff. So we have, 400 staff who really committed to ending homelessness in this generation. And I would love to say we pay them as much as they should get paid and all of that, but, as many nonprofits face, they could probably work someplace else, but they work here because they're really dedicated to the mission. 63% of our staff when surveyed, have experienced homelessness themselves, or formerly incarcerated. So we're asking, the folks who actually had to go through this system and came out of it who are ending this issue.

[00:14:08] **Ryan Smith:** And to your point, it's not easy. As much as we are seeing progress, we know there's more to come and. We are part of, we are the coordinated entry surface lead for spot five, and last year we saw a 19% decrease in homelessness in the region that we support.

[00:14:27] **Ryan Smith:** And that is because of the amazing work of staff and partners who are dedicated to this work. But we know there's more work to do. So I do think, part of our work is celebrating where we see success. Continuing to shine a light on where we need to see progress as well.

[00:14:45] **Ryan Smith:** We do this work through a fierce urgency and determination that we can bring everyone inside. And this staff leans on each other. They often say, we are a family here. And I say, I don't know, some people don't say family anymore when it comes to work. And they correct me. They say, no, no. We are a family, really dedicated and committed, to solving this issue. So I'm lucky to work, with the staff that I have. I just wanna shout them out. Thank you for all that you do every day, the life saving work that you do.

[00:15:13] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** I think this is a good time to bring up Santa Monica College and its homeless services program.

[00:15:20] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** When did you first hear about it and what was your reaction to seeing a program like this at a community college that is aimed at training the workforce that's needed for homeless services?

[00:15:31] **Ryan Smith:** Yeah, I had heard about the program through a number of colleagues, who, said, Hey, you should really learn more about how we're creating a pipeline of talent, to go into homeless services. Leepi who is a fantastic faculty member as well we're like, you should come speak, at one of the classes. And finally, I got my schedule together so I could go. First of all, it was great since, you know, growing up on the West side, there's so many people who went to SMC. So to be on the campus, a campus that I had been to as a youth was great. But what really was fantastic and amazing were the students. Those students come from careers across different sectors come from different backgrounds. Some of them have done work in homelessness, some have not. But they said, we want the skills, the knowledge necessary to receive a certificate and how to address homelessness and in homelessness in our generation.

[00:16:29] **Ryan Smith:** They were fantastic. They asked me the right questions, the hard ones. Like, well, tell us what's really going on. They talked about their aspirations in doing this work.

And the great thing about this program, including the students, is we have to build the workforce. We want the idea that, we can just continue to recruit folks.

[00:16:51] **Ryan Smith:** Yeah. But honestly, it's the, we have to find the people who are already excited about this and help build their capacity, to make sure that this movement continues. So SMC has been so smart, in carving out space to make sure that we're putting in the kind of love and care necessary to create the next wave of leaders is right on. We need more of this program. I was happy to be a part of it in the small way that I was.

[00:17:21] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** It's really the intentionality too that I think is so critical. I mean, how important is it to have a homeless services program like the one at SMC be duplicated at? Not just community colleges across California, but across the country.

[00:17:39] **Ryan Smith:** I'm glad you asked that question. So we need more places where we're training human service leaders and homelessness service leaders. We have a program called Careers for a Cause where we work with some of our Compton in Southwest students to think about, this pipeline as well.

[00:17:57] **Ryan Smith:** But what's really important is that we're recruiting, folks who have experience. In the workforce already. Folks who may be mid-level, who are thinking critically about their next steps because, we come from a community where we can be somewhat humble about the work that we do, right?

[00:18:14] **Ryan Smith:** I talked about the sisters, but at the end of the day, we're only going to solve this. Through the work of people, it's people who, so we are not in the business of widgets. We're in the business of making sure people thrive, that in changing lives, and you're only as good as the people who work within the communities.

[00:18:36] **Ryan Smith:** So we need this to be replicated. We need a bigger base of people who understand the landscape, have the knowledge, have the passion it takes, to do this work. And you know, as this old timers gray and you know, we get a little tired and we wanna pass the torch, there's already folks who are ready to carry the torch, are probably carrying the torch too, so that we continue to do this work.

[00:19:03] **Ryan Smith:** I believe we can end homelessness in this generation, but we need the people dedicated to that mission to do so.

[00:19:10] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** It's really about succession planning, really from an organizational perspective. How are we making sure there's a pipeline of folks to keep moving up as other people start to graduate out of the sector?

[00:19:24] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** A, as someone who has been a leader in homeless services for quite some time, in addition to your own personal experiences, what do you think LA is doing well when it comes to addressing the issue of homelessness in this area and what could we be doing better? What are some areas for potential growth?

[00:19:41] **Ryan Smith:** Yeah. So what I do think LA is doing well is there feels like there has been a locking of arms and a call to action to bring as many people inside as possible. So we've seen our mayor and our county supervisors and local municipalities, all begin to say, well, what are our collective goals? What can we be doing together to solve this issue?

[00:20:06] **Ryan Smith:** Understanding that this is, that this issue is solved at the local ground level. But we have to work together and break down silos to do so. So I think LA is really stands as a beacon on the hill. I'm thinking programmatically about how we're bringing people inside. We've seen more interim housing come online.

[00:20:25] **Ryan Smith:** We've seen more supportive, permanent supportive housing, that's coming online as well. There have been a number of policies passed, like ED one and others. That make it easier to build affordable housing. So we're seeing a movement and traction that way, which is really exciting. I will say a highlight is LA County Pass Measure a thank you LA County, which doubled the revenue, in order to ensure that we have the dollars necessary to keep doing the homeless service work, but also to move upstream to think about prevention dollars that are needed to think about housing production. That's really necessary for us to end this because we do need the resources necessary to make this happen.

[00:21:11] **Ryan Smith:** So, we have some things in motion that are really exciting. We've seen a decrease in homelessness across LA County and LA City. That being said, I think as we're looking at the aftermath of the wildfires that has displaced folks, whether it's Eaton or we're looking in Pasadena and sna, or we're looking in pa, the Palisade, which is close to Santa Monica. We know now that there's an inflection point about how we build and rebuild our city, and I think this is the point where LA leaders. Can lock arms with our nonprofit and community, stewards to go, how can we reimagine what LA could be when we're talking about addressing homelessness, when we think about the resources from the Olympics and other world events that will come, this is an opportunity to think differently about our future.

[00:22:07] **Ryan Smith:** I hope we leverage this opportunity amongst the challenges that we have in front of us to really do the community building, the holistic equity work, as well as the physical building necessary to ensure that everyone has a place to call.

[00:22:25] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** You mentioned that your goal of eliminating homelessness within your lifetime.

[00:22:30] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** What do you think it's gonna take to get there and can we get there?

[00:22:34] **Ryan Smith:** I believe we can, it is a tall order but I believe we can absolutely. One, we have to continue to push our production of affordable housing and permanent supportive housing across Los Angeles. At the end of the day, when we talk about permanent supportive housing.

[00:22:51] **Ryan Smith:** Talking about the housing that has all the wraparound services necessary for folks who experience homelessness. To sustain housing, we need to ensure, that we have more PSH sites across the county. Also, affordable housing has to actually be for

affordable. We know that, there are many affordable housing projects that don't set aside enough for truly affordable, housing for folk and that people can access easily, particularly low income folks. And it's becoming more, unaffordable to live in Los Angeles. So we have to redefine what affordability is. And we also have to ensure that we have enough affordable housing that people aren't falling in to homelessness.

[00:23:32] **Ryan Smith:** So that's important. The other thing is prevention, prevention, prevention. In order to end homelessness, we need to prevent it. So a lot of our work is downstream. We're working on folks who already are experiencing homelessness, but our work should be really also centered upstream for the folks who are on the margins.

[00:23:52] **Ryan Smith:** For people who are two paychecks away, for folks who may, if they just had more rental assistance, if they just had more mental health supports, if they just had, more problem solving, supports, they may not experience homelessness. So our work has to move upstream. We have to think more about prevention.

[00:24:12] **Ryan Smith:** The great thing is that Measure A almost quadrupled the amount of money to support prevention efforts. But we need to do more of that work and we need more resources, to ensure that we're preventing homelessness as well.

[00:24:25] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** What advice would you give to someone considering a career in homeless services?

[00:24:30] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** And what do you wish you knew before you started your work in this sector?

[00:24:35] **Ryan Smith:** If I had to give someone advice, one is, it's not an easy job, right? We are supporting folks who have been, who are chronically homeless, who have experienced trauma. So it's not an easy job but it's a rewarding job, meaning when you're able to give someone their keys, a family, their keys, to say, you have struggled for a long time, but this is the place that you can permanently call home, here is your welcome mat that you will welcome your neighbors to. I know you've toiled, but this is the place in which you can call yourself safe. Like that is a feeling you will never forget. And I have so many staff members who lift up their success stories of helping someone get their keys home. So it is rewarding to do that work.

[00:25:29] **Ryan Smith:** It's a powerful testament and the belief that we can help change lives. So the work is rewarding, and it's needed now more than ever in Los Angeles. This is ground zero for this effort. So to do the number, to do the work around the number one probably humanitarian crisis we've seen in our lifetime, and to work towards changing that is really a call to action.

[00:25:53] **Ryan Smith:** The other thing maybe I would say. I, and I'll try not to get emotional here, but, you know, I'm a person of faith. I believe in the power of faith and, when I prayed about what I could do, in my lifetime to give back, the first thing that came to me was this idea of beloved community.

[00:26:11] **Ryan Smith:** How can you do this with people? Because at the end of the day, I believe this idea that we belong. Each other. And I am at a place at St. Joseph's Center where people really do have each other's backs and sides and front. They ask how you're doing. They decorated. I had to take down all the balloons. They decorated my entire office for my birthday and just said, happy just happy birthday. And they do that for each other. You really can't do this work alone. And so much of this work is done in community and I'm fortunate to do that. So if you're looking for a community making change, I really believe homeless services is a great place to start

[00:26:54] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** To join the beloved community.

[00:26:56] **Ryan Smith:** Yes, absolutely.

[00:26:58] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Dr. Ryan Smith, thank you so much for joining us and sharing your insights and expertise with us. 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.

[00:27:13] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** 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.