

Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 8 Tamyra Simpson

Title: Beautifully Traumatic: A Student's Journey Through the Homeless Services Program with Tamyra Simpson

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Guest: Tamyra Simpson

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00:00 Ashanti : 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, we'll engage with experts, policymakers, and educators to uncover the history, explore effective policies, and highlight the efforts of those working to create change.

00:25 Ashanti : Joining us on the podcast today is a first for us. We're excited to interview a student from Santa Monica College's inaugural cohort in its Homeless Services Certificate Program. This student is quickly approaching the finish line of her coursework, and she's here today to share her experiences in the program and what may be next for her. Tamyra Simpson, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. Oh, thank you for having me.

00:49 Ashanti : Our first question for every one of our Doing What Works podcast guest is the same with a little alteration for you. What was your first job and how does what you learned in that position inform Doing What Works for you in your current role as a student in SMC's Homeless Services program? So my first job, both paid and unpaid, was working at an in-home daycare center. And I did that

like after school, during high school.

01:18 Ashanti : And I guess I would say the woman who runs the daycare center, Rommel, she is incredible and longtime family friend. And the way her program was run, she was paid through, well, a lot of the families, they received like government benefits. And so their children went there for free. But there are other parents who, you know, just paid out of pocket. And so she had like a mix of, you know, students from different, you know, economic backgrounds.

01:47 Ashanti : But she gave every child the same level of care. Obviously, some needed more, you know, things than others. And so I guess she was very equitable. And I think that's what I saw then. Not every child got the same thing, but they all got the same level of care and love. They all got what they needed. Yeah. And I think that's so important in this work. Some people, you know, have privilege and have, you know, things that, you know, they need basic, you know, needs and others don't.

02:16 Ashanti : just making sure everyone's kind of like on the same playing field to be successful. I feel like you had a lot of those experiences when you were growing up, and I want to talk about your background. You came from a long line of, I would like to call them helpers, right? Your mom, your grandmother. Tell me about growing up around them and how what you saw them doing shaped what you wanted to do with your future career. It's funny because I...

02:43 Ashanti : Never really saw it as like, like I knew we were helping, but it was so just like the status quo is just what we did. I never really saw it as like a career opportunity. And I didn't really sort of feed the passion until later in life. Yeah, I just sort of fell into the work with my very unconventional journey here. But seeing my mom and my grandmother, I always just thought, oh, you know.

03:10 Ashanti : They do this work and they love it. And my grandmother would always say, if you do what you love, it never feels like work. Again, it never sort of came full circle until, you know, adulthood. Tell me what they did. Tell me what your grandmother did. So my grandmother, she retired from the Pasadena Health Department after like 30 something years. She's a substance use counselor. And it's very interesting because most of the counselors that worked with her, they were all.

03:40 Ashanti : recovery and so they had sort of that like peer experience and lived experience and she didn't and it was really uncommon and unheard of because they're like how can you relate to this population if you know you've never experienced this but she just had a way about meeting people where they were and I think that's why she excelled and and people loved her I mean she would literally take people in you know after they finished her program if they

didn't have a place to stay she literally let them live with her and so I

04:09 Ashanti : saw that growing up. My mom is, well, she's a nurse and she was on the front lines during COVID at MacArthur Park, like doing COVID tests, giving out vaccines. And again, it's just, it's what I saw. And I think the seeds were planted early on and somehow they were watered and fostered. And here I am today. It became normal. It became so very normal for you, right? This is just what my family does. So why wouldn't I then do something similar, right? Well, tell me how you learned about S&P.

04:40 Ashanti : SMC's Homeless Services program and why you were so drawn to it when you found out that it existed? I was actually scrolling on LinkedIn. I just get on there. To me, it's like a safer social media platform. And I follow LASA. At the time, I wasn't actually following SMC. And they were promoting it. And I thought this was what really piqued my interest is because it was offered and promoted.

05:08 Ashanti : low to no barriers and LASA is Los Angeles Housing Services Authority right correct and so I'm like there's no way this could be real like completely free like nothing all i have to do is like show interest and you're gonna let me in um and i was really skeptical very early on and even up until like receiving the email and i'm like is this real and when we had our first zoom meeting with everyone on i was like oh my gosh this is really real um and then it sort of said i'm like oh wait i've committed to this so yeah

05:43 Ashanti : So it was interesting to, because I remember having this conversation with you where you said you seeing that there was even a homeless services certificate program and the timing that you saw it was kind of serendipitous. Absolutely. Tell me about that. So I've always, my volunteer experience has always been volunteering with the unhoused.

06:11 Ashanti : It just right now I'm like, OK, what is my next act? I currently nanny, but I'm not my girls aren't going to be small and need me forever. And so it's like thinking about, you know, what what is coming next? And. Seeing that, I was just like, oh my gosh, this could be a path forward to what I've felt like I've been called to do and where my passions lie. And again, because it was so low barrier, I was like, I could do this and see where it takes me. You talked about the feeling of being on that first Zoom and saying to yourself, oh my goodness, this is real. This is happening and I've committed to it and let's go.

06:53 Ashanti : Tell me about the first day in class. The first class you took, what was that feeling that you had when you stepped into that class, sat in the desk, and then what were you expecting? I think I was like, wait, what did I get myself into? Because I just was overcome with like PTSD of like 1159 deadlines from

when I was previously in school and, you know, hitting those midnight deadlines. I was like, oh, wait, this is going to start all over again. I just kind of a wave of emotions. And then I just.

07:25 Ashanti : Like seeing the very diverse group of students in this cohort, I was like, wow, like there are other people just like me who feel called to this very same thing. And I just thought that was beautiful and really, you know. sort of representative of like LA, you know, in particular, where, you know, we have people from all over the world, all different cultures, all, you know, different socioeconomic backgrounds. And so I was like, wow, like this, this could really work. Like, I was very excited. So yeah. What was the camaraderie like amongst your cohort? I'm sure that you all started to kind of build some bonds and, you know, maybe trauma bonded with deadlines. But how did those relationships start to develop through the program? Yeah, I think for me personally, I didn't connect. So there's like four of us, myself, a woman, Romina.

08:26 Ashanti : faith and tie and we couldn't be closer it feels like we've known each other forever um we're just so obsessed with each other uh but it it sort of happened like just before i think it was like our holiday break in december where we really sort of like connected we were trying to work on our like final that was coming up and we all sort of sat near one another and had been put in a group project together and it was just like

08:55 Ashanti : Again, I'd never like all my best friends from like high school and college. None of them are in this work. And so I have different, you know, things that I bond with them over. But I've never had someone who shares the same drive and has that fire in them. And so that's been a very different but like beautiful experience. And so, again, them having the same heart that I do for this work. It's like, oh, my gosh, like you feel the exact same way that I do. But it's also like provided me with like a different.

09:24 Ashanti : perspective and sometimes we don't always agree on things and there's nuance and you know different experiences and so I think it's just beautiful and I'm so grateful that was like one of the things that we learned in the first semester was like we're going to be in the trenches with one another it's it's great to like make connections and like these are the people you're going to continue to see if we all stay in this you know field and I'm so glad that I was able to form those connections very early on and they are so solid yeah these are the folks you're going to lean on when you're doing

09:53 Ashanti : in this work. Was there a favorite course that you had? I know I was looking back, you're almost to the finish line, but looking back across the program, you know, was there a favorite course that you had and what made that course so special for you? Honestly, no. It's like saying who's your favorite kid,

right? Like I've loved them all for different reasons. Like our health equity class with Leapy, she just made it like so practical. And again, like that was.

10:28 Ashanti : Maybe where that maybe that was definitely where we really sort of like started to lean on one another because we're like, this work is heavy and you're going to need people. And again, like my outside connections and friends and village, they don't do this work. You know, they see what they see on TV. They hear what I talk about. But to be in it is so different. And so it was really beautiful to see that sort of come together and and leap.

10:57 Ashanti : really stressed like lean on you know your cohort like you know participants and then dr elisa was just phenomenal we would take these like five minute like meditation breaks and we you know with the presidential election it just like she really held a safe space for us to just show up authentically and fall apart, come back together, cry, all the things. And Celina's just, she's a giant in this field. She's who we're currently being instructed by this semester. It's just, they couldn't have picked a better like instructor lineup. Literally the MVPs all start, like they're incredible. I've loved all of it. I'm sure it was important to be able to learn from those who have been.

11:43 Ashanti : exactly where you're going to be, have even, you know, gone up the ranks in their careers in this particular sector. What did that mean to be able to even hear their experiences? It's really fascinating because Celina particularly, they are from a different generation and the way...

12:06 Ashanti : they learned is different than what the field looks like today and so we are going to be coming in as like outliers in the way that we approach this work and from a really like person and human centered place um and it's not about metrics and not about you know the data and the numbers or yes like it's great we need that stuff for like funding and you know just to understand what's happening but like

12:34 Ashanti : They're people. We're all people. And like to serve them from that space. And so I just I feel so privileged to learn from them. Like it's yeah, they've unlocked a whole new sort of like mindset for me. What do you think this program did really, really well? And where are some areas that you say, you know, maybe this could be done a little differently for the next cohort that comes in? I think, number one, making it so low barrier. If that continues and they continue to have the funding, I think that is so critical. Obviously, here in America, we don't have, like, free education like that. And so, I mean, down to, like...

13:17 Ashanti : parking passes like i was able to get my parking for free laptops books like you name it they have been so supportive and the resources that we didn't even know was available to us as students um has been really amazing um

so that they knocked out the park with that um and then i think

13:40 Ashanti : Again, this work is heavy and, you know, these the discussions that we're having in real time, there have been some really tense, you know, conversations, intense conversations and discussions. But our professors have, again, just really held space for us to go through these emotions. And, you know, from different backgrounds, we've all respected one another in a way, you know, with love and compassion. But, you know.

14:09 Ashanti : Some people just inherently have privilege. And so acknowledging those blind spots, acknowledging those things and being able to have those nuanced conversations, we were able to do that in such a like healthy and respectful way here. And all of the like faculty and administration, they all honored that. And I think that's really beautiful. And I loved it. Those wraparound services really key, right? A hundred percent. Yeah. Talk to me about we know that you're almost done.

14:38 Ashanti : And I'm sure you're about to celebrate, celebrate, celebrate very, very, very soon. I'm sure it also went by extremely fast, right? What are you hoping to do once you have this certificate in hand? What's kind of the plan for you to even know at this point? I don't know, honestly. The other really great thing that they did right, they connect us. So we have site mentors at our internship sites, but we also had like in-class SMC mentors. And I feel really grateful that I have my mentor. And she's been really like just incredible about like figuring out like what does, you know, this next step looks look like.

15:24 Ashanti : opening up doors for me and really fostering, okay, this may not be what you want to do, but you can try it out and see. And I've been able to get on Zoom meetings with different people within her network to say, hey, let me pick your brain about this or tell me about your experience in this role. So that's been really cool. And I feel really...

15:49 Ashanti : blessed and privileged to not have to immediately go out into the field. Because honestly, it's actually really scary, especially right now with everything going on with funding in this sector and sort of the nonprofit world. Sometimes it's, you know, unreliable and not very secure. And so I think if I had to be looking for something, I'd be like on edge. But again, they really did provide sort of like wraparound services. So I think anyone who's looking.

16:17 Ashanti : is going to find something and something that fits and suits their strengths and, you know, where they want to go. But I don't know. I think I'm enjoying not knowing right now. And that's OK. How critical was it for you to be able to do this internship during the program? You know, really internships give students an opportunity to see, is this something that I want to do? If I'm here in

this world on a day to day basis, am I good with that? So talk to me about your internship experience. So I've been interning at the Downtown Women's Center, which sort of exclusively serves the women in Skid Row. And it has been incredible. I love, love, love.

16:59 Ashanti : I can't say enough about that agency. And it really sort of highlighted the differences of volunteering through different organizations and things and actually being out there. I know I'd pass out food and supplies and things like that, but this is different. I'm thinking of a woman, Cindy, who we outreached to.

17:26 Ashanti : Just hearing her story and sort of what came after, she was robbed recently and lost all of her belongings. And we had gone out day after day looking for her. And when we finally were able to connect with her and found her, she literally like sobbed because she's like, I can't believe you guys have been looking for me. You know, a lot of people talk a good game, but they don't back it up with actions. And it just really sort of.

17:55 Ashanti : sunk in for me that like showing up and showing up well and showing up consistently consistently is so critical to this work and just sort of reaffirm like I'm exactly where I need to be this is exactly what I need to be doing so I'm super grateful yeah 100% that yeah oh my goodness that must have been so that seems like a kind of an aha moment right where you're like no no no I'm on the right path here

18:21 Ashanti : Absolutely. How many aha moments do you feel like you had? Oh, do you have time? So many. But I mean, they've taught me so much about myself, about my boundaries, you know, my bandwidth, what I'm really capable of. I think I've really stretched myself in this past year in a way that I didn't know maybe I needed. And so I'm just.

18:47 Ashanti : I'm grateful. I think that's gratitude is what's really setting in now that we're at the finish line. Yeah. What would you tell someone who might be considering? Do it. You don't even need to finish that question. Do it. What advice would you share with them? So let's say they're like, yep, you're right. I should do this. What advice would you share for them to set them up for success in the program? Number one, having a village, whether that's your professors.

19:17 Ashanti : you know different resources here on campus your family friends whomever that may be whatever that looks like you need support and it really like it's possible obviously you can do this without it but like it makes it 10 times more manageable to do it with a support system and I think it really it

19:42 Ashanti : sort of mirrors what we see in the field like individuals who can be

successful and you know can get on their feet but like it's easier when you have help and support and resources um so I would definitely say that um be patient gentle with yourself like you're not gonna always get it right you're gonna it's it's a learning curve like you're not gonna know everything and that's okay like

20:09 Ashanti : If you knew everything, you wouldn't be coming here. So, yeah, definitely just be patient and be present. I think a lot like we would be like, oh, we have this deadline, we have that deadline, we have to do this, do that, do this. And like sometimes you just forget like, oh, like this is what it's for. Like this is why we're here and just like being in that moment. So, yeah.

20:30 Ashanti : You mentioned that two of the professors, Celina Alvarez and Lipe Shimkata, they were talking about how differently they entered the sector and how that is going to be vastly different than how you and your cohort mates enter the sector. Can you talk about why this type of program, why this particular program is so important and how important it would be to be able to

21:00 Ashanti : have this expand to other colleges, other community colleges in the state of California and even across the country? I think I'm hesitant to say I want it to expand because obviously, like, yes, we need this replicated. But the other side of that is replicating it.

21:23 Ashanti : without like the fundamentals, without the leapies, without the, you know, Celina Alvarez's, it's, it would be a disservice to the individuals. So unless they're spearheading it, unless they get them on board to go, you know, I mean, or just, that's the other part of it. How do you figure out how to, you know, sort of screen the type of individuals that can provide that same level of love and support and education in the same way? You know, I think it's possible. But I would love to see that happen. Again, it's such a crisis here and a need. Yeah, I would love to see it, but only if it's done right and it's, you know, authentic to.

22:11 Ashanti : why we're here. If you had to pick one or two words to describe your experience in this homeless services certificate program at SMC, what would that word or two words be? Beautifully traumatic. Oh, I love that. Beautifully traumatic. You want to expand on that? What does that mean to you?

22:39 Ashanti : As I've spoken about, just the different challenges. And again, we were the inaugural cohort. Had it in our mind from the beginning. We are the guinea pigs. They are testing all of these systems and practices and things on us. So that was like the traumatic part of like, OK, wait, what do you mean? I'm not starting my internship like now when like this is what, you know, and figuring out logistics and, you know, things like that. But just beautiful because we're here and.

23:13 Ashanti : I recently wrote a paper sort of reflecting on this journey. And, you

know, I griped about how it was a little disheartening that we didn't finish with our full cohort. But I think that was, you know, just divine intervention of like weeding out, you know, not necessarily the people who shouldn't be in this field, but who couldn't show up the way that. Or maybe just weren't ready yet. Or weren't ready.

23:42 Ashanti : And in this particular time, and that doesn't mean, you know, forever. And so, yeah, I beautifully traumatic and I do it again. I love that. Beautifully traumatic. I'm going to start using that. Tamara Simpson, thank you so much for coming on the podcast today and sharing your journey with us. We appreciate it. Thank you. And thank you for joining us on Doing What Works Innovations in 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.

24:22 Ashanti: tuned for more insights from the experts leading the way. Until next time.

****Guest Information:**** [Tamyra Simpson is a student from Santa Monica College's inaugural cohort in its Homeless Services Certificate Program. This student is quickly approaching the finish line of her coursework, and she's here today to share her experiences in the program and what may be next for her..]

****Season Theme:**** [Season 2: Homeless Services] ****Relevant SMC Program:**** [Homeless Services Certificate]