

08. Cass Green and Somaly Osteen_mixdown v2


📅 Mon, 6/14 3:57PM ⌚ 59:24


SUMMARY KEYWORDS


community, people, pandemic, cass, community organizer, kensington, called, question, community engagement, business, folks, work, iron sharpens, khmer, speak, happened, iron, understand, black, legacy


SPEAKERS


De'Wayne Drummond, Leon Robinson, Somaly Osteen, Cass Green

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Leon Robinson 00:10
Hey everybody. It's Leon Robinson here.
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De'Wayne Drummond 00:12
And De'Wayne Drummond. Welcome to Iron Sharpens Iron.
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Leon Robinson 00:16
We're excited to share with you a very special episode of Iron Sharpens Iron as part of PACDC's Equitable Development Conference.
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De'Wayne Drummond 00:26
Today, we're talking to two community organizers, Cass Green and Somaly Osteen on the topic of race.
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Leon Robinson 00:36

Yeah, I think we had a very, very powerful conversation with these two organizers. And we were able to hit some good points and talk about Yeah, and I think we had a very, very good powerful conversation with these two organizers. And we talked about race, and how that plays a part in their community organizing, especially since neighborhoods are going through a lot of gentrification. And when gentrification always requires that there's one group that's been displaced and another group that's coming in, so race definitely plays a good part in community organizing today, and it's good to know how to have the tools to effectively reach these groups and groups of people. Our first guest this week is Cass Green. Cass is currently Project Manager for New Kensington CDC, HACE, and Impact Services DOJ community-based crime reduction grant. She previously served as People's Emergency Center CDC, Director of Community Engagement and Partnership. Cass' career includes 27 years at the University of Pennsylvania serving as a senior business and building administrator for the Institute of Contemporary Art for 17 years. She is a multi-disciplinary artist, curator and producer of the Mill Creek Past, Present, and Future documentary. Cass co-founded the Mill Creek Community Partnership in 2004 and served as it's president along with having established the Fine Arts Through Our Eyes Community Arts Initiative. Cass, Cass, welcome to Iron Sharpens Iron. I'm so glad to talk to you. You've been one of my, you're at the top of one of my favorite community organizers when I think about colleagues that are called on to help out with Iron Sharpens Iron. So I just want to say it's good to hear your voice. And I'm glad to have you at Iron Sharpens Iron.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 02:38

So Cass, can you tell us your story? What led you to this type of work?



02:45

Okay, so my story is, I'm an artist. And I found myself working at the University of Penn for 25 years. And I actually encountered my dream job at Penn after many years, and that was working at the Institute of Contemporary Art Museum. I was their business and building administrator. And so basically, that was my dream job. And I had no interest in community engagement and organizing. And then what happened was, I was invited to a church service at this non denominational church called the Church Down the Way with this dynamic pastor. And his name was Curtis William Wylington. And he was talking about folks having access to hope, and that children, most importantly, access to hope and access to God. And I was like, Oh, I don't really do traditional religion. But I was like, I might could get down with that what he's talking about. And he was a community organizer. And he had been for many years all over the world. And I started being around

him and this ministry, and he became my mentor. And that's where I first had my experience with community engagement, and outreach. He was all about outreach, like, he didn't believe that institutions, religion, or possibilities should be confined by four walls, that everyone should have access to hope. And it should exist outside of formal interactions, right? It shouldn't be nine to five, it shouldn't be on Sunday mornings. It should be accessible all the time. And he actually mentored me and I was able to work with him. He asked me to start a nonprofit, which I did. It's called Mill Creek Community Partnership. And it got incorporated back in 2004. Um, it still exists. I must say my mentor, Reverend Curtis, he transitioned about it'll be 10 years in August. But the work still lives. And I also started to understand around community engagement activism and outreach that it's important that we cultivate the legacy, right? Because it's not just in one person. That's what he taught me, right? You want to keep the legacy going, and the information and resources pushed into other people and other areas. So now it can live outside of a mortal lifespan. And so I feel like the work that I do is a part of keeping not only his legacy alive, but also the legacy that he carried from other people that have poured into him. So I'm kind of like a vessel, so looking at myself as a vessel, who has been poured into by many, many, many great people, that some of them like Fred Austin, great people, Patrice Brown, great people in Philadelphia, and all over the country, and even my family that have poured into me, and then I pour it into others, and they pour it out to other people. So that's kind of my story. I've been hooked, I drink, what do they call it, I drank the Kool Aid. And now it's my life's work and my life mission. And I'm so honored and always very humbled to even be in this place, among greats like yourselves. So, I use my artistry. As a part of it, I tell people all the time, when I approach community engagement and community development, I really approach it from an artistic lens, or curatorial perspective.

L

Leon Robinson 06:40

That's a very good way of looking at it. I like the concept that you had keeping the legacy alive, because that's what we tried to do at Iron Sharpens Iron. If one person you know, knows whatever they have shared with somebody else, so that they can carry you on their vessel. I like that. I like that. Let me ask you this. When did you know that? Okay, let me say this first. A lot of times, I work with people like yourself, my colleagues in community organizing. Some of us just have it in the heart. You know, you could there's no paycheck sometimes, or whatever. And you still do it the same way you do it for the paycheck, you do it without the paycheck would be? When did you know? Is there any incident that you knew it was in your heart?

C

Cass Green 07:24

Oh, my gosh, I mean, I have so many incidents. And it's so interesting. You asked me that question, because I I've been doing it since like 2002, being like involved in community engagement. And it's funny, just last week, I was having that same, you know, they say, do you have that experience of when you first got engaged right when it first happened for you. And I still have it. And I actually experienced mine, as a part of, we have a program that I started, it's called Fine Art through our Eyes, Community Arts Initiative. And it actually started and was birthed over at the mill creek Cultural Center in West Philadelphia. And that's when I got really hooked. And I was working with community children, and started teaching this art class on Saturday mornings. And it was a place where the children could come. And again, it was accessible. And it was an entry point, right? Like, a lot of them came and said they weren't artists or they kind of just didn't have anything else to do. But it was a safe place where they could be creative, and express themselves and be together. And how I knew it was for me, was when I began to cry for them. I began to cry for them. And it didn't matter that they weren't my blood children. I didn't birth them, but they became my children. And that's been a consistent path of the work that I've been doing over the years is through the children like later on, I became involved in the community connector program and people's emergency center and bringing on youth from the Youth Work program. And I have just a beautiful story. I have a set of twins Eli and Lou Bivins, who were a part of the very first art class at Mill Creek Cultural Center back in 2004, and these young ladies are still a part of my life. They are board members of Mill Creek community partnership to ensure that their legacy lives on. And I interact with them at least three or four times a week and they're doing great things with what they got back then. And what they've evolved into now. So that's the part for me is to see when I talk about that vessel and pour it out and then then pouring out and seeing those legacies live through folks like the community connectors and those youth that were in art class. And I even had one young lady she was, I believe nine, she actually lives in my apartment building in Mill Creek. But she was a part of that very first art class. So that's those connections, right? those connections that I'm still attached, I'm attached to them, and they're attached to me, even though we may not see each other every day. We're attached and connected.



Leon Robinson 10:31

Okay, that's good. That's good. That's a good story. I like this. So this is I have a two part question for you, and we're going to take it to another phase. Because you are in Kensington or whatever. When did you first start thinking how race affected your work that you're doing now?



Cass Green 10:47

Oh, actually, race always affected my work. And it's very interesting, I was just having this conversation with someone else like, so for many years, once I started to go and kind of get in different departments at University of Penn. Many times, I was the only Black person in that department. Right. So there was always, you know, I always knew that I was black, and other people weren't. I'll put it that way. Just so also you guys know that I actually come from Newark, New Jersey, which was primarily a Black town. It wasn't a lot of non black people in my community. And then, especially after the Newark Riots, you saw even less non black people in Newark, New Jersey, like, that's when the like shopkeepers and stuff close down your businesses after the Newark riot. And it became even more disinvested in, so I was very limited in my interaction at home with non black people. But what I did do was I, you know, went a lot to New York, so I interacted with folks who were of different cultures and backgrounds. But like, I've always been knowledgeable about who I was as a black woman in America, or a black kid in America, just from my experiences of coming from North New Jersey. Um, but then like, in terms of the work that we do, I always felt like, and this is something, again, to go back to my mentor, you know, looking at the lens of, particularly in contemporary art, university academic settings. Um, I knew that the people that I interacted at home, and in my neighborhood wasn't necessarily in those environments with me. Right? That it was very far and few in between folks, Black folks at University of Pennsylvania, they were very far and few between Black folks in professional positions, right. They were very far and few between black folks in the contemporary art world. Um, so it was always present with me. And that was a part of my work, and you know, how it actually gets delivered. And that I want the same value and excellence that is offered in the marketplace and in academia, and other places to exist in the work that we do in our community, it should be the same quality, it shouldn't be like a watered down version of something else. And that coming from Community Development and Community Engagement, that our folks shouldn't just be happy to get whatever they get, right, they should be able to have access to excellence, and top shelf items and bountiful items and things like that. It shouldn't be a thing, where we should just be happy to get what we got. And so that's a part of that, like, now, I guess it's called equity. Um, but just in my professional career, you know, what's good for me should be good for you, or what's good for you should be good for me. Um, so I kind of live my life that way. You know, with my children, I have two daughters. I'm making sure that they had access to excellence. And that we're set up that we're not always starting, I used to say this all the time. And I still do like, for Black folks who don't like we always started way behind the start line, right. So we just trying to catch up to the start line, right? As opposed to at least having us at the start line, then we can compete, opposed to having all this space between where we even started. Um, so trying to always make sure we incorporate opportunities that were at least at the starting line. If you get us to the starting line, if we're at the starting line, we can take off and do the rest.

- D** De'Wayne Drummond 15:06
Ms. Cass, I just want to let you know that that was a powerful, powerful statements that you just made, and they had me just wondering, um, can you define what transformation is?
- C** Cass Green 15:22
Transformation? You mean for me or for you?
- D** De'Wayne Drummond 15:25
Yes for you.
- C** Cass Green 15:27
Okay, I guess for me transformation is the process of becoming. And that part process of becoming is not always like from what I told you about my story is that my intention was never to grow up and be a community engagement or community organizer or an activist. But the process of being vulnerable enough to receive the change in the possibilities is what helped transform me into the person I am today. And it was collective. It wasn't just a personal endeavor. There was many, many people that helped put the pieces together to bring the information in to mentor me and tutor me and walk with me, then that sometimes even pushed me even sometimes cut me off. All those things have been a process, I think, play a part process to transformation, right. It can be very rewarding. But it can be very painful and being able to surrender enough, I guess, to receive all the parts of it, right? It takes all these parts to transform. And it's very layered. I think Leon had mentioned earlier about my change from West Philly to Kensington, right. That's transformative, that transformative, right? Coming from one community that I know very, very well to go to a community that I had been in, but never really experienced, and being open enough to be willing enough to go and be a part of the process. And I have truly been transformed in the last few years. By being in Kensington. Yes, and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. And that transformation is an ongoing process. I don't think we ever complete it. I think it's something that's concurrent and is everlasting. Keep transforming. So yeah. Did I answer your question?
- D** De'Wayne Drummond 17:52
Yes, yes. Yeah, change change. And one thing that I realized over the last like 15 months, something called the pandemic, and it can be like a roller coaster ride. In past year, how

was this pandemic life for you?

C

Cass Green 18:12

I think the pandemic life has, from my personal opinion, has showed how not only myself but how our universe in our Earth was able to transform, right? Right before the pandemic, I believe, folks were talking about cutting folks off food stamps, and social security and public services. Right, that really what's happening right before the pandemic, but then the pandemic hit, and the amazing things that transpired with people having surpluses of food, food cupboards popping up everywhere, access to additional funds, with unemployment, extra food stamps, like yeah, it showed us what we really had all the resources we really had, that we may have been sitting on, that we weren't really making accessible. In a pandemic, when when we didn't have a pandemic, all we heard about was what folks were going to take away from our communities, and what people didn't deserve anymore. And it showed the humanity that existed within a pandemic. I know that there was much death, and I honor that and a lot of fear that happened with it. But I also think that it's very, very important that we see the things that happen outside of our imaginations, like really, the government gave us money twice, and we don't have to claim it on our taxes. Like, when did that ever happen? So and it also showed its possibilities. So that's what I think about when I think about the pandemic. And hope in my prayers that we don't revert back to the people we were before it happened, I think we became better people, better society and a better world. Through the pandemic, in terms of loving, I'm having more empathy towards each other and more consideration, more love and care towards each other, just as human beings.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 20:27

Thank you, you are true woman and a great virtue, too. Appreciate that.

L

Leon Robinson 20:35

A year ago, Cass a year ago this week, a vigilant mob of white civilians armed themselves with baseball bats, golf clubs and other weapons in Fishtown. Can you talk about that? And how did you handle that in your work?

C

Cass Green 20:51

So yeah, um, well, um, you know, I'm gonna just put it on out here. What did Malcolm say? The chickens came home to roost. Yeah, it was already there. It wasn't like it was new. It just, you know, got shown and revealed in what it was, where it was, and how it was. And

so interestingly enough, like I said, I've been working in Kensington for two years. And I actually was really affected by that incident and how I was was a dear friend of mine. Um, De'Wayne actually knows her, Jeannine Cook. We worked PEC formerly together. She opened up a bookstore, in Kensington, won't call it Fishtown, and it's called Harriett's Bookshop. And so when that happened, you know, we knew about it. And then a few months later, I think she got some really hateful emails, saying that they were going to come and burn down her, her her shop, and just horrible, horrible things were directed towards her and her staff and her business. And so, I felt like also with the pandemic, it gave us a sense of, I'm not sure if other people are feeling this, but like, you know, what do we have to lose at this point, right? If folks could come out with bats and do that, right, like they did, in Kensington, right? If they felt like they had the the authority to do that, then we have the authority to do something else, right? And what would that be? And so when I found out from Jeannine, and I saw it online about what happened, because of where I work at, I went to my superiors and I was like, Hey, this is happening in the territory that we say we service, then what are we going to do? And so what we did was we immediately went and met with Jeannine and asked her, like, what can we do? How can we support you. And in talking with her, we supported that Sister Sit-In that happened in Kensington. And so it was a silent March. And we supported however, she said. It didn't need to be, you know, I'm not saying our agency, because it wasn't about the agency. It was about people supporting people. And we came together, and I believe it was over 150 folks participated in this silent sister protest, in which we marched through that same space where that had happened. And we said no more, we're not going anywhere. And we have the authority over the space that we're in. So making those moves and feeling like, we have space, I'm gonna say Black and brown people have space to say, push back. I'm not so much in like, violence, but definitely in our voice. And the way we advocate and the way we lift each other up, and the way we speak our truth. We have the ability to do that even more now from those kinds of instances. But yeah, no, it was, it was like it was good to know like this is I've been hearing the same proverb all the time. And it talks about what is that to Scorpion and turtle or something or the scorpion and the frog and who's carrying you and who's with you along that journey. It's better to know who your enemies are than to not know and have them as ghosts or secret societies behind you because then you can deal with them appropriately

D

De'Wayne Drummond 24:42

Yeah, that's a good proverb right there I got a proverb for you at the end, but I ain't gonna release it.

C

Cass Green 24:47

And you know, that's that's the same thing that happened in DC, right? That's what happened really was it just got shown like it was always there. It just got exposed. So that the people that was like, oh, wow, it's not don't really like that. It's not it is. Oh, no, that doesn't really that's not really happening. Um, oh, the proof was in the pudding.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 25:09

If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, it's a duck. So how can community organizers help a community as it recovers from a racist incident?

C

Cass Green 25:23

So like, um, I mean, you guys know me, right. So I'm all about like, you know, I used to think that being an opportunist was a negative word or negative behavior. But I think that how we can recover is to become opportunists and take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself and that does not present itself. Right? Go for it. Like now's the time when if you had an idea, put it out here. We had to get this period right here, where before people pivot out of this space of the knowing, right, the knowing of what we working with, we always knew. But now we have the revelation, right? There was always there. But now we have revelation. What do we do with revelation? Revelation is a tool that you use to process out and transform to what's next, right? And before we miss the move, or the wave, to the next thing, that we as people of color, need to get our stuff, get our stuff, go for our stuff, support each other to level up. And to build, build it out for the coming generations. Now's the time right to seize the moment. Don't put it off till next year, or later on, like, go for it now. Go for it now. And that's how we could when you say how do we combat or come up against racism is to go and cultivate and build and prepare our best selves for the next thing.

L

Leon Robinson 27:18

Oh, okay. Um, I think it's so cool. Um, Cass and I don't know if I said this before. And even as a seasoned community organizer, myself, the tools that I'm talking about the tools that we bring to communities so that they can have a better quality of life, how you got this art thing? And you know, that thing you do it before? And I just think, you know, I was like, Hey, why don't why isn't this more? Why isn't this more like more programs like thi? But like anything else is about funding and who gets to you know, who gets the money and who wants to make that change or whatever. But I just want to say, even today, I mean, as you're explaining, the work you do to art, through art, you know, it's just amazing, the tools that we that we have as community organizers to, you know, put out there and I think art is a good tool, you know, so I just want to compliment you want it other than that,

De'Wayne.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 28:21

Yeah, so this is a proverb that we use and Leon was just talking about tools, and just listening to you, Ms. Cass, I realize that you utilize tools. I realized that you utilize tools. So this proverb, this phrase I just wanted to say to you and ask you what does this mean to you? What does Iron Sharpens Iron mean to Cassandra Green?

C

Cass Green 28:52

Iron sharpens iron? Um, yeah, I guess it means, you know, we all can learn from each other. Right? We, it's necessary. Iron sharpening iron is necessary. Like, we don't graduate and get to the pinnacle. And like a lot of people like what Leon was saying about the art. When I started doing art in the neighborhood in 2002 in that building on 46 and Lancaster, I was just being myself and trying to bring creativity to folks that wanted something to do right. Um, over the years, it's transpired and now has a fancy word, and it's called creative placemaking or creative place keeping, but that iron sharpens iron. That's what people do on the ground. When you talk about grassroots community organizing and engagement. That's iron sharpens iron. That's when, De'Wayne, you sharpen me, and I sharpen you. It doesn't matter how old you are. It doesn't matter how old I might be. It doesn't matter how young a person is. We all have have something to offer. It doesn't matter. We can all bring something to the table, whether I fold napkins good whether I speak good, whether I cook good whether I can cultivate people good, whatever it is that's that iron sharpening iron. That's what grassroots community organizing is all about. That's why we still survived. I told y'all I was watching the Underground Railroad. But that's why we have survived, because black folks is iron sharpening iron. That's why we even exist anymore. So I hope I answered your question.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 30:39

Yes, you hit you hit, you hit hit the nail on the head.

L

Leon Robinson 30:43

Yeah. You was on the soap box girl. I'm getting ready to say amen

D

De'Wayne Drummond 30:54

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much, Ms. Cass. Enough said, you did the benediction

and everything. So it's all good. We appreciate you. Keep on keeping on. Keep the Faith man and keep your hands to plow, and you will go a long, long way. And it's just not about you going a long way. That legacy that you're instilling in the young, the old is going to be there for a long, long time. So thank you.



Cass Green 31:29

Thank you. Appreciate it. Thank you guys.



De'Wayne Drummond 31:33

Okay, screen. Wow. That's a lot. A lot said and it's the truth. One thing personally, that I know about Cass, she stands for what we talking about iron sharpens iron. And I have sharpened her. And she has sharpened me. That's why we can go out in community and do what we have to do. I'm very, very excited that we have her as a guest on iron sharpens iron.



Leon Robinson 32:03

And you know what the good part, the part that affected me or I took away from that interview is how we as community organizers pass on the legacy. You know, we we, we don't know that some of us don't know that. But they just do the work. And the work is to pass on the legacy to our culture, make sure our culture stays in the neighborhood. And Cass was really, really explained that really well in our interview with her.



De'Wayne Drummond 32:37

Yeah, I really appreciate that interview, because a lot of people they can talk about theirself and how iconic they are in the work that they do. But one thing that I can say about her she did talk about legacy and about passing the baton down to the different generations. So you can keep that cultural enrichment of your community history. So very, very impactful podcast. True indeed. Our next guest is Somaly Osteen who is a community development specialist coordinator manager with SEAMAAC. Somaly graduated with a Bachelors of Science in Business and Tourism Management. She has more than 10 years of experience working with multiple local and international nonprofit organizations. Somaly career started in the country of Cambodia, while taking part as a community advocate, community engagement and development. Somaly believes that the Sustainable Development starts with each individual while sustainable chains come through unity.

L

Leon Robinson 33:58

I'm really glad we have an opportunity to talk to her because that puts a whole nother a whole nother spin a whole nother spin on community organizing as we do our outreach to different people of ethnicity. Okay, Somaly. Hi, my name is Leon. I haven't had the opportunity for introduction. But I've heard some a lot about you and some good work that you're doing. Tell us your story. And what led you to this kind of work?

S

Somaly Osteen 34:25

So yeah, Hi, everyone. My name is Somaly Osteen. I just start where I was born in Cambodia, country of Cambodia, and I moved to America in 2015. So I've been involved with this work for five years this month, actually. I actually graduated from my majors, specifically as hotel and Tourism Management. And after graduated I work at a five star hotel for one month. And I feel like this is this isn't for me. I don't feel completed. I don't I feel like I, beside my paycheck, I don't feel like I make any impact. So, throughout the college, I volunteer with different organizations, various nonprofit to work for community health, community education, community development type of work. So I kind of like I feel like I am fulfilled when I'm in that field. So since I graduated, I pursue that career and work with different international nonprofit organizations helping with fighting HIV and community health issues in the community, helping children, poor children to go back to school, basically advocate for the education. And when I moved here, in 2015, after I married to my husband, I feel like I won't be able to do this the job that I love anymore, because I'm in the country, like a rich country, put in a simple word that they might not need my skill or my experience. But after I got my paperwork and everything in place, I the job opportunity at SEAMAAC appears at what I'm doing right now. So I apply. And I was grateful that SEAMAAC gave me a platform to do what I would love to do and to work in the community where I feel like I can create a lot of impact. So that's how I started with SEAMAAC.

L

Leon Robinson 36:25

Okay, sounds sounds great. I understand how you feel about the hotel. I used to work at a hotel. So and I know that can be very, very, whatever you want to call it, but it's not. It's really not a good job if you're not into it, you know?

S

Somaly Osteen 36:42

Yeah. It's, I mean, it's fun, although you feel like, what what have you done throughout the day, eight hours a day? Is it like you making impact besides just help people get a nice

room and get your paycheck at the end of the month? So it's definitely a job but it's not a good field for the passion that I have.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 37:00

Hey Somaliy. This is De'Wayne Drummond. I heard you said that you was from Cambodia. Can you tell us a little bit about Cambodia?

S

Somaly Osteen 37:11

Yes, Cambodia. I would say now is a developing country is located in Southeast Asia, next to Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Definitely, its a small country, people - It's less than 20 million population in general. But yeah, I grew up in a in a village where education was not necessarily accessible then. But I was lucky enough to have a parent that had valued education. And I were able to went to school and then continue to college in the city and graduate from a bachelor degree and is the first one in the family that graduated from a bachelor degree in my family members. Yeah, hope that I answer your question.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 38:08

Yeah. Yeah, that's legacy right there. Thank you. We appreciate that.

L

Leon Robinson 38:12

Somaly, when did you first start thinking about how race and ethnicity affect the work that you do?

S

Somaly Osteen 38:18

That's its - It's a good question. And I'm hoping I can have a better answer. Well back in Cambodia, you know, race, is the physical identification, you can see that but this thing deeper into the ethnicity, I learned that is affecting my work, when I started working here, specifically in South Philadelphia, because, as you know, South Philadelphia and Philadelphia in general is very diverse. And you might see people probably look like you the same like, for example, in the South Philly area, I see a lot of people look like me, because most Asian also look alike. But also if we go into deeper into ethnicity, which mean we focus and we look into the language that we speak, food that we eat, you know, clothes that that, that we might, you know, dress or our culture, those are different things that I've noticed, and I've learned that those are important that as a community organizer, or community worker, we have to respect acknowledge and try to understand so that we

can work within the community where we serve effectively and have an impact and make our work easier and smoother by trying to understand the power and the differences of the ethnicities. I hope that answers your question.



Leon Robinson 39:48

That's a good answer. I don't think that's a good answer.



De'Wayne Drummond 39:51

Somaly, I heard a whole lot about SEAMAAC. For people who are listening What does that acronym SEAMAAC stands for?



Somaly Osteen 40:03

You put me in the right spot. Yeah, SEAMAAC stands for Southeast Asians Mutual Assistance Association coalition. Um, it's formed over 35 years ago, with a group of refugees from Southeast Asian, and that's why it started with Southeast Asians. But now we serve more than just Southeast Asians.



De'Wayne Drummond 40:29


Cool cool, you learn something new every day. How do you build trust and connection among such a diverse community of refugees and immigrants?




Somaly Osteen 40:40


That's a great question. And that connecting back to Leon question the first time when you start to recognize that the ethnicity actually affecting your work. So that on our part, to build trust is basically you put yourself in the community, and you you acknowledge the differences. You, I personally, you know, try to understand the background, the heritage, the history of the community that we serving, respect, what they have to say what they have to offer. And more importantly, is be consistent, be approachable within the community, and not to over promise and what with what you cannot deliver, per se. So spend a lot of time with the community respects the community and be more consistent, open communication be approachable. And those kinds of thing I personally see through my experience four or five years ago when I start to work within the community, because we might look alike. You know, I'm Cambodian I look a lot like Cambodian. But I might come from different history, different backgrounds, different story. And those when we open when we open to share and with transparency, and that how we build trust along


the way.


 De'Wayne Drummond 42:07
Thank you so much.

 Leon Robinson 42:08
Okay, I'm just outside the box a little bit, how many languages do you speak?

 Somaly Osteen 42:14
I speak only Khmer and English.

 Leon Robinson 42:17
Okay. Okay. What was the past year like for you personally, as a community organizer, with this pandemic, and all that.

 Somaly Osteen 42:25
Was definitely challenging, personally and professionally. For the community that we serve, there's a lot of limitation in terms of language, in terms of technology, or understand how to navigate the systems. So that is challenging. And on top of that, everything has to go remotely. It's even create more challenge among the community that we normally meet in person help to, you know, translate help to show them how to do some paperwork thing like that. So when it moved to all, remotely, it's, it's been tough. For example, my main job was to help business to apply for grants. And those businesses and some of them doesn't even understand how to read the grant guidelines, or how to take a clear photo of the tax return and how to send it to your email or your text. So those 'hand holding' was hard, but its rewarding, because looking back sitting here looking back right now. We see how much we have done and brought to the community that grant and funding to help at least them pay for rent and keep their business open. And they also learning in the process at least how to use zoom and how to use email how to use phone for clear photo and scan and take it and send it to you. So it's been challenging, very challenging, but it's also rewarding.

 De'Wayne Drummond 44:03
I'm glad that you're down in South Philly tackling, tackling that digital divide. Like I really,

really appreciate that. You're overcoming some barriers and keep up that good work.

S

Somaly Osteen 44:16

Thank you and we can learn we learned what we need to do for the recovery and what next steps we need to take to make sure that if we ever have this ever happen again, we know how to be prepared better.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 44:31

Yeah, I believe ya'll prepared. I believe and you know, we can use what ya'll have been doing at other communities that help the various and other communities how y'all been tackling some things. So over the past year, we have seen a stark rise in anti Asian hate crimes. How has this violence affected your community in South Philly.

S

Somaly Osteen 45:00

It's not just South Philly, I'm sure the affecting most Asian community in general, but specifically for the community that we work with, like, I go back to the limitation of understand the English and what they can only see probably social media or video or pictures of, you know, the violence that happened. It's scary. It's it's make them fearful. And even one of the businesses even mentioned that she afraid to even walk on the street to the store and somehow get pushed to the street or get knocked over and without, you know, without no reason. So, yeah, that that's been affecting, at least mentally for some business that see what's happening. Although, as an organizer, and as the community's vocal I would, I would speak through with them, you know, that this thing is happening. But it doesn't mean that you have to be living in fear. You, you just have to keep doing what you're doing. And be careful and cautious of what where you go and what you do. And if things happened, you know, who to contact and what to call. I personally don't believe that we should share the information that make community, scared and fearful, but encourage them to continue to do what they doing in a very, you know, sufficient way and safe, safer way.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 46:28

Yeah, that question that I just asked you, it hit close to home because I have a a friend, my coworker, she's of Asian descent, and through this whole pandemic, she hasn't been riding public transportation. And after she got vaccinated, we came and her and a couple other colleagues and she was scared to ride on public transportation. And she rather to get in an Uber or Lyft than get on public transportation. And what me and my colleagues did

was, we just rode with her on the El to the Girard stop, you know, because she lives in Fishtown. And you know, I can relate to that, even though I'm not from Asian descent, but I had people that's close to me, that, you know, they're, they're close culture, their their descent has been under attack, just like Black and Brown people. Like we all are in the same boat. And you know, this racism has to give some, some they gotta give. And the follow up to that question is, how can organizers help a community to recover from these racist incidents? How can we help them out? People need to know.

S

Somaly Osteen 47:52

Yeah, that's, that's a tough question. I hope I have a better answer. But personally, I would answer this out of my own personal thoughts. I would say continue to motivate and encourage the community to to know what's going on, like I mentioned earlier, it's not to make them fear of what is happening and not even get out of their home, but to help them to understand and perhaps not to highlight everything into the same incident, but to help them to, to understand who you are in the situation, what you should do, what number you should call, and who to reach out. Basically, like I mentioned, I personally believe that teaching people to know how to react to the situation is better than to tell them something that make them more fearful. Because no matter what the community that's where they live, that's the community they cannot hide, or they cannot just like, lock themselves in the room, but they they just they just need to be, you know, perservere and and and at least be more educated or understand what to do if that happened to them or how to do it in a safe way and protect them from not have to put themselves in that situation.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 49:18

Yeah, yeah.

L

Leon Robinson 49:19

Somaly, SEAMAAC - Do you have programs for youth at SEAMAAC?

S

Somaly Osteen 49:25

Yeah, the specific program that work with youth is hip hop heritage program under the education department. And that is the one program that work with most youth around the city. It's an after school program we provide during summer for like taking hip hop, breakdancing. Yeah, those kind of - photography and things like that.



Leon Robinson 49:55

Okay. And do you have, does SEAMAAC have a volunteer program where community residents can volunteer?



Somaly Osteen 50:04

Definitely Yeah, volunteers. We believe that volunteers is a big help for to help the community. You know, moving forward specifically during this pandemic, we got a lot of help from volunteers through the hunger relief program. So volunteers, some of them get up early in the morning, four or five, six o'clock o'clock in the morning, come and help pre packaging the food and bring it out to the community and going out to the people. So definitely, SEAMAAC cannot do what we are doing right now without volunteers.



Leon Robinson 50:42

Okay, and how about senior citizen programs? What what kind of senior citizen programs does SEAMAAC offer for immigrants?



Somaly Osteen 50:49

Yeah, we have the we call Elder program that operate under health and social service department. And before the pandemic we normally have elders come together every Tuesday morning, to just have like breakfast together have a chance to talk and to have any action, social with other elders in the community that they not necessarily know each other, because they only stay in their own home. And unfortunately, that program has to, of course, you know, stop for a while during the pandemic for their safety, but we still our hunger relief program, teams volunteers to bring food to those elders house so that it's safer for them, you know, compared, you know, to have them come out and try to stand in line and to get the food. So, but we hopefully, at least the end of this year or early next year, that elders program would come back and bring you know, bring them back to to normal life.



Leon Robinson 51:57

So you guys have a interpreter at SEAMAAC, suppose you know what you deal with someone that you don't speak the language? Do you guys have an interpreter to help you out? Help you community organizers out?

S

Somaly Osteen 52:08

Yeah, SEAMAAC has that as one of our strengths is to have bilingual staff who speak different languages, especially our outreach workers. There's some outreach worker that speak Burmese, Nepali, Laos, Vietnamese, Mandarin. I myself speak Khmer. So we at least have staff that speak at least 10 different languages in the organization, if not more.

L

Leon Robinson 52:40

Okay. Sounds like a good program. Yeah, you guys got going on. Okay. And one last question. I want to ask you. How many ethnic groups would you say in that area that you serve? You guys?

S

Somaly Osteen 52:54

That is a big question. We do have a map that we've been working on the neighborhood planning. It's, I cannot come up with the exact number. But normally, if we do the outreach, translate flyers or any outreach material, we at least try to cover eight languages on the flyers, including Indonesian, Like I mentioned Vietnamese, Chinese, they use Mandarin, and Khmer, Burmese, Nepali, Spanish. So at least those eight languages we we include into our material, but it's easily I can easily say there about you know, 20 different ethnicities in South Philly area itself. For the business that I small business that I work in with along the South Seventh St Corridors, we have 50%, Cambodians and the rest have 50% different ethnicity, which include Honduran, Dominican, Mexicans, Indonesian, Burmese, Pakistanis, so you name it, and it's very diverse.

L

Leon Robinson 54:14

Oh, actually I have one last question. Something else came to mind. How about during the Trump administration, that immigration thing where a lot of people were hiding out or whatever. I guess you guys must have dealt with that too. And I and since the election of Biden, has it gotten any better?

S

Somaly Osteen 54:35

Um, I might not be the right person to speak on this question because I will help in social service department who dealing with a lot of citizenship process, a lot of immigration work, but if I speak on behalf of the community that I work closely with, especially the business owner, most of them are citizens. So I would say the concern was not up there for them.

- D** De'Wayne Drummond 55:04
Okay Somaly. Um, I have a question. Can you tell me what's the difference between equity and equality?
- S** Somaly Osteen 55:19
Okay, equity and equality.
- D** De'Wayne Drummond 55:22
Yes, ma'am.
- S** Somaly Osteen 55:23
Thank you. I love that question because flashback to where I grew up, you know, that would been use throughout, but I barely see it being implement. But anyway, come to the work that I'm doing in South Philly you you can see that okay, equality for, for example for all the business to apply for grants, you know the grant is open for all the business to apply. But without equity in this process, some of them cannot access to it. Why? Because they don't understand or know how to navigate where to go or how to do it. Or even they have the piece of paper in front of them, they don't understand what they say. So what equity can play during this process is to make sure that the material is available in other language that they can understand. The process shouldn't be so hard or we have a person like me on the ground that helped them to navigate the grand process. So I just answering your question by giving that example. It's that equality is there, but equality cannot be successful without equity.
- D** De'Wayne Drummond 56:44
Yes, yes. Yes. You You hit. You hit the nail right on the head with the hammer. You brought that home. And we like to thank you so much for participating in this podcast, but I need a favor from you. And the favor is I'm gonna ask you a question right?
- S** Somaly Osteen 57:06
I thought - you always ask a lot of questions haha.
- D** De'Wayne Drummond 57:13

But this one I need a favor. I need I need I need a favor. I don't need you to say it in English. So this is the question I'm going to ask you and I'm gonna say in English. Does iron sharpens iron mean to you?

S Somaly Osteen 57:32
Do you want me to answer in Khmer or English?

D De'Wayne Drummond 57:36
Answer it in your native tongue please.

S Somaly Osteen 57:39
Oh, okay. Um Is this is technical term that I need to switch my brain a little bit to Khmer and you want me to answer it in Knmer right?

D De'Wayne Drummond 58:19
Yeah, man.

S Somaly Osteen 58:19
[Speaking in Khmer]. Thank you.

D De'Wayne Drummond 58:23
Thank you. And I believe everything that you just said. On behalf of PACDC, we really really appreciate you and the work that you are doing in your organization, what your organization is doing in the community and how it is touching neighboring communities. We appreciate all your good work. Thank you.

S Somaly Osteen 58:47
Thank you for having me and for some Khmer people who are listening to my Khmer translation just now. This You know, this is a surprise question. So But yeah, I hope that's acceptable.



De'Wayne Drummond 59:03

Yeah. It came from the heart that's all that counts. Thank you so much.



Leon Robinson 59:09

Thank you. Shop is on is produced by the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, but the opinions are our own.