

Shimon: Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host Shimon Cohen. In this episode I talk with Ocesa Keaton, who is the executive director of Greater Syracuse Hope in Syracuse, New York. Ocesa details the incredibly comprehensive and thoughtful strategies Hope uses in their antipoverty work at both the systems and individual levels to eliminate systemic barriers that maintain inequity and prevent people from having opportunities.

We discussed the racial wealth gap in the US and stereotypes and inaccurate beliefs about people in poverty. Ocesa shares her journey of wanting to become an entertainment lawyer, but choosing social work due to her own health issues and a social worker who helped her. She stresses the importance of policy work and why voting is critical for social change. I hope you enjoy the conversation. Hey Ocesa, thanks so much for coming on Doin' The Work. Can you start out with telling us about the work you're currently doing?

Ocesa: Yes, so right now I am the executive director for Greater Syracuse Hope. Greater Syracuse Hope is a designated antipoverty initiative by New York State. We're actually one of 16 cities that governor Cuomo picked to address poverty, either concentrated poverty or poverty in general throughout the New York area. So this work really concentrates on finding those systemic barriers that keep individuals from moving from poverty to prosperity and also highlighting from their point of view what they would need to move to a level of self sustainability and self autonomy.

Shimon: So what are the current campaigns you've got going on as part of Hope?

Ocesa: So Hope is an interesting concept, at least in my opinion because one of the things that we do is we take a look at it from the system side and then we also take a look at it from the individual. So from the system side, what we decided to do was to identify key local partners that could help us carry out some of our objectives in our four focus areas. Those four focus areas are health, housing, education and economics.

So local nonprofit groups, grassroots agency had came with the initiative to do different programming that will tackle a variety of issues that we know contribute to concentrated poverty. The city of Syracuse unfortunately has been deemed as number one for concentrated poverty for black and Brown individuals throughout the whole United States, and so these agencies have great reputations for being impactful in the work that they do.

So just to give you a high overview of some of the areas that we're focusing on. We're focusing on financial literacy, getting individuals in the community that are traditionally under banked, getting them linked to different banking institutions through financial counseling. We're also focusing on education with a hyper focus on the middle school

population and those students who have been disengaged from the school system and getting them back engaged in school.

Do a wraparound services where we're also offering a supportive social work services to their family as a whole. Also under that same strategy, we're offering trauma informed care through the after school program as well as a summer youth job component. Which will also teach them about the importance of saving their money with the hope they apply the money that they earn to getting stuff for school supplies and school [inaudible 00:04:29].

The other strategy that we're doing is this concept around social isolation for individuals who have been out of the workforce for quite a number of years, either through a known disability or perceived disability. We will use the concept of volunteerism to slowly reintroduce them into what it's like to go to work. Because sometimes when you've been out of the workforce for a long time, that can be intimidating.

But we do know as a adult, that's typically where you get your most social interaction is when you go to work. So a lot of the individuals here in our community that don't work or have been out of the workforce for quite some time, they also report feeling disconnected from the neighborhood and from the greater Syracuse community as a whole. Our last two strategies deals with neighborhood empowerment and getting individuals moving around through transportation.

So we want to be able to do a shuttle service, getting individuals back and forth to work, allowing them to go to the grocery store or doctor's appointment and that would be a free service for the first few rides. And then after that... We want them to have some steak in then games. So it'd be a small nominal fee but nothing outrageous.

That strategy actually partners with our regional transportation authority here so that we can service during the time periods where our bus system doesn't typically run and there's a huge gap. So a lot of individuals who are working at second and third shift when they get off of work, there's no bus that runs and sometimes they are quite a distance away from their home and they have to walk in the middle of the night back to their house.

So we want to be able to try to fill that gap through the shuttle service. The last strategy deals with is this concept of making connections in the community through the services that are out there versus how people see their neighborhoods as well as helping individuals be able to advocate on behalf of their own communities. That concept is called the community connectors and these would be individuals that are kind of looked at as leaders in their own communities.

We will give them training around community mapping, asset mapping, and also give them training around advocacy and what does it take to advocate and who are the correct people that you go to when you have a problem. The difference between what a city council member does versus what someone on the educational board is responsible

for. So, and then we're also doing stuff around the new American population because Syracuse has a very big population for new Americans.

So we want to make sure that we're providing support to those agencies that are known to do great work within those communities. So I think I hit all of the systems strategies and on the individual level I have a community advisory panel and Shimon, they are phenomenal individuals. They're a group of volunteers that use their free time to help me put on educational forums for the community.

Just recently we had a huge forum about issue here in Syracuse dealing with the highway. I81 is coming down and they were right by my side when we had to go out to the neighborhood that's going to be most impacted and flyer and talk to people and really drive home that message as to why this was important and why their voice needed to be heard.

I think it has a different ring to it when you see someone that you could relate to and that lives in the community telling you, "Hey you need to pay attention to this." So that's a group that I'm always proud of. I always try to give them their props in any interview that I do because without them I would be dead in the water.

Shimon: You've got a lot going on and the fact that you've got that community support for what you're doing is obviously critical. That part when you say it's like people who live right there saying look this is something we got to address. There's just so many levels that when you hear poverty or anti-poverty work, right? There's just an endless amount of work that could be done to deal with this issue.

Ocesa: That's what makes the work kind of hard. You have to do a very... You have to approach the work in a very thoughtful manner. For instance, we decided to not try to do any programming or strategic interventions around housing. Right? Because that's such a huge issue. So when you're taking out things around education and economic empowerment and transportation.

Housing is it's own multi level layered issue that you can just go down this rabbit hole of anything from quality housing, like the lead crisis through the rent going up. It's a lot. So we had to make some hard decisions about where we will focus our efforts on. So, yes, it's a lot of different factors that go into the work of poverty mitigation.

Shimon: As you're telling me all the work that you're doing and then talking about having to make the hard decision to not take on an issue like housing, right? That is so critical. What I think of organizations like yours and the folks that are... The communities that you're trying to help are fighting and deciding like, "What do we deal with? Education or housing."

Whereas there are elites that are consolidating wealth on a daily basis. I just, as you're explaining all that, I'm like there's companies that don't pay taxes. There's so many... Right? There's just so many issues. I'm wondering what do you think it's going to take to address the racial wealth gap? So there's obviously the... There are folks in poverty,

right? That it affects all people of all backgrounds. But then there's also a clear racial wealth gap in this country as the result of decades of policy and disenfranchisement. What's it going to take to address that?

Ocesa: In my opinion, I think what it would take to address it is folks has to start getting real and start being able to have those uncomfortable conversations, right? So as one of those things of acknowledging your privilege and we all have privilege. We all have it. I had the privilege of being able to pursue a higher education and get a master's degree.

So I'm trying to use my platform of privilege which is education to try to give that to the community in a best way that I know how, and I think sometimes people don't want to have those tough conversations around how this is a policy. For instance, redlining that's been around forever and it's a jacked up policy. But you may have benefited from that policy through no fault of your own. But it's okay to acknowledge that I benefit for some of these policies that seek to strategically and systematically alienating one particular group from opportunities to secure wealth for their family.

And once we cannot start having those very transparent and truthful conversations, I think that's when we can start identifying the work. I would love to see us that anytime there is a policy created that we look at what the disparate impact may be on any communities, right? So if we have this great idea about a policy, we just go... You go through it and you say, "Well how would it impact this marginalized group and how would it impact that marginalized group and where are the pluses and the cons?"

Because a lot of times people hide behind the phrase of unintended consequences. So when you talk about the ratio disparities wealth get, that all goes back to policies that have been the driving force in locking out of minorities from good jobs. You think about how when the first African Americans were allowed to be in unions, right? How long they weren't allowed to be in unions and what were the wages that they lost because of that.

When you think about new Americans and then wage staff and them being scared to speak up about the fact that they were told that they were going to be paid this amount but now they're getting paid this amount. They don't want to rock the boat per se because they know that this is a climate that's not friendly to new Americans. Even if you do have your papers.

Once we're able to start taking a hard look at how we move as a country and how we treat other individuals in this whole concept of othering situations and how we just need to check ourselves when we find ourselves doing that. I think we won't be able to address issues around wage disparity or housing inequality or food deserts. We won't because we are tried to put a band aid on a bleeding wound and that won't fix anything.

Shimon: The other thing I just wanted to kind of say is how many people think about someone who gets off work at night and has to walk home because there's no bus. Just how many people think about that person or those people. I'm wondering when you're publicly speaking about this stuff and you're interacting with communities that they all have

cars, right? They're not worrying about these kinds of issues. What's that conversation look like? Because they're really oftentimes, they need to get some buy-ins to be willing to support your efforts, correct?

Ocesa: You're absolutely correct. I'm going to use a social work term here, cognitive dissident. That's the thing that you see across their face when... First is disbelief and then it's pushback, right? That's when you just have to keep introducing the facts. I think the reason why is disbelief is because so long the prevailing narrative has been that people who are poor, they did something to be poor. So poverty in this country is a morality issue, instead of a social policy issue.

Shimon: Totally.

Ocesa: So for those who are listening, that may be like, "Well, what does she mean by that?" What I mean is that we put the blame on the person who's experiencing the hardship because we say, "Well, they need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps," or "They need to go to work and stop having so many babies," or "They're just drug users."

Well, what I say to all three of those misconceptions is that how can you pull yourself up by your boots if you don't even have shoes and socks? As far as having too many too many kids, why is it okay for someone who's making, let's say \$80,000 \$90,000 to have a family of five, but just because I make 30, I can't have a family of five and should I be ashamed about my motherhood and the fact that I was able to bring life into this world.

Their drug use, yeah, that could be an issue of poverty. But we also know a lot of corporate wealthy business men and women who also have drug problems and they're far from broke. Because like you said earlier, they're getting tax breaks. They're getting tax incentives. So it's really trying to change that narrative about what causes poverty and trying to humanize a conversation that has been dehumanized for so many centuries or so many decades should I say. When we're talking about this work around poverty mitigation.

And by the time I'm done speaking to a lot of those communities that do have better access, they seem to get it. They're always asking how can they help? I think that the best way... What I tell them, the best way that they can help is know what's going on around you, not just in your community, know who your representatives are.

So when there's an issue around certain things going on, if it's a new housing bill that's trying to be put into play, if it's something like protect the Affordable Care Act, you know who to talk to, who to advocate for it. You understand why you're advocating for that. And also understand that today we're talking about people in other communities, but tomorrow we could be talking about you. Because the research tells us that most Americans are a couple of paychecks away from going into an economic crisis if they ever lose their jobs, so.

Shimon: Yeah, those are all really good points in this whole concept of... That it's something is wrong with the person. It just creates so many problems to try to address this issue and

make any progress. Also, the whole concept of welfare moms that is still just permeates that thank you Ronald Reagan for that horrific concept.

But I just think it's so hard to overcome those things and the work you're doing is just really powerful. It's so needed. I want to make sure to talk to you about your personal story as well of how you got into this work. Because I know you've got quite a story, so I was hoping you could share a little bit of that too.

Ocesa: Okay. So in another lifetime I was going to be an entertainment lawyer. So I actually did enroll in law school. I was living in Los Angeles, California and I was at a small law school in Fullerton, California. So you could tell I wasn't from the area because I made that mistake of living almost a 45 minutes away from the law school in LA with their traffic.

But I was out there doing the law school thing and I started getting sick. I started showing symptoms of lupus. But at the time I didn't know what it was lupus. So I ended up getting really, really sick and I had to be hospitalized. And during my hospitalization I made contact with a hospital social worker and it really threw me through the loop because prior to that I had only ever seen social workers in school.

So when she came in and she said, "Oh, I'm the social worker." I was like, "What are you doing here? I don't understand." So she explained to me what her role was and that she was there to help me get services because being a law student, I did not have medical insurance because at that time they didn't allow you to work a full time job while you were going to law school full time. Rules may have changed by now, I'm not sure.

But needless to say, I couldn't afford the schools medical insurance, so I didn't have any. So her main objective was to try to get me services and she actually encouraged me to come back home to New York state. Because she said I would have an easier time accessing Medicaid than I would getting CAL... I think they call it CAL MED in California. So I came back home and it a year for my health to get back stabilized.

And during that time I realized, I hate law school and I don't want to go back. So I went through this... Yeah. I went through this whole phase of trying to figure out what I was going to do. So my family background is one of, we're not rich by any stretch of the imagination, we're definitely working class. So that's a foreign concept to my family. Trying to find yourself. They're like, "Yeah, you either going to go to school or you're going to work at one of these factories here." At the time it was like Budweiser.

I remember getting heavily encouraged to go apply to work at Budweiser. So, long story short, I ended up finding a job with a local criminal reform agency here working with kids in the school and I got even more exposure to social work and someone made a suggestion that I enrolled in social work. I was saying that I really wanted to do something around policy because I felt policy had a lot to do with why I couldn't access adequate healthcare in California.

That's when I was told, "Oh well you want to do my macro-social work and not micro. I was like, "What?" Because I just learned that there was so many levels to social work

and it's not just school with social workers and it's not just clinicians. There's social workers that are congressional representatives. There's social workers that are lobbyists.

I was intrigued and I enrolled and I graduated with my master's in social work and I haven't regretted it at all. One step in a way. It's weird how sometimes what God has to do to put you on your correct path. Because had I not got sick, I would've just doggedly pursued my JD because I didn't know anything else.

Shimon: Yeah, your life took a turn and you got exposed to this whole other aspect of the struggles. I mean, healthcare and the overlap there with poverty too, right? The access and how that taught you about policy. I mean it's amazing. I do think a lot of people... I know a lot of people go into social work because of personal experiences, right? So that's why I like to ask people about them because people listening can relate. People listening are like, "Yeah."

It makes people feel... This is a very... I mean, you can speak more to this than I can because you're the one out there doing this every day in the community. But this can be a very stressful and isolating experience and pressure to create change when there's just not enough time. There's not enough resources.

So the more people can feel connected, right? To each other. I do think that's helpful. In terms of just getting out message, is there anything that you really want to get out there to use this opportunity to get out to listeners, allow the work you're doing or about poverty or just how you organize or any of that and just kind of get your message out there?

Ocesa: Yeah. If, I can just push one thing I would say we really need to... A, if you're not registered and I hope anybody that's a social worker will absolutely be registered. But if you're not registered, start with yourself and you get registered and then see what you can do to do voter registration drives in your community.

I know here we're even talking about giving people rides to the polls as need be. Making sure that people understand the issues because this work, like you say, it has so many different moving pieces, but it all comes back to who we have representing us. If they're willing to do what's in the best interest of the people, the masses, not just a select few that have all the wealth and the resources and how do we spread that resource around.

So we are approaching a pivotal point I think in this country. This next election is going to be very telling as to where we stand just as people. I just want to... I can't say it enough. You have to get out and vote. I even have a vote shirt on. Because this is just so important when you're talking about making change. It starts at the ballot.

Shimon: Yeah, I hear that. I echo everything you're saying. That makes me think of something that I just want to ask you before we wrap up is that, so when you talk to folks that are probably some of the most marginalized folks, right? People in poverty are to me, some of the most marginalized folks in society.

Homelessness obviously is right up there as well. And there's an overlap with that of course, because it doesn't take much to end up on the street. When you talk to folks about voting and the importance of it, people in the communities you're working with, how's that conversation look like?

Ocesa: That's definitely not a one and done conversation, right? Because I know in my community I'm fighting against, not apathy, but I'm fighting against the notion that they don't matter. Their voice doesn't matter because for so many years there's been so many things that's happened just in our small community alone that's kind of given them the message that they're not important.

It's one of those things where you have to keep coming back out and just keep delivering the same message to the same people and doing it with kindness and trying to understand where they're coming from. When you break it down to them in a way that really touches them personally, that's when they're able to relate.

I'm thinking about just recently when we were out canvassing to try to get individuals to come to the forum about I81 and a man told us, "Well, it's okay if the individuals who have more money get more say because they have more money. So that's just how it works." We had to tell him, "No, that's not okay. You have grandkids that come and play with you and you want to go outside with those grandkids. So what would be the impact to you being able to play in your backyard with construction going on less than 200 feet away from your backyard."

It's the same message with voting. I tell people, "You want safer neighborhoods. Well, which person asks, running for office has a platform that talks about neighborhood violence and what they would do to address it. What's their voting record? This is how you make change." And just letting them know like, "Yes, the process sometimes it can be hard to understand. Sometimes you may not even get the outcome that that you want, but a 1,000 little pricks could because a mighty giant to fall because of bleed out."

I say that to everybody who feels their voice doesn't count. So if we can all get together and we all pick up our swords and we all take a stab at it. Eventually that giant is going to fall and we have to believe that it has to keep pushing forward.

Shimon: That's powerful. That is real powerful. I want to just thank you so much for coming on here, sharing this knowledge with us, sharing about your work and your personal story. And thanks for doing the work in the community.

Ocesa: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for giving social workers a platform to share about their work. Thank you for being courageous enough to put the spotlight on different types of social workers out there. Because sometimes we're pigeonholed. So, I want to also just give hats off to you and this has been a pleasurable experience and I'm so humbled that you chose to interview me as like my work I'm doing here at Syracuse.

Shimon: Thank you for listening to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change. I hope you enjoyed the podcast. Please follow on Twitter and leave positive reviews on iTunes. If

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