

DOIN' THE WORK:

Frontline Stories
of Social Change

Healing Trauma Through Community Building in Little Village
- Alicia Martinez, MSW; David "Tiny" Estrada; Shipra Parikh, PhD, LCSW
Episode 35

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Shimon Cohen:

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.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you to FIU's Disability Resource Center for providing transcription services.

Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Enlace Chicago's Violence Prevention Manager Alicia Martinez, Street Outreach Worker David "Tiny" Estrada, and Social Work Educator and Clinical Supervisor Shipra Parikh, in the Little Village community in Chicago. They talk about the work they do in their community with families and youth by engaging in assistance, services, counseling, conflict mediation and restorative justice, youth leadership and advocacy, anti-adultism, school transformation with restorative justice and a trauma-informed approach, and much more.

Shimon Cohen:

Alicia explains that Little Village is a primarily Latinx community that is resilient and hardworking but deals with structural barriers that affect basic needs, survival, employment, healthcare, and opportunities. David discusses how COVID-19 is currently the biggest challenge facing the community and how Enlace has shifted how they work to continue to support their community from phone calls with youth to organizing food distributions. Shipra talks about the increased gentrification and the community's response, specifically supporting local business rather than larger corporations that move in.

Shimon Cohen:

Alicia explains that one of the ways COVID-19 has hit Little Village hard is that most residents are considered essential workers and have been exposed to greater risk, resulting in families losing loved ones. We talk about how Chicago often gets talked about nationally in a negative way. And David shares a story of how Black and Brown communities came together for peace and to support each other. Alicia, David, and Shipra all talk about what they love about this work and how Enlace Chicago models within their organization the kind of world they want to see. We also talk about the election. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

So before we get into the episode, I'm so excited to tell you all about this episode's sponsor, Designs by Tee. Tee is a Brooklyn based social worker who's created a line of t-shirts and accessories to disrupt places and spaces and the fashion industry. This t-shirt line is doing what no other social worker has done before, fusing creativity with art. And she's managed to create a local buzz. She gives 10% of all sales towards purchasing essentials for children and families in a local shelter. She's got a social work collection, a socially conscious collection, a royalty collection, a kids collection. You've gotta check her out at designsbytee, that's T-E-E, designsbytee3.com. Check out the link in the show notes and take \$5

off your next t-shirt order with the code TeePod5. That's T-E-E-P-O-D and the number five. TeePod5. And now, here's the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Alicia. Hey, David. Hey, Shipra. Thanks so much for coming on the podcast. I'm really happy to have you all to talk about the work you do with Enlace Chicago and, you know, to just get started, could you say a little bit about what you do?

Alicia:

So, my name's Alicia and I am the Violence Prevention Manager. In my role I oversee a group of clinical social workers. So our social workers, they work in a school setting, providing one on one counseling. And then we have street-based counselors who provide more of the clinical case management while providing mental health for our for our team. And in that I also do a lot of linkages between our organization, our schools, in Chicago, and organizations to make sure that our partnerships are flowing and that there's access to our clinicians.

Shimon Cohen:

Nice.

David:

Okay, so, yeah, my name is David. I work for the Street Outreach Team at Enlace Chicago. My role there is, I'm part of a team of outreach workers that work in the Little Village community. We work mostly with at-risk youth, men, boys and girls, men and women. We do have a certain age group that we're supposed to work with but we, we don't turn anybody down. My job consists of just using the network and our community partners to provide services for our youth. And also we do a lot of conflict mediation and use restorative justice and peace circles to bring victims and, you know, the, the other, the victims and the offenders together to see if we can bring some sort of compromise, so there's not any violence that occurs.

Shipra:

And my name is Shipra and I have a couple of roles. For Enlace I provide clinical support and supervision for the Violence Prevention Team. And what that basically means is I get to speak with everybody on a regular basis. And we, we talk about the work. We talk about the impact of the work. And provide kind of that clinical space that people need to process all of what they're handling.

Shipra:

I'm also a social work educator. And what that means is that I am responsible for educating the next generation of social workers who are gonna go out into the field. And so I take that very seriously as well. And it really is an important part of teaching for me that I can ground it in work that's happening on the ground as well.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, for sure. I'm sure the examples you can bring in to your classes are really impactful.

Shipra:

Yes. I would agree. I think, you know, social workers today, and we can all think about how we were trained and educated, but it's so important to have examples of what work looks like and the different ways you can make an impact. And so it's really a real honor for me to work with other people like Alicia and David to kind of be part of a community team. And to feel like, you know, the experiences that we have supporting youth don't go unnoticed. And that people can really be inspired from the survival, really, of the youth we work with.

Shimon Cohen:

So what would you say are some of the unique challenges facing the youth and the overall communities that you work with?

Alicia:

So to give a little bit of understanding of Little Village, that we are a community based organization. So we mainly, all our focus areas are concentrated in the Little Village community. We're located in the Southwest side of the city. And it's predominantly Latinx, Mexican American families. So with that there's a lot of generational families who immigrated to the United States and settled in Chicago. And with that there's a lot of mixed status families.

Alicia:

So I think with that, some of the challenges that we see, with all the strengths that we have in our community, so our community is very hard working, they're very- they have a lot of family values, a lot of resilience, but at the same time, because of so many structural challenges, policies that, that impact our community, there's been a lot of, like, a lot of generational trauma too. And so in my role, like I am in with the counselors, what we do a lot of is the direct intervention with families and with youth. But- so one of the biggest challenges is really addressing those structural challenges that continue to make us, like, continue to do this work. So, although we're working one on one with youth, with families, with the community, the structural barriers are still there.

David:

I think that one of the biggest challenges our community faces right now is the actual COVID virus and the way that we've had to sort of implement a different way of doing, you know, our work with our youth, because we can't be in direct contact with them right now. So we've had to switch to, like, using the phone and social media to, you know, to engage them and address them and help them out in any way we can. Because of the COVID virus, a lot of our youth, have had family members who are unemployed or have lost jobs.

David:

And so, you know, trying to get them financial help but also food. We partnered with the local organization that's a community partner of ours, and twice a week we meet at their spot and they give us a list of food, addresses to pass out food to the people in the community. So we're doing our best right now just to help them out as far as, you know, financial wise and also with food.

Shipra:

And I think, you know, those are examples of ways in which all the work is really grounded in the community, in the neighborhood of Little Village. One of the things I think about in terms of, like, what makes the work specific is gentrification. Over the time, you know, we certainly have all had examples, we've experienced them together, of, you know, businesses trying to come in to the community and then being able to sort of, kind of like in a radical act of really pride for the community, support local businesses and encourage those kind of businesses that come in out of gentrification or financial opportunity to encourage them to go. Because people wanna support businesses that put money back into the community.

Shipra:

And, you know, Latino neighborhoods tend to gentrify much faster than any other neighborhoods. And we can definitely feel that in Little Village. There's sort of this false, racialized sense of, you know, false comfort that I think a lot of, you know, white people and young adults, kind of feel coming into the community. And so we even heard a radio report a couple years ago that kind of highlighted the Little Village community as a really great place to live. But it was a very interesting report because it was really targeting a primarily, like a white listenership. And when they were asked about crime, they said, oh, you know, the gangs don't mess with you if they can tell you're not from there. So that's pretty much just an invitation to people to come in and gentrify.

Shipra:

And, you know, we've, we've all felt that pressure and tension of just how devastating that would be. The local grocery stores that have been serving families right now that people can walk to, that they can turn to in these times of need. That have had, you know, toilet paper long after, like before all the big stores ran out. These little neighborhood stores were saying, no, we got it. We got you. So I think, you know, that's a big concern.

Alicia:

So for me it feels a lot like, it's two sides of the coin. In one side our community is struggling with the pandemic. A lot of these underlying issues just surfaced up. And we are struggling to- a lot of our families, they don't even- they didn't qualify for a stimulus check. They don't qualify for unemployment. And because they're essential workers, our community is made of almost all essential workers, they have to go out. They were exposed to the virus. There was huge loss. Like, like David mentioned of family members to the virus. And many of them were uninsured. So it's layers and layers of challenges that our community faces.

Alicia:

But then on the other side of the coin, gentrification is bringing in people and not letting the- our community be accessible to the residents that it's always been home to.

Shimon Cohen:

Mm. You know, I mean, I don't think we can do an interview with you all in Chicago without talking about how Chicago gets used in the national media and by this current administration, right? I mean, I can't do justice to interviewing you without us having that conversation. So since you all are out- like are doing this work in the community, and then you see what gets, you know, you see what's said and you

see all these stereotypes, right, that get put out there about Chicago. Like what do you, what comes up for you when you see all that?

Alicia:

For me it's a lot of frustration and a lot of using our community as a device to- like for the divisiveness. Like to separate. Because in our community there's a lot of- only a very glimpse part is shown but there is so much more that isn't shown about Chicago. And I wanna just give David the floor because he has a really good example of how our community just really unified in these really trying times.

David:

I wanna say it was like the end of May, the beginning of June. There was some big protests downtown which turned into looting. The mayor raised the bridges, she flooded the downtown with police force, which left other communities in the City of Chicago without anybody to protect them. And so what happened was, when she raised the bridges, the looters decided that they wanted to come to the neighborhoods and loot. And a lot of them went and destroyed their own communities. Out of fear, you know, out of oppression, out of a whole bunch of other things that we could get into. But I, but I won't.

David:

But they came to the neighborhood and they tried to loot some stores in the neighborhood and the neighborhood guys were not having that. So they, they stood up. They stood up to the looters. There was a few fights. The police were involved. You know, arrests were made, but the, but the city didn't see it as a community member standing up for the businesses in their community. They turned it to a racial, like a race war. You know, basically, several people were on social media, you know, people who are popular in Chicago, musicians, rappers, a few other people, saying how they were gonna come to Little Village and flood it. And they were gonna basically, like, harm people. You know, there was- over three days there were several skirmishes back and forth. You know, there was some incidents that occurred. Nobody got killed. Nobody died, you know, which is the good part. There was people injured. You know, vehicles and stuff like that.

David:

But what we did was we reached out to our network of other outreach workers and community partners across the city. And we got them to unite with us and bring people from their community into our community. You know, in solidarity and show peace. So what the- a lot of the local businesses were boarded up. Neighborhood people, and some of our organization, people painted murals on all these boards to make the community look a little bit better because everything was boarded up and it looked abandoned.

David:

So we did a big unity gathering at the park. There was probably maybe three or four hundred people out there. We served food. We had music. We gave away t-shirts which said Stronger Together. And it had like the map of Chicago with the different neighborhoods on it, which was really cool. Basically what we did was just utilize the people that we knew in the streets, key individuals to come together and just show peace. And since the media wouldn't cover it we flooded everything with social media, our own Instagram, Facebook. You know, I think it was Twitter. I got a bunch of calls from guys telling me that I was famous. You know, which was like really cool but I'm-

Shimon Cohen:

(laughs)

David:

... I'm not in it for the fame. You know, I'm in it for the results. You know, my job is more of a passion to me than it is a job, you know. I was one of those young men in the streets who did a lot of wrong things. And, you know, I suffered a lot of bad consequences. So, my thing is just use everything that I can, that I've been through, my experiences, to help lead people in the right direction.

Alicia:

Yeah. And to David's point, I think there was a lot- there was this pitting Black and Brown communities against each other. And we were able to show that with unification, with the- that dialogue that we can unify. And really understand where we were coming from and really show that too, outwardly. Whereas they were trying to divide us, we unified. And, and I think that, that was like, David said, like something very powerful.

David:

I think that the best thing that occurred after the big rally that we did was that other local organizations saw that it was safe to come back out in the community. Because a lot of people were terrified. We were getting phone calls from people asking if we could escort them to the store. People were calling us saying that, you know, they had African American friends that lived in the community, that they were scared to come out and come shopping. And we did our best to escort everybody around. Even some of the neighborhood guys were like, "Look, this isn't about that. You know, we got you. Don't worry about that. You know?"

David:

And so it was a really great thing because I think it gave everybody that feeling of safety, that they were able to make more marches, do more protests in a peaceful manner. You know, and it was a beautiful thing because now they were drawing attention to a lot of problems that are always overlooked and that nobody ever talks about.

Shipra:

And I think that's the difference too between, like, the City of Chicago, like the spaces and the places where if you visit, you will see. And then the neighborhoods that you may not come around to visit. You know, the south and west sides are really vibrant communities and this kind of stuff happens all the time. This happens daily. That we rely on each other and we figure it out. And I think Chicago's tough in that way. And anywhere you live, you know that that happens.

Shipra:

And I will say, in my community too, I don't live in Little Village. I live in South Shore. And, you know, I saw the same thing happen there. There were people coming together in the community to do clean ups after damage was done to businesses. And people helping each other out. Neighborhood, neighbors, you know, doing grocery shopping for each other because people don't have cars and a lot of the businesses closed down. And so, you know, that is so many people's stories and kind of the rebuilding that had to happen after, you know, a lot of the pain that people suffered all through the summer.

Shipra:

So, to me, and I think to us, we feel like that's just Chicago. Like that's just what happens. Whether you hear about it or not.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, well, it- people need to hear about it. You know? And I'm so glad you're here to talk about it and counter that dominant, you know, misinformation and destructive narrative that's constantly getting put out there. You know? Something I wanted to ask you was, you know, what do you love about the work that you do?

David:

I guess I can go first on that one. I- what I love about the work that I do is that I get to utilize all the mistakes that I made in life to use those examples to show young men and women that if they make the wrong choices in life, that there's gonna be consequences to those choices. Like I said before, my job is a passion to me. It's not work. You know I was a person, like I said, who ran the streets. I was incarcerated, you know, several times. And the last time that I was there, I really utilized every program that was there at the institution to better myself. I enrolled myself in school. So for the whole six years that I was there, I did nothing but schooling. I came out with 16 certificates.

David:

And, and a lot of the times when I meet young men and women I talk about the things that I've been through. You know, I know a lot of their family members 'cause I was born and raised in the neighborhood where I work. But those papers that I show them, you know, it's a lot. It means a lot to me and a lot to them because I proved to them that I was in a horrible situation and I made the best of it. And, you know, they have so many resources that we could provide for them that they shouldn't have to go through that. You know to be out there and feel alone and afraid.

David:

You know, so I just try to use everything in the toolbox to put it to work to better the community and to change people's mindsets.

Alicia:

David talks about the lived experience and being born and raised in Little Village. I think that is something that is very common throughout our organization, throughout Enlace, throughout our community. We have a really strong sense of community. And I think that's what I love most about this work is that this work is really hard. As Shipra says, like, we all as- in Violence Prevention Department, have her to support us, to process everything we see on the ground. But the community always sustains us doing this work. We are a team. We always look out for one another. We're always checking in on each other. And I think that's one of the things that I enjoy most about the work within our team but also our community.

Alicia:

Our community, they know us. They appreciate the support that we provide for them. I think they really appreciate that we honor their lives and their journey and through this work, through their strengths

and not their deficits. So for me, like this is- seeing the progress when we work with our youth, seeing them grow throughout the years, has been really rewarding for me.

Shipra:

Yeah. I agree. I think, you know, we're also representing like a much bigger team than just the three of us here, so just shout out to them. 'Cause they'll listen to this and, you know, it takes everybody. And I think, for me, you know, like I said, I'm not from the Little Village community but I was invited into this space. And that's something that's really important, is being invited into spaces rather than kind of taking up space in spaces where you're not from. And so I really try to use that example with my students as well. Of like what it means to be really invited in.

Shipra:

And even though there are differences, you know, I'm still first generation from an immigrant family and I could've probably used social workers like who we have when I was a kid. And so it's really nice to sort of feel like you get to be seen in the work you do. And it really does sort of feel like a family, you know, fights and everything.

Shimon Cohen:

I love hearing those positive stories 'cause I know the work is hard. I mean, I'm not in it like you all are, right? And, I think it's important to highlight, like, that love, you know, and that passion. I also wanna, you know, you talked about ... I mean, there's so much you all do, right, that we could talk about. One thing you talked about were these structural challenges, the systemic oppression that exists that affects people in the community, right? That you're confronted with as you work together to get through what you get, right? Life. (laughs) And, you know, what's the biggest challenge in terms of actually like real social change? Like what are the biggest bar- like what are those barriers that you feel with that?

Alicia:

I'm gonna just flat out say that it's access to resources. I think our community because of these structural challenges that exist, have been generational, the access to resources is, is definitely a huge challenge. As a mental health practitioner, there's very little mental health support in the community. And one of the reasons why I decided to become a school based counselor, I started out as a school based counselor, was because there's not so many avenues in our community to get mental health. But one of those avenues at that time was the school based counseling program. And so, to think about that, there is such limited access to mental health and the need of it, is really daunting to me at times.

Shipra:

I think similarly to that but specifically targeting kind of the youth. 'Cause like, they need to see that there's options for them. They need to know what they're- why is it worth it to you to stay in school? It's not just to make, you know, these adults in your life happy. But it's gotta be connected to something that feels real for them. Something they can see themselves doing or a future they feel they can have. And that goes right to structural resources. If they don't see the jobs, if they don't see those opportunities, why are they gonna stay in school? They can, they can earn more money. They can do other things. And so that disinvestment, I think, just kind of ignoring, you know, for generations, really, like not investing in the kinds of businesses that the community could really use and benefit from.

Shipra:

Literally, there are so many activities that the team does with youth. You know, rock climbing. I mean, you know, back before the pandemic. But rock climbing and, and just camping. And trying out new things that, you know, city kids have never done. And they find a way to love everything, which just goes to show they're kids. And they just wanna try stuff and feel good at something and be challenged and laugh and tease each other. And so I think about- I think a lot about the youth and what kind of future they're looking at.

Alicia:

And to your point, Shipra, I think a lot of the youth in our community, since a very young age, are told that they cannot amount to a lot. That they have very limited options and, because of those limited options, they tend to- they'll look for a sense of belonging, a sense of like I belong here. This is where I feel at home. So I think part of, you know, the beauty of at least our program is that they are sho- it's a hybrid mental health program but it also does mentorship. So it's an opportunity to experience things that they may normally not have the opportunity to experience.

Alicia:

And I think Tiny can talk a little bit more about his work too with that.

David:

To me, the biggest, the biggest challenge, in terms of real social change is that in the past, communities have always been separated. You know, that segregation in the city of Chicago is a big thing. You know, I feel that- they keep people separated, you know, by borderlines and streets because they know that if you keep people separated, their voice won't be heard. You know, a lot of people, like, in the community that I'm from and the surrounding communities, it's normal for them to feel oppressed. For them to feel that, you know, there's no hope. You know, the lack of resources, the lack of education, you know, the lack of jobs. You know, all these things are normalized in our community and our society with these young youth. And so they- to them, they have the I don't care attitude. You know?

David:

And in, in order for us to really bring about social change, we have to come together. We have to voice, you know, our struggles of the things that we feel that aren't right. And be able to come together and make noise about those things so that people start to realize that we are tired of going through this stuff, you know, for, for decades already and something has to happen that- to bring people together so that the change will benefit everybody, not just one or two people or a certain group, but benefit everybody that needs help.

Shimon Cohen:

You know, you were talking about the youth you work with, right? And obviously they're at, like, the forefront, right, of- the center of what you do is, is them. Right? And I'm wondering about, how do they, you know, do they help run any of the programming? You know, how are they, how are their ideas and, and their voice, you know, incorporated into like the leadership of the organization and what you do as an organization?

David:

Okay. So on my behalf, I try to- whenever I plan a trip with the youth or we wanna go out to eat somewhere or to go watch a movie, when we were able to, I would always let them make those decisions, you know? I would let them talk amongst each other, figure it out what they wanted to do, and then we would just take it from there because I thought that was the best way because a lot of times these young men and women are always told no for everything. You know, no, you're not gonna amount to nothing. No, you can't be part of this. No, you're too wild. You know, stay away from us. You know?

David:

So my thing is like to give them that power to make those decisions, even though they're so small. All those little- they're just small steps, they're turning into bigger steps later on. You know? So my thing is just always include them and, and I never tell our youth that I'm gonna do something and don't do it. Because that is like the worst thing that you can do to a young person, is say that you're gonna do something for them and don't. Because they're so used to everybody else already denying them that it just sort of like pushes you away from them. You know?

Alicia:

So as Shipra mentioned, our organization, like we're only a very small fraction of our representation. We're only, here from the Violence Prevention Department. But our organization is comprised of four other departments. And one of those is the Organizing and Advocacy Department. And so they have a youth leadership academy that really teaches them the, the history of Chicago, the history of policies, and they work to learn how to advocate in Springfield, advocate in the community. Really do that out front work.

Alicia:

But even in our program like we, we've been very intentional about creating spaces for our youth to build their leadership skills. So one of the programs that we have in our mental health team is the Youth Led Group. And our Youth Led Group consists of youth from our, who used to be in our caseloads, who were connected to us in one way or another and this is kind of like the transition for them. So they learn how to build community, learn how to, to facilitate workshops and these topics that really interest them. They're the ones that are facilitating those conversations.

Alicia:

They do a celebration where they invite the community to firsthand talk about what they experience as youth from Little Village. Because it's one thing to hear it from us. Like oh, this is what our youth experience. But it's another from them to directly talk about their, their lived experience and what mental health means to them.

Shipra:

Yeah. And I would, I- you know, I'm just thinking, you know, here we are, sort of talking all about the youth. And they're not here to talk about themselves and represent themselves. And that's like- that is a real commitment, I think, on this team. And this organization to kind of- to, like you're doing, to kind of raise up and uplift youth voices. And have them be really active participants in their own work.

Shipra:

One of the first conversations we ever had ... Alicia, you probably, I don't know if you remember. We were talking about participatory work. And we talked about anti-adultism. And adultism, of course, just being, you know, this idea that just by virtue of being older than them, we know better. 'Cause when you really kind of enact anti-adultist ideas and when you kind of implement that, you are also committing to being anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobia. Anything that's oppressive, you're committing to undoing that too. Because it's all under this umbrella of the things that happen to our kids.

Shipra:

And so I think, you know, that commitment to them really feeling like this is their space. In fact, you know, when they could come to the office they would, you know, meeting them up, out wherever they are. Talking to them. Going to their school. You know, home visits and, and whatever needs to be done. And, and that's the thing I think of the most right now. Is that's such a loss for all of us, but for them, it's just that separation. You know, not being able to see each other in person. I mean, it's just nice seeing you all in person too (laughs) kind of in this way. So I think we all miss that connection. And I know that that's a huge commitment that this team has.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. And, you know, we can always, in the future, get some youth from your program, if you want, and do another episode and really have them talk about what's going on, you know, from their perspective too. You know, I'd love to do that.

Alicia:

That would be amazing.

Shimon Cohen:

The work you do is near and dear to my heart 'cause I started doing street outreach. That's how I got into this work as a whole and I helped open up a youth center. And so, you know, and it was, it was like they were in charge. Like they helped run the program. You know, they had shifts and they would come and they would, like ... And that's what made it work, right? That's what made it work. If we didn't have that, the place- it wouldn't have- it wouldn't have worked. It was their space.

Shimon Cohen:

I wanted to kind of explore some of what you talked about with the services you do or the, you know, the programs you have, in terms of restorative justice. And what that looks like. In terms of like, if you maybe had, you know, kind of like a way to talk about and put it into ... So someone listening could actually imagine seeing what that looks like in action. You know? And you kinda talked about it with that example in a way of like, what was happening in the community and how people came together, right? But maybe if you could talk about like a way you use it in your program too?

David:

Okay. So, we do a safe haven every Saturday. Or we were doing a safe haven every Saturday before the pandemic happened. So we would meet every Saturday with our youth and they could bring their friends or neighborhood kids could also come. And we would just open up the office to let them use our

computers to watch movies on our projection screen. To play the video games that we had on our other TVs. We had set up a recording studio for music. So that was another program that we did. We had a tutoring program also. But basically, my work with the youth I always try to instill in them to be respectful to one another. To, you know, to respect not just, like, people's opinions but also their personal property and their personal space as well.

David:

And one day one of our youth was he was on live on his phone. And one of the other young men in the office didn't like that. And so he asked him to stop recording him. And the one young man took it as a joke, 'cause they're all friends, you know? So he, he laughed it off and he kept filming everybody. And the young man who didn't wanna be filmed got up and he pushed the phone out of his hand. And, you know, we were all sitting at the table when this happened. So we kind of just, you know, everything got quiet. We kinda look at each other, like, all right guys, let's, you know, we need to take it to the table. Let's sit down at the table and let's figure out what went on.

David:

So, you know, a bunch of the other young men helped me, you know, they actually mediated the situation themselves. But they did it in a way that they used the things that I had instilled in them. So they got an arbitrator. You know, the young man who was there to like keep both sides from, you know, arguing. The other young men, of course, you know, everybody gave good feedback and good information to those two young men.

David:

You know, they let the young man know that he should've asked permission before he was recording anybody. They let the other young man know that, you know, you have to be respectful to people's personal space and their property. You know, that it was not right for him to knock the phone out of the young man's hand. You know, they both agreed with what the other young men told them. They shook hands. They apologized. And they went right back to playing video games and listening to music and everything was cool.

David:

But it was just great to see them in that setting utilize the things that we instilled in them to solve the issue on their own without having me or my other coworker actually have to really get involved and sort of like separate them or, like, you know, just try to tell them, you know, the right and wrong part. It was great that they comprehend, you know, the things that we try to instill in them and they utilize that to help out their peers, which was really great.

Alicia:

So I really like that approach that, you know, he built the rapport. And it's because of the rapport that our workers have that they're able to have these really awesome outcomes. On our end, like, especially with the school based counselors, one of the things that we really strive to do is work holistically with our youth. And so and one of those things that we really are very intentional about is creating schools that feel safe to them. So, for the most part, schools in CPS, they, they've always been very punitive approach to discipline our youth. What we're really trying to do is work with schools in supporting them in providing a social justice/restorative justice approach to discipline with the youth.

Alicia:

And so one of the ways that the counselors do it and they're marvelous is they have those conversations with teachers. So the teachers understand that when students react in their classrooms, when they act out, it's not personal against them. It might be other factors. So it's really working with the teachers, working with the administrators to have that trauma-informed understanding of what our youth, what our youth are facing.

Shipra:

And I think when we talk about trauma-informed, you know, there's a lot of ways people understand that. But one of the ways I see at Enlace that we are really trying to uphold that is also what happens between the staff. So if we could just talk about that for a second. Because I think, you know, when you do this work, it's a lot. It's not just a nine to five. It's kind of setting boundaries and kids don't really care what time it is when they need to reach out to you. So that happens a lot. Weekends, evenings. And I think for the staff it's like you've gotta get really good at setting boundaries and understanding, like, where does my life begin and where does my work life have to end? And how do I do that in a way that's respectful? And all of that balancing takes- can take a toll.

Shipra:

So I think what's important is that I also see that trauma-informed lens being practiced at work. I had never worked at a place, been involved with a place that treats people so humanly, in times of need. You know? If you, there's a personal need and you can't make it to a meeting, whatever it is you're gonna be late to a call, people are just like, it's fine. Whatever you need. Whatever you need to do. And I just have never seen that level of human understanding, which to me really embodies this trauma-informed lens, not just like with the kids and with our families, but like, as a staff. And of course it's challenging.

Shipra:

And we get into it sometimes and people have really strong personalities and will stand up for what they believe in. But I'm very inspired by kind of the level of commitment to, like, people's humanity coming first in the job.

Alicia:

And I think it's really, to your point Shipra, a lot of our staff, a lot of the people who work at Enlace, they're very passionate. They grew up in Little Village. They have strong connections to Little Village. So it's really hard to really set those boundaries. And I think as social workers, as people who are in that forefront, it's really important for us to set those examples of what it means to set boundaries and what it means to say, like, if I'm not able to do X, Y, Z all the time, it's okay. Because I think, as David says, like sometimes because we grew up in the neighborhood, because we have strong connections to our families too, it's really hard to turn off your work hat.

Shimon Cohen:

You know, something I wanted to talk about before we wrap things up is this episode is going to be published at the start of November, right? And like, right after this episode is published, we're gonna have a major election. And I just, you know, I just wanted to kinda- I think it's an interesting thing 'cause we're talking now and we don't know what the outcome of that election is going to be. Like either way,

depending on the outcome of the election, you know, either way, like, what does that mean for your community and the work you're doing?

David:

Well, in my, in my opinion, I don't think that it's gonna matter on the ground level. You know, we're so used to dealing with the lack of resources and the lack of help that, you know, we utilize private funders to help, you know, us continue to facilitate our programs and things of that nature. I think that, you know, we've been through the last four years of, you know, the person in office and we've survived. And I think that we will still continue to do that. You know, just, you know, you gotta just tighten the belt buckle, tighten your shoe laces, and keep moving. That's all.

Alicia:

And to Tiny's point, I think the feeling may feel like, let's say that there is a different person in office. There might be a sense of relief. But at the ground level, there's those structural challenges that our community faces, they're still gonna face. They're still going to have to fight poverty. At the end of the day, that's what it is. That type of poverty is still going to be there. The lack of employment. The lack of a safety network. The lack of support for our youth. It's still gonna be there. So, for us, we continue to advocate for those structural changes, advocate for more funding and more resources to come to our neighborhood.

Shipra:

Yeah. Until we commit to- really commit to kind of ending poverty as a country and as individual cities and states, you know, there's gonna be a huge disconnect between elections and politics and kind of what the work needs to look like. There's, as David said, a lot of, you know, segregation in Chicago, historically, with redlining and some of these other policies that have drastically impacted education for example. And if you look at the sort of wealthiest tier and the lowest income tier, the point difference between them is growing, actually, in terms of how they score in school. And it's shameful. That as a city with resources and in a country with resources, that we are willfully, neglecting neighborhoods like Little Village, and the families in them.

Shipra:

Because I think, you know, we're all pretty much in agreement on the fact that the work is gonna have to be ongoing and, continuing to work with our partners, continuing to survive as Enlace has done in the last four years incredibly well. And thrive even. And so, election or not, the work will continue.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That community based resilience that you speak about, you know, in the face of historical and ongoing oppression, right? Like, I mean, that's what I hear you talking about when I hear that answer from the three of you.

Shipra:

I think that if people really wanna, you know, kind of support this work, committing to anti-poverty programs is a big part of it. You know, we talk about violence and, and violence in programs with the, you know, kind of the title violence in them, get funding because nobody wants violence. But, you know, really what's at the root of it is people suffering. And I think we see that across all the events that have

happened in Chicago this summer. In individual communities well before this summer and kind of in the work in Little Village.

Shipra:

And so, you know, people are suffering. And because there's not an investment in access to basic needs. We're not even talking about things that are, you know, beyond that. But, you know, things like internet. And there have been some really good, you know, movement made, especially because of the pandemic that's forced some of this stuff, access to internet, for example, which really should've been implemented well before this. Well before-

Shimon Cohen:

Right.

Shipra:

... school was virtual. But, you know, I think that would be one commitment we would share with anyone listening. To think about how to support anti-poverty programs where you live.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I wanted to ask you all, you know, since you're on this platform, you know, what else you wanted to put out there before we wrap stuff up. You know, we've covered a lot of different things. But, you know, I really wanna give you that- this space to bring up any- you know, put out anything you wanna put out there.

Alicia:

I think, just as Shipra says, like, supporting and advocating for those basic needs that should be human rights. Like affordable housing. Like healthcare. Affordable child care. Things that should be basics that we continue to advocate for things that will support the safety network of our families. Sometimes our families don't even have living wages. And that in itself is necessary to be able to get an education, to have safety in your neighborhood.

Shipra:

I would say to, you know, anybody out there who's doing work on the front lines who is nurturing and, and stirring things up in their community and participating in there, catalyzing change, you know, doing any of that work, is to take time for your- you, yourself and to really create a culture of healing and humanity in your workplace because it's going to really help sustain you to do the thing that you care about the most. Taking care of each other and really having time to go on a retreat once in a while, to enjoy things together. Not just kind of how to navigate a work problem or a dilemma. 'Cause that's important too. But to take that time to kind of be humans together and be people together and connect.

Shipra:

And to any students listening, you know, social workers or future social workers, really thinking about the investment you're making in the communities where you're working. How would it change if you lived where you worked? How would it change if you engaged in the same sort of resources that your clients did? And I think that's another thing that Enlace really models. So many of the staff live where

they work. They live next door to their clients. And they're- We don't call them clients. Youth participants. Participants. And I think it makes all the difference because it creates that community feeling.

Shipra:

And to any kids listening, you know, you matter.

David:

Yeah. I just, I just wanna say that, some- to just reflect off of Shipra, I have a big thing with like, students. You know, like, any student that's going to school for social work or any type of, you know, field out there that where you're gonna help somebody, don't give up. Stick with it because we need you. You know, we need everybody we can to stand up and help be accountable. You know, and just get more work done because, there's not a lot of us in the field right now and the more help we can get, the better.

David:

You know, and also, just, if you're concerned about things in your community, look for it. Look for an organization, a nonprofit organization in your neighborhood or in your city that, that does work, you know, in the community. And just volunteer there, you know? Get your feet wet a little bit and see what the work is really about, you know, so that you know what you're getting yourself into. And, you know, just always remember, don't give up. You know, stay positive and keep moving forward.

Shimon Cohen:

Well I wanna thank you all so much for coming on the podcast. And thank you all for doing the work in the community.

David:

Thank you for having us.

Shipra:

Thanks.

Shimon Cohen:

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