

Sherae Lascelles: Of the People TRANSCRIPT

Crystal Fincher: [00:00:00] Welcome to Hacks and Wonks. I'm your host, Crystal Fincher. On this show we don't just talk politics and policy, but also how they affect our lives and shape our communities. As we dive into the backstories behind what we read in the news, we bring voices to the table that we don't hear from often enough.

This is Crystal Fincher, your host of Hacks and Wonks. I use she / her pronouns. And I'm very excited today to welcome Sherae Lascelles. Sherae is a state candidate for the state house of representatives, Position 2 in the 43rd Legislative District. Sherae's a coalition member of Decriminalize Seattle, founder of POC SWOP, and founder of the Greenlight Project.

Sherae's been doing work for a long time in the community, and I wanted to make sure. that we talked to Sherae specifically because they're doing incredible work in the community, have been for quite some time, and wanted to get more specifics. So welcome to the program, Sherae.

Sherae Lascelles: [00:01:07] thank you so much for having me.

I never thought there would be a day and it's very exciting.

Crystal Fincher: [00:01:13] thank you. There's a lot going on, and a variety of areas, and you're involved in a variety of areas. So the first thing I wanted to talk about was the work that you're doing, and how that all fits in to the decision you made and how you go about running for the state house of representatives. It's a lot!

Sherae Lascelles: [00:01:37] Yeah, I've been doing a lot, and honestly it was just really a matter of pivoting some of my personal practices for survival, and trying to expand them from the micro to the macro. When we started with that, with advocacy, and how to help people formulate the ability to, advocate for their own needs, like empowering them with the tools and the access, and then the knowledge about how systems work to navigate for civic engagement, and how to advocate for yourself in those. And it, it became really apparent through working with other advocates and organizations that what was, missing or wasn't being done, to the extent that was necessary for it to, enact quicker changes honestly, was the direct services.

And the second that was solidified for me, I really didn't have a choice but to see if there was a system that was out there already, that we needed, and see if we can bolster it, or improve upon it, or join it ,or all three. Or have to create one ourselves to demonstrate what we mean when we say that we need experience driven, and peer-led solutions to identify the needs of the community and the impacts of legislation, and how to mitigate the harm that is done when you're sourcing data to make change by providing material support for those communities.

So that's where Greenlight Project came from. And the idea, the concept, at least, there had been previous renditions of direct services to student populations, namely sex workers and

drug users. However, there wasn't necessarily one that was specific to the intersection or run in the way that we identify it as a need.

And then when someone asked me to put my hat in the ring for the interim vacancy for city council, for District Four and sit in the City of Seattle, it was a wake up call to me that, folks had been seen how I approach things and wanted to see that reflected in who has the ability to make those changes on a larger scale for our community, our city, our state, et cetera.

And I couldn't think of a good enough reason other than fear for not doing it. So I did it. And that's essentially what was able to kickstart taking our concept for programming to action, and to be able to demonstrate what we're talking about when we talk about how we need to be helped or assisted in advocating for ourselves and how we'd like to be, essentially, studied - but without it being exploitative, and so we set out to create that exact thing. And that's what led me here, because of the moment that the district for interim vacancy vote had cleared, within hours of that, someone asked me if I'd ever considered running against Frank Chopp.

And I said, honestly, not before you said it, but now I am. And I had to do a lot of self-educating. And it put me in a position to know that it was the right decision. And, after talking to people about how they feel represented or not represented in our districts, through my direct work and services to community, and through that, that question for knowledge about it, it became extremely apparent that I had to at least try.

Crystal Fincher: [00:04:55] I think that's really important and brave. Definitely. You bring up very important things: experience driven ideas, solutions, and policy and peer-led policy, really looking at including impacted populations and policy across the board. Here's what we've seen too often is that there are people making policy that have had no experience, no connection with, who really don't understand what it means to live in the community, under the conditions of existing policies or what the impact of proposed policies may be. And I think a lot of people, some people get that when it comes to issues that are, have been traditionally more widely talked about in society.

How it seems ridiculous that, in the wake of another Supreme Court ruling that, people who are not women - men, employers - can have a say in women's health, women's body, women's reproductive rights, but there are a number of, a number of groups, number of members of our community, that have traditionally been ignored, and set aside and completely marginalized and stigmatized. And you talked about two of them, sex workers and drug users. And for so long, there's been so much talk about policy and advocacy that has not included their voice, or that has intentionally discounted and disrespected that voice, and you have centered it.

And so I think that's really important to recognize and understand and encourage more widely. And as the Green Light Project, with the Green Light Project, its really worked. Can you talk more about what you've done and what Green Light Project does.

Sherae Lascelles: [00:06:48] This is, honestly, one of the hardest questions for me to answer, because that changes day to day. And not because we can't decide on what we do, but

because we've completely committed ourselves to our mission statement, which has to be flexible. Because our mission statement is that, above all agency and autonomy, and making sure that we are securing that in our actions as best we can to reduce harm and even our interactions with populations. And how that translates into harm reduction, community care, and mutual aid is that we're not gonna have staff or volunteers - or the, essentially the wonks - on how to build these models that have had the same identical experiences of the people that we are serving. And we need to be very aware of that at every action.

And so we have to know that we are not going to be the authority on someone's experience, or what they need in order to improve their material conditions. And that's a really hard concept to practice in every action. but it's really easy for people to say. And that's where the disconnect is.

You can read a sentence and commit it to memory for the rest of your life and repeat it every single day for the rest of your life, but if you can't come to every intersection in your life and practice it, then you already are causing harm. That's unnecessary. So that's really it.

Traditionally we use the term "bespoke" to describe something that is made custom to an individual or custom to a situation, and it generally means that it is extremely expensive because it's custom and it's not mass manufactured. but in our scenario, that we encounter while serving the public, bespoke doesn't have to cost a lot of money.

Bespoke literally means asking what the problem is, asking what factors in someone's life [they] feel contributed to it, and then asking them how, out of either an open ended question for self-reporting or, with a couple of options that we come up with on the spot, they'd like us to assist in addressing it and improving it and reducing harm in that scenario.

And it's not something that I can give you the exact details on how to do, because it's different for every interaction. And bespoke essentially, doesn't have to mean expensive. It actually can mean, the opposite: that you're not wasting a lot of money or resources or time and energy, which are just as valuable as capital, on. Trying to make something work that you conceptualized, and trying to make everyone fit in to that concept and that practice, it actually reduces how much is spent on those issues, because you just have to see what it is, ask what it is that they need, and then provide it as best as you can. And then also just be honest about expectations about what you can and cannot do, and let them make their own decision.

And that builds that kind of trust that they continue to come to you for all kinds of issues. And they already start learning how to advocate for themselves and, being able to identify the factors that contributed to that. So in that situation so that they can actually self-determine, and then start to have those skills on a daily basis on their own without actually contacting us.

But just checking in with us to tell us, "Guess what I did, because of what you taught me or how you impacted my life." And that is revolutionary in and of itself. And it's what provides me with the motivation and energy to do it every single day.

Crystal Fincher: [00:10:20] I think this is an important conversation to have, and an important issue to talk about when it comes with, when it comes to service providers across the board. And you touch on a critical element, that bespoke element, and basically meeting people where they're at and that you can't say, "This is the solution that we provide. This is the service that we offer," because you are meeting people where they're at. You are centering their needs, which vary, and which are different. And there's a segment of service providers, and organizations who prescribe the condition that someone needs to be in order to get help.

Sherae Lascelles: [00:11:00] Yeah, the barriers.

Crystal Fincher: [00:11:01] Then sometimes that's beyond where people are at. And that becomes just like you said, a barrier for them itself.

Sherae Lascelles: [00:11:08] Correct. And vice versa. They could be beyond that, or they don't look like they are in need, while they're struggling to get themselves out of a situation. And maybe they just really need the education on how to navigate the systems that they are now encountered with that maybe, time before that, they never encountered because they hadn't been in a position in their life to do that.

So it has to be this ongoing cycle of care and checking in with community needs directly and be like, what are your struggles now? And it could be that, they don't qualify because they make a little bit more money than a service needs or because they don't fit the perfect profile of a victim when it comes to gender based violence services, et cetera like that.

And we don't, we don't account for that. We make a blanket statement. We'd like a blanket plan for how do we address that statement, but there's no flexibility in how we respond to things that don't quite fit the rubric or the matrix that has been put forward and then funded, by an institution that also has barriers on the reporting and what money can be allocated to [it] through restricted funding.

And it's just this never ending cycle of perpetuating the same harms of the institutions that a lot of organizations and departments, claim to be there to mitigate. And it's heartbreaking every day when someone says, I was with a so-and-so agency and they said they were going to do X, Y, and Z., and then, I did this thing where I thought I was helping and being part of that. And they thought, because I started seeking those services on my own that they no longer were needed in this situation. So now I'm back at square room one - and it really just took the follow through of checking in with where people are at and then adjusting to their current situation.

And they could have probably made it through., I can't - and I see it every day.

Crystal Fincher: [00:12:51] Yeah. And it's a key to harm reduction, and in the centering of the individual and not saying, if you fit into this box, we can help. And if not too bad, because that's still leaving people behind and that's still accepting harm, if it doesn't come looking like you prescribed it to be. You know, for listeners thinking about this and okay, what does that look like? When we have debates about, sharing clean needles versus dirty

versus saying, someone needs to be clean and like dedicated to not using drugs at all and not doing anything.

If someone is experiencing substance use disorder, they may not be at that point yet. They might be able to get to that point, if they have steps along the way, or if people are meeting them where they're at. However, they may never be able to get help if they have to, to meet a series of requirements or, are faced with barriers that just prevent them from getting that, in a variety of situations where society, especially with stigmatized populations, just automatically recoils at anything but abstinence, anything, a complete rejection and repudiation and an absence of any kind of harm, and to prescribe how someone needs to be functioning, especially when people don't understand what it means to be in their situation, and how people in their situation have successfully worked out. I wanted to speak to you because you are doing this well, because you are centering the people who need help and what their needs are.

And you know, that the way you answered the question, I can't give you an answer on what we do because you do what people need. And to me, that's the answer. You actually do what people need, and that looks different for different people, but that actually prevents leaving people behind, which I think is our ultimate goal as it should be, our ultimate goal as a society.

So I appreciate that. You've been doing that for a long time, for years, successfully making an impact in people's lives. Obviously these problems are big and systemic and more resources and people are needed. But you have been one of the people and involved in founding organizations that have done that work.

And I want to say, I appreciate it. And I want to make sure that we share this within our community to understand, 'cause this concept is new to people still. People are still learning -

Sherae Lascelles: [00:15:29] Pardon, pardon for interrupting you explaining that this is a new concept to a lot of people, but in a sense it's not. It's just a matter of being able to craft language that allows us to communicate it to a wider audience, so that they can start identifying in their own life, what they do to reduce harm and how they have created mechanisms to cope with struggling circumstances.

And it does feel like sometimes I'm giving away this sacred secret about survival in a stigmatized and criminalized population, or at the intersection of many. And what keeps putting us down is honestly the support system in order to change our circumstances. We can't always rely on institutions that exist within government or within, restricted, nonprofit, industrial complex, funding structures.

We can't just leverage that overnight and change it overnight. It's not something that you can just implement because you have a will. You have to also have people with experience in those networks from personal struggle, and from identifying with the needs of that community by being part of that community is integral into the efficacy of implementing these structures. So I will say that a lot of the work is really just education, and that includes

educating participants, not on their experience, and how valid it is or on what they should do to remedy the situation, but on, "It's okay to be honest about your situation."

It's okay to tell us what you think you need. It's okay to be wrong about your idea about what you think you'll need. Cause it's rare that you were ever asked. And then to try again and try again, and there's no shame in failing at trying to acquire improvements in your life when you were set up to fail.

And you should have control over what you do or what you try in order to change the things you want to change, and not have to fit into a box versus making your own.

Crystal Fincher: [00:17:34] That's powerful and that's important. And, just listening to that from my perspective, and in talking to people, who've been criminalized or stigmatized, you brought up something that I've experience personally.

And that was powerful. It's just that, yeah. It's okay. It's okay to advocate for what you need. It's okay. To be wrong about that because you probably haven't been asked, and so many of the people who are criminalized are not - they're not asked, they're not talked with, they're not listened to, they're just completely discarded by society.

Sherae Lascelles: [00:18:14] And also told that if they tell the truth, they lose access to resources and help, and people's compassion for their circumstances. And there's a lot of times where the first time we interact with someone they tell us what they think we want to hear, based on collecting data over time of interacting with other organizations, and having to try over and over again to be the perfect participant for those restrictive options and opportunities.

And so we see a lot of formulaic responses to our requests for what do you need? And then the longer we are in community with them and the longer we're in relationship with them they do more and more self reporting, and they are able to build the skillset to advocate for specifics, and essentially and accidentally, by creating this structure of our mission statement and like always sticking to that, we have influenced people's abilities and courage to self report, self identify issues, and self reflect and create plans of action to change their circumstances. And it's, It's something I wish every organization would at least attempt to do, first and foremost.

But yeah, either no one asked them or they've been trained, programmed, educated on what didn't work in the past and they already are indoctrinated with that type of language, to hide because of their own safety concerns. And that's, it's absolutely heartbreaking, but it's also, like I said before, what fuels the need to continue down this path.

Crystal Fincher: [00:19:55] Continuing down that path. and along that path, obviously organizations and people who are meeting the needs of, the community and specifically the most marginalized or criminalized or stigmatized in the community is important. And it's also important for policy to move in a direction - to move in that direction.

And so that brings me back to your run for the state house of representatives, in the 43rd and Position 2, against the incumbent Frank Chopp. And so when you look at what we're

facing in the state and, obviously there are people struggling right now, we're looking at the probability of increased suffering of all types between the pandemic, between, this coming eviction, tsunami, and austerity that's being put in place in so many areas, and that inclination to, cut.

Sherae Lascelles: [00:21:00] Cut spending to save money.

Crystal Fincher: [00:21:04] Which actually, lots of data, it's not the most effective thing to do. But how does that inform your run and the policies that you're looking at instituting? How does that, I guess when you're looking at running and what you can do, how does your experience make that possible?

Sherae Lascelles: [00:21:23] Okay. so looking at running, that would have to be something that happened last year before we were in this situation, but we knew it was an eventuality, if not, at least possible. I saw in a microcosm. And so I put it upon myself to have to check into a larger scale of if these things that are effective on a hyperlocal level could be effective in other demographics or communities or scaled.

And unfortunately there's not much data that already exists on specifically implementing protocols around serving the communities needs directly, and asking them for what they need. But the lack of data speaks volumes. It's not been tried at that scale and that's the problem. It's okay to fail.

Like I said, and that's also true for legislation and bodies that govern, but they have to admit it and they have to. redirect and pivot. And it's very clunky to be in such a large body, and, one admit you're wrong. And then two, pivot in a way that reduces harm while you're pivoting it.

It's okay to say it's not going to happen overnight. It's not okay to say we're not going to try. And that's the point. And that's literally what conclusion I came to when I decided to run against Frank Chopp. I can say it's possible it won't work out or that it won't look the way we will want it to, and that I might fail, but I can't say that it's not worth trying.

And we all really need to start adopting that. And I also will admit that I have been wrong on a lot of things, but the thing that is different between me and other people that have held this office or currently running for this office, is [that] I know how to pivot very fast. And that's something I hope to demonstrate, not just now, while I'm running, but also, when I win.

And how I pivoted while I'm running is COVID hit - publicly, like it was publicly announced what we had to do in order to mitigate the circumstances and reduce harm in our community right now - and I had just announced my run. I had to decide every single day and especially on those first few days, whether I was going to run, a more traditional campaign with my style, or if I was going to answer the cries for my community.

In institutions that were supposed to be able to react or do preventative work. We're not necessarily feeling to do it because to only time tells when you fail, but [they're] frozen.

Cause they didn't know how to maneuver institutions that they already have built or policy that was about to be rolled out, to immediately improve the conditions of constituents.

And so I had to choose to go do that instead. Right then. And try to fill it and some of the cracks, as many as I possibly could, put a finger in, as possible and know that anything that I was experiencing as a constituent under the same exact circumstances is probably indicative of what's happening on a macro level.

And if it's something that I was struggling with, then I should do everything in my power to communicate that this is a larger thing. And to collect the data and narratives from my community members and ask them what they wanted to be done about it, and then try to navigate the systems in order to make it happen.

And it's. Yeah, it also is bespoke. How we react in times when we're also struggling or under duress, this is a lot about people's character. And I know there's a million quotes out there that have become trite, or repetitive, about that, or that your characters, revealed when you're under duress.

But, it was more apparent why it was necessary for me to continue running and not just completely retire the campaign, because I was busy on the ground trying to ramp up our responses and trying to support the organizations in the same. And then it turned out that the legislature and elected officials started contacting organizations that were trusted in community or had the ability to reach niche populations, and essentially explaining their relationships in order to roll out their programming when they finally got to it. And it just doubled down on realizing that you don't always know what's best if you're not part of the community that you're trying to reach, and these resources should be put into those communities' hands to decide what needs to be done at that moment.

And not just mining them for data of how to get to their participants and um. Yeah. I wish that, it was more eloquent, but, ironically this entire situation is almost proven everything about my personal mission statement and everything about my platform's necessity in the current climate. And the timing wasn't predictable, but it's surreal to witness it firsthand.

Crystal Fincher: [00:26:39] And I agree. I think that's important. I think what you said, if listeners walk away with anything, it's what you just said. Put resources in the hands of people who have experience with the problem or issue that is trying to be addressed and let them guide and dictate what the solutions are, and let them try and figure out what it takes and give them the space to do that.

So I appreciate your voice in our community. I appreciate your voice in the race in the 43rd. And I thank you for taking the time to speak with us here today. At Hacks and Wonks.

Sherae Lascelles: [00:27:21] Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Crystal Fincher: [00:27:27] Thank you for listening to Hacks and Wonks. Thank you to KVRU 105.7 FM in Seattle where we record this show. Our chief audio engineer is Maurice Jones Jr., and our producer is Lisl Stadler. If you want more Hacks and Wonks content, go to

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Catch you on the other side.