

ARISE Podcast 093 NAUWU-Community Foundation

Host: Tania Anderson, ARISE CEO

Guest: Qiana Williams, Program Officer, Community Investment, Central New York Community Foundation

Transcription

Tania Anderson 0:00

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson, CEO at ARISE. It's my pleasure to have with us today. Qiana Williams, who is the program officer for Community Engagement at the Central New York Community Foundation. Welcome Qiana!

Qiana Williams 0:20

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Tania Anderson 0:21

So, before we get into a very special project that you've been working on with people who work with disabilities, tell me a little bit about your role at the Community Foundation.

Qiana Williams 0:33

Sure. So, my role is a new role. It was put into place about two and a half years ago when I came on board, and it was based on community listening from the foundation, based on trust, based philanthropy. It was our way of trying to meet more racialized and marginalized communities and centering those needs and making an impact. So, my role is to engage the community with outreach in various ways, tabling through our grant making processes which are more democratic in the way that we go about it, where residents who are closest to the issues get to make decisions on how the funding is spent.

Tania Anderson 1:10

Great. And so, for those who don't know, the Community Foundation has been around for, like, more than 100 years.

Qiana Williams 1:16

Almost 100 our centennial is coming up.

Tania Anderson 1:20

I made you older than you are. Sorry about that. And really, it's, it's an investment in the community. A lot of people will leave a legacy gift to the foundation for future investment in the community. And the term you used was trust...

Qiana Williams 1:34

Trust based philanthropy. And this type of approach is an approach seen internationally and nationally, where more and more community foundations are building relationships, relationships and partnerships of trust in order to be change makers and make their communities better. So that's, it's an approach, it's a philosophy. It's a way to make investment in the community. That's that makes sense, because it's human centered design. It's the community helping to make those decisions, rather than a grant maker saying, hey, we're going to give you grant funds for this project, and it's like a one and done, and you're out of the way. We're really strategic and focused on how we want to make changes to improve our community.

Tania Anderson 2:18

And if I understand it's really listening to the people in the community that this is what I need, and then the foundation saying, this is how I can help you get there.

Qiana Williams 2:28

Yeah, responsive grant making. So, in other ways that we serve in our capacity is as connectors, conveners, as thought partners. So, there are these other roles as well that help to move the needle on things we care about.

Tania Anderson 2:44

It's wonderful, and it makes so much sense too. So, talk a little bit about the participatory grant program that you're working on right now.

Qiana Williams 2:54

Yeah. It's so exciting. First of all and having had the opportunity to work with you and learn more about what you do and your expertise. So, the participatory grant making project started last year, this is our second year, and it's an effort to center racialized and marginalized communities. So, we're working with five different communities, the Onondaga Nation, the Latino community, people with disabilities, LGBTQ plus, and with, my God, I'm missing a group, the Asian community, sorry, forgive me. So many juggling so many different things. And so those are communities that we know

historically have experienced bias or marginalization. And so, with that, our goal was to bring them to the table. I learned in Igbo saying, and if you don't know who the Igbo people are, they're part of Nigeria, that if you want to know where the roof leaks, you need to talk to the people who live in the attic. And that's all about approximate leadership, and people who are experiencing the issues, they're going to be where the solutions are. And so, we're being more focused and strategic with that grant making. So, this project came about, and our participatory grant making project is slightly different than others, than my peers, because I national peer group. We're doing it where we're co-designing a project, rather than bringing proposals to an advisory group to decide what to fund. So that's kind of what we did together with the people with disabilities, community trying to gather a mix of residents and nonprofits to help us decide what's the issues that we really need to start thinking about, what do we want to do? And then who's going to benefit the most from this, and who has the capacity to carry out the project.

Tania Anderson 4:37

And can you, I went through this project with you. It was really interesting. And can you describe, for those listening just how you design this whole process?

Qiana Williams 4:50

It's kind of an amalgam of participatory budgeting and participatory grant making. So, in my thought, it would be where we would have the top three proposals that the group has come together to think about and thinking about those needs. And each of the proposals had some different needs. And then we have either vote by ballot, which I think our group did something similar, and or vote by consensus. And with the Onondaga nations, more consensus, because it's based on their government model, with the with their council and their grandmother/clan mother. So, each group decided to decide on what they wanted to do based on the group and who was a part of that. So, it customized to the actual gathering of folks who are part of the advisory group. I wanted to keep it flexible and nimble, because it's a democratic process, and those processes, I'm always saying this, I sound like a broken record, or they're messy. They're not always clean and cut, but at least there's a little bit of structure so we can be creative. And this is more of a creative process in grant making, rather than okay, here are the funds. Here's the applications. What do you want to do? It's more of Let's talk it through. Let's listen to lived experiences. Let's think about different ways to approach some of the things that we want to change.

Tania Anderson 6:08

And, you know, I went through this process, and I found it really interesting. You know, at first, I was grateful that ARISE was invited to be at the table, and even though ARISE has been around as an independent living center, working as a disability rights organization for close to 45 years, actually, 45 years now, I met stakeholders for the first time around that table, and there I was really excited to be working with what I call, quote, unquote, grassroots organizations, folks who were literally just

putting it together in on their kitchen table to serve a community that they've identified. Did you, Did that just happen? Or did you really how the synergy was just so great about a combination of organizations? How did you achieve that magic?

Qiana Williams 7:02

Through a couple different ways, through extensive outreach, being out in the community, trying to place us in spaces where we could build relationships, also through identification of other people, through networking, which was really important. And then some folks just kind of approached me on other projects, and I'm like, you should be a part of this project. And they're like, okay, sure, let's, let's do this. It was a combination of ways to get people to the table and build those relationships.

Tania Anderson 7:31

And I, I know what I learned when I was meeting these new folks around the table, and you were sitting there sort of as a quote, unquote outsider, because you're not doing the work every day. What did you learn from our conversations?

Qiana Williams 7:47

Oh my gosh, I've learned so much. I'm in a caregiver capacity with my mom, who's legally blind and is having cognitive challenges. So, I learned about caregiver burnout, which I didn't know I was experiencing at the time, so that was really valuable to me to start seeking resources so that I could feel more supported in my work. And since I've been able to get my mom in a great program that's going to help me with her care, having spoken to some people in the group and learning that I also learned about disability rights, and that in many instances, a lot of folks don't know what their rights are, and don't know how to advocate best for those who identify with a disability, whether it's visible or non-visible. I also learned the right language, the shared language that should be used. You know, there's some outdated terms that folks still use and don't realize it. So now, when I'm in a conversation, I talk about that, I just I gently say, Hey, this is what people are saying now as they identify so being able to pass that education on and that awareness some of the other things that I learned that I thought were very valuable is each of you have your niche and your specialty and focus areas, and that each of these things, when they come together, can really build out a stronger community of people with disabilities. So, when we're in silos, it's harder to really do impactful work, even though you're doing it, but when you have more people that are part of that process, you build the bigger family, and you're able to make a greater impact. So, I learned that as well.

Tania Anderson 9:25

Yeah, and I must say, I really appreciate what you just shared. I have a lot of thoughts, and one is the point about your mom, it just really underscores that the disability community touches all of us, because one in five of us has a disability, if we may be born with it, we may acquire it through an

accident. We may acquire it as we grow older. It's just a natural part of our human condition. And if we don't identify ourselves as having a disability, we've got someone we love that is in that community. And I'm so glad that the perception our community that people who are disabled are other, is breaking away. Yes, although the marginalization certainly still exists in many ways, and the your last point in terms of us working together, has really been the most exciting part for me, because as an independent living center, we are organized and directed by people with disabilities. More than half of our staff have disabilities, and that peer piece is really important, because even if my experience with disability isn't exactly the same as yours, we have enough of a shared experience that we can relate to each other and support and grow together. And I have found in my interactions with the other organizations that I'm thinking specifically my conversation with the founder of Women Overcoming Obstacles Together, she and I have very different experiences in terms of our background. However, we're both moms of kids who have a disability, and that bond is much stronger than anything that is different.

Qiana Williams 11:12

Absolutely, moms and you have, you know, children on the spectrum, that's, that's powerful. It's, it's really powerful. And I'm just glad that that partnership has come about, and those relationships are being built. You know, with that commonality, there's just a long history of marginalizing people with disabilities, and I have nieces and nephews on the spectrum. I also have other family members with different types of disabilities, and they're not necessarily visible and helping them navigate the world. This enriched me in so many ways in learning, and I think one of the things that I find very important is that we have to normalize, not segregate people with disabilities in schools and in social settings, you have to build the community and develop that in order to normalize and make people understand that there's no difference here, right? Everyone deserves a seat at this table or at a table and has a right to live a good quality of life. And I hope with this project, we're able to tear that right down and, you know, just get rid of it all together. But it's going to take a lot more work, obviously, but this is, I feel, having worked with all of you and learned from all of you, this is a step in the right direction.

Tania Anderson 12:34

I completely agree that is a good foundation. And, you know, we're all about ripping down the barriers and making our world more accessible for everybody. What do you see? You know, we're in this first year of this project. We're in a series of different workshops and education sessions that are all publicized on ARISEinc.org so get on that website. So, but what do you see as the next step for this project?

Qiana Williams 13:03

Oh my gosh, we're in phase two, so now we have gathered some other partners in the community, and I'm hoping whatever they come up with will just kind of build off of what you all put in place this

year. I don't know what it's going to look like, because everyone has it'll be customized to the group, but I'm very excited that it can continue, and my hope is that we just keep making those inroads, and I keep finding the funding, and we keep working together to design things that you want to see change and that you all want to want to make better.

Tania Anderson 13:37

Thank you. I don't want to put you on the spot, but are there other groups other than the initial five you mentioned that you'd like to see engage in this process.

Qiana Williams 13:47

Yeah. I mean, well, we have our black Equity and Excellence Fund that's specific to the black community addressing disparities there. This is really based on the US Census when we look at marginalized groups. So, I mean, when you talk about any community, they're not monolithic, and that's the most important thing that I also like to point out is like, yes, you may belong to this community, but not everybody's the same within there. They may have a shared commonality, and so I like to be mindful of that. But those are the typical groups that historically have been marginalized and not invited to the table and want to break those barriers down as much as possible and create the equity that we really, truly want to see systemically.

Tania Anderson 14:34

Absolutely. Qiana, I can't thank you enough for your work every day and for your special attention to our disability community and just thanks for what you do every day.

Qiana Williams

Thank you Tania and thank you for what you do every day.

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