

Inspiring Women

Episode 35: Dorri McWhorter

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years, I've come to learn one thing: women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women, and I am so pleased that today we have the opportunity to speak with Dorri McWhorter. Now, Dorri was previously the CEO of the YWCA in Metropolitan Chicago, but very recently has the new opportunity as being the CEO and chief of the YMCA in Metropolitan Chicago. So we're so excited to have the opportunity to speak with Dorri. Now, Dorri prides herself on being a socially conscious business leader, and she's committed to creating an inclusive marketplace by leveraging a multi-sector approach across business, civic and community organizations. She is somebody who has a long history of business leadership, of relationship leadership in terms of involving many different organizations. She's also dedicated to empowering women as a member of organizations like Women in Entrepreneurship Institute. She's also a leader at the Women's Philanthropy Institute, and she's on the board of directors of many different organizations, as well as having some excellent degrees and experience and tremendous civic leadership. Dorri, I'm so pleased to be speaking with you today.

Dorri McWhorter:

Oh, thank you for having me.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, this is just great and congratulations again on your new role as the CEO of the YMCA, but as we get started in Inspiring Women, I always like to start out with sort of, what are you doing now? What is your role? What are you doing? How do you show up at work?

Dorri McWhorter:

Sure. So what I'm doing right now, as you mentioned in the introduction, I'm leading the YWCA Metropolitan Chicago and really quite honestly working through the transition to ensure that the YWCA maintains a successful platform that we've built over the last eight years. So that's been like all consuming right now. So that's absolutely what I'm up to.

Laurie McGraw:

And that organization, 140 years old, you really have, in just a short period of time, worked to transform that to a modern-day organization. A 21st century enterprise is how I've heard it described. Can you talk a bit about that Dorri? How do you take an organization that esteemed, established, old and bring it into the 21st century?

Dorri McWhorter:

Sure. So one of the things that was really important to me when I joined the YWCA is that I recognized just how amazing the work was, whether it was our counselors or our childcare providers, or the folks that were providing housing assistance. Regardless of the area, that work was amazing, but what I recognized as well is that it was really struggling when I joined to... I was going to say prior to joining, in identifying what I would consider this overall business model. Right? So how do you take this organization that does great work and really bring it and create a model around the work to allow it to sustain itself? So while I'm not an expert in any of our services, it really became important to me to make sure that I was focused on, "Okay, what is the business that we do?" And so what I like to say is that we took this 145-year-old organization, social services organization, and brought it to be a 21st century social enterprise. And to me, that means that we're absolutely focused on creating social impact, but also recognizing that there's value in the impact that we're creating. And therefore, we're able to connect to different funding partners, different business partners, different government contracts. And so that allows us to sort of tap into what we're doing to create value to actually sustain the work as well.

Laurie McGraw:

I like the comment, as a social enterprise from a social services agency, I mean the mission of the YWCA dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. I mean, those are the kinds of things that I think a lot of people can stand behind, but transforming it into more of an enterprise with business relationships and other things to sort of fuel the urgency of how to go about addressing those issues, I think, is a whole different approach to the YWCA. Can you talk about how you sort of started to move and pivot? It seems like you've had to work with a lot of energy, a lot of urgency to make those kinds of big moves.

Dorri McWhorter:

Sure. One of the things that was really important for us is that as we recognize that, yes, we are a social service agency, meaning that we do receive a significant amount of government funding and our work is absolutely community-based. But what we learned is that there's also value to the things we do in corporate America. So we look to say, how else can we create partnerships to sustain our work outside of our government contracts? And let it be known that I was not one of those folks that was saying, "Oh, we don't want government funding." I actually was like, "We want all the money available to do this work." So we just want to make sure that it's highly diversified, which is usually the issues that some nonprofits run into is that they have one concentrated source of funding. And when that funding source goes away, they can't continue the work, and I didn't want that for us.

Dorri McWhorter:

And so what I did is say, if we're doing this type of work, who else cares about this work that would be willing to support it? Which many organizations do as they look to ensure that the value that they are creating actually get supported. And so if you took a service that we were already doing, for example, our counseling services and specifically in the sexual violence support area, as well as we were doing prevention education, so we were talking to children in schools and things like that, well, we were able to translate that work to sexual harassment training for corporate America, because we already had the foundation. So we were just expanding it. And so we renamed it and called it "safety at work." Actually, we call it "respect at work" now. And so we were able to continue to modify the foundation of our work to target different customer bases that could also support that work.

Laurie McGraw:

And Dorri as you build those programs and those additional relationships and think about how to pivot program... So I like this respect at work and I can imagine that was pretty important in this sort of new environment where Zoom is sort of the mode of operation for many businesses. How does your background play into this? I mean, you have a business degree. Your previous experience before YWCA was more commercial kinds of organizations. How does that play into your approach to your leadership today?

Dorri McWhorter:

It plays such a strong role for me. A couple of things. I recognize that as I looked at the YWCA and said, "We are a business. We are participating in the same marketplace that everyone else is. So how is it that we define our business so that we can pursue the partnerships and the relationships that we need to support our business?" And so, what I like to say is previously as a social service agency, that we are in the business of human services, and as a result of that, particularly given our mission, which as you named, Laurie, is so broad... So when you have a mission like eliminate racism, empower women and promote peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all, I called that part of our mission our Superman mission, because we're literally trying to save the world at that point.

Dorri McWhorter:

But what it allows us to do is say, what services specifically are we going to focus on that will allow us to absolutely go into the marketplace and create new opportunities for resources? So from my background and being in business and understanding business processes and relationships and value chains and how things work, I was able to say, well, we could be a part of this process from a business perspective to expand clientele for our work as well, which got us into different business partnerships and different strategies and relationships as it relates to businesses.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. And one of the things that the mission is not, there was not a part of the mission, at least as I understand it, that says something about eliminating poverty, yet some of the programs that you've implemented during your eight-year tenure at the YWCA include things like economic empowerment for women. Why is that so important? Can you tell us about some of those programs?

Dorri McWhorter:

Well, economic empowerment is absolutely... I always say this. We live in a capitalistic economy. And so we need to also make sure that the folks that we work with are participating in ways that benefit them as well. And so we talk about our economic empowerment services is actually economic inclusion. We tend to shy away from the words like financial literacy and things like that. One, we don't want to apply that people are illiterate when in fact they've been excluded. And so we know that there's a significant racial wealth gap in the United States. And so part of our work has been focused on how do we close that gap and effectively use three levers of services that we provide. One is the housing support services and overall financial management services. The second is what we consider workforce innovation and what we're doing there is trying to connect people with high demand, high growth career opportunities, because of course, income is a factor in the ability to close the wealth gap. And then the last one is entrepreneurship. And so we are a small business development center as well.

Dorri McWhorter:

So our approach has really been focused on what are the different levers that we have in the marketplace to drive economic inclusion, which will ultimately help us close the racial wealth gap. And women, particularly in black and brown communities, are often single female headed households. And so to the degree that we can economically empower those women, it affects the entire household as well as the communities that folks live in. So we're very mindful of the interconnectivity of the different services that we have as well. But I say in my mind, being a CPA by background, all roads lead to economic empowerment. So that's my ultimate goal for everyone to feel included, and that's what we actually say. We say that if we, in fact, fulfill our mission, which is eliminate racism, empower women, that we would have created an inclusive marketplace where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Laurie McGraw:

I agree with that economic empowerment. Sort of if you can solve that, help with that, accelerate that, that that solves a lot of these interconnected issues. So I really think that is an incredibly strong statement. Dorri, the work's working. You were recently awarded a Mackenzie Scott surprise, \$9 million grant. So congratulations on that. Tell us how that work is working. And maybe if you could also focus on this incredible past year, COVID-19, we've all seen sort of the social disparities laid bare and the racial injustice of that. How has that impacted your work? How has the acceleration with the grant from Mackenzie Scott helping you?

Dorri McWhorter:

So we have absolutely expanded and increased our work during COVID. Given the nature of the services that I told some about, COVID absolutely highlighted everything that was sort of wrong with the environment and society. And so I told my team, I said, "If we're not growing now given the amount of need that's out there, then we almost don't deserve to be in business." And during this time, we actually hired 150 people last year to expand our workforce to over 300. And a lot of those were opportunities driven by the impact of COVID. So we added health navigators to our staff to help people access... At one time, it was COVID testing and contact tracing. And then that evolved to ensuring that people were going to access the vaccine. As one example, we were also able to expand food distribution and helping people access fresh hot meals, that versus

some of, I would say, the food that was being provided at the food pantries, which was fabulous, but we supplemented that by people knowing that they can come to our center to get a fresh meal.

Dorri McWhorter:

And so during COVID, we gave over 150,000 meals, as well as we were able to provide direct cash assistance through a number of generous partnerships that we had in the Chicago land area. And so we were able to get over a half a million dollars out the door to families that needed that immediate cash assistance. One thing I'll say as well about the food distribution, part of what we were able to do with these fresh meals is that we were able to not only distribute the meals to the people that needed them in the community, but we sourced the meal from the local caterers in the community. And so with that effort, we actually were able to get an additional half a million dollars back into the hands of small businesses by procuring the meals from them. And so we looked at everything we did very holistically and we're still doing it, right? So everything we did during COVID and still doing very holistically to see how we could serve as many stakeholders as possible. And having a spot business development center, of course, we were connected already to some of the caterers that we were able to use because we always like to say, particularly with our small businesses, everyone needs capital, but revenue is the best form of capital. And so to be able to drive revenue to those businesses was also very important to us.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that is a lot of activity, a lot of impact, certainly results for the stakeholders, the women that you serve. Dorri, you have this incredible leadership role with the YWCA, but you also are involved in many other organizations specifically focused on women, whether it's Chief, Women in Entrepreneurship, Women in the Philanthropic Institute. So we all know some of the statistics about women. I mean, I read recently that it's going to be 200 years before, at the rate of change for women to receive, get to parity in business. So maybe how do you have the time and energy for some of these other organizations? Why are they important in addition to the work that you're already doing as sort of your day job, so to speak?

Dorri McWhorter:

I appreciate that, Laurie, because I look at it... I'm actually racing Elon Musk. I'm like, "If he gets to Mars..." I'm serious, Laurie. If he gets to Mars before we create gender and racial equality on earth, I'm going to be highly upset. And so I'm like, that 200 years thing doesn't work for me. We need to use every lever available in the marketplace to us, which is why I participate in some of these other organizations, as well as why we launched the Women's Empowerment exchange traded fund on the New York Stock Exchange to hold corporations accountable for the women's empowerment that we're trying to do on the ground every single day as well. And so I literally look at we have a marketplace that we all need to participate in. And so if we could leverage every single lever, not just the ones that are intentional for good, like philanthropic efforts, but we need capital market efforts. We need, of course, government efforts. We need business efforts. We need everybody to focus on equality and driving equity between gender and race, because that's the only way that as a society, we truly advance.

Dorri McWhorter:

And so for me to hear the numbers like 200 years, which pick a source, I'm like, I stopped counting over a hundred years. It's too way too long. And I just can't believe in our lifetime, as we've seen so many innovations and including space travel, why can't we create equality? It is not that... We actually have a saying that the way that we say. We have a hashtag, not that complicated. I'm like, relative to other things, it's really not that complicated. I actually had a chance to meet the woman who leads SpaceX, which is Elon's Musk company that's focused on getting to Mars. And I asked her how long it's going to take, and this was several years ago, and she said, "20 years. It's not that complicated. We just have to build an atmosphere." And I sat there. I'm like, "Okay, if she could build an atmosphere in 20 years, the things that we're dealing with here, we have to make them a priority to change them." And I just cannot believe with all the amazing people, the innovative people that we have around the world, and particularly in Chicago, why we can't make these things happen.

Laurie McGraw:

I love what you're talking about there, Dorri. And look as I got prepared for just being able to talk to you today, I've heard you described as amazing, impressive, fierce, and that is clearly coming through in just your passion for how you talk about those things. It isn't that complicated, but let's talk about you a little bit. It's because the audience here for Inspiring Women really looks to women like yourself and they ask questions like, "How can anybody be a Dorri McWhorter? Is that possible?" So let's just talk about that. In terms of your drive, your passion, where does it come from? Have you always had it? Can others have it?

Dorri McWhorter:

Well, I just think every person has their own unique gifts and talents, and we all need to contribute those talents and gifts. Right? And so my goal is for everyone to recognize what their value is, because I fundamentally believe that everyone does have value. And so how can they optimize that? So ultimately, that's my goal, and it's unfortunate with certain random factors like gender and race devalued people for no reason. And so from my perspective, I think I've always felt this strong urge to, on one level, make the world a better place, but also just to make sure people feel appreciated and supported. And this has been something... People often ask me when I started, when was my aha moment. I'm like, it's never been an aha. It's mostly been like ah-ha. It's been my entire life.

Dorri McWhorter:

And I say that because even it's documented, I wrote a letter to Santa Claus when I was 11 and a half years old and I asked Santa for three things: one, to make everyone in my life today be okay, two, to give a picture. Clearly, I was going to pick a little pushback to show people that Santa was real. And then the third, to be my parents accountant. And so I'm like, yeah. So it's been consistent that I want everyone to be okay and I think business is an effective tool for change. So this is nothing new for me. It's just manifested in different ways. Even when I was at my accounting firm, I really leaned into how we treated our people, what the business processes were around, not only our people, but even as I work with clients.

Dorri McWhorter:

So I just felt like we all have a place in the world and can contribute as much as we can to make the world a better place. And that could be, yes, doing community-based work like I get to do at the YWCA, but also it could be in the office cube next to you. And unfortunately, when we see such violence across the country too, in workplace, we see that workplace does make a difference in people's lives and how we treat each other in those places and what becomes of those folks in those places too. So I just feel like as long as we're interacting with people, we have an opportunity to do good wherever we may sit in the market.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Dorri, first of all, that's incredible, and your passion just really rings through in your comments. I'm feeling very inspired just listening to you. I think we'll close out on those comments. And if you have any sort of last words of advice for women who are either younger or aspiring in their own career journeys, what advice might you give them?

Dorri McWhorter:

I'll probably just give a quote that I absolutely love and it's by Maya Angelou. And she says that if you're lucky, a solitary fantasy can transform a million realities. And I love that quote because I just think it gives us permission for us to hold our dreams and the imagination that we may have about what a world could look like and perhaps be a catalyst to sparking that million lives that it could ultimately change. So from that perspective, I just would give people the advice to do you, because you just never know that what you want to do or what you believe can be that one spark that can absolutely change the realities for the all of us. So I just really encourage people to be themselves.

Laurie McGraw:

I am inspired just having the opportunity to hear from you Dorri and speak with you. So this has been an Inspiring Women conversation with Dorri McWhorter. And Dorri, thank you so much.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. Please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Kruse at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.