

# Inspiring Women

## Episode 55: Natalie Davis

Lori McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Lori McGraw. I am your host, Lori 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](http://inspiringwomen.show), or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening, and I hope you will be inspired.

Welcome to this episode of Inspiring Women, and today we're speaking with Natalie Davis. Natalie is the CEO and co-founder of United States of Care. She has spent two decades shaping and implementing American healthcare policies to improve the lives of all people. Now, she's been doing this from for a number of years she was at CMS, where she was a senior advisor to the former CMS administrator, Andy Slavitt. So she worked closely with him really implementing one of the country's largest expansions of healthcare in modern history. She was the director of strategic engagement at the bipartisan policy center, there she worked with some of those smartest peoples across both ends of the political spectrum, Senate majority leaders, Tom Daschle, Bill Frist, to really bring together policy makers and lead change.

Natalie's is also a social entrepreneur. She founded Town Hall Ventures, the Medicaid Transformation Project, and she's really focused on making large scale change to improve the health and opportunity of all humans for better health outcomes. And, Natalie, I am really excited to be speaking with you today.

Natalie Davis:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited.

Lori McGraw:

Great. Well, why don't we get started. So on Inspiring Women, I always like to begin the podcast just talking about, what are you doing today? What is your day-to-day look like? At United States of Care, what is that all about?

Natalie Davis:

Yeah, thank you. Like you said, I am newly appointed as the CEO of United States of Care, which is a huge honor, and I'm so excited about it. I'm one of the co-founders of the organization, but I'm really excited to take this next step, and really move into this position as CEO, and take

the organization to what I'm calling our theme is bigger, better, louder, this next phase of our work. So I'm spending a lot of time reintroducing myself to partners, and supporters, and people we've worked with over the last couple of years, and also introducing the organization to new individuals and new partners that can really help us take our work to the next level.

And of course, I'm doing this during... What are we? A year and a half into a pandemic, and so also navigating what does it look like to have my kids back in school, how to keep them safe and my family safe, and really making space for ourselves as an organization, ourselves as a family, to continue to live wholly or fully in a time that still remains uncertain and scary at times.

Lori McGraw:

Well, there's a lot of time pack here. So, Natalie, you've got a family with four children, an amazing husband, and I want to talk about that. I want to talk about modern motherhood, and taking the helm of an organization with a very large mission. But before we get into all of that, maybe just bring us back to the personal story. How did you get here? You have a master's in social policy, you have an interest in impact for change. So how did you get there? How did that interest begin to then lead to these large-scale policy changes that you've been focused on for the past two decades?

Natalie Davis:

Yeah. I feel like there are people that have a really neat and tidy story about their career path, and I can tell that story in retro space, but-

Lori McGraw:

I don't know anyone who has a neat and tidy [crosstalk].

Natalie Davis:

Okay. Maybe they're good at telling that neat and tidy story. I've always been really fascinated with the idea of how does an individual shape society, and how does a society shape the individual? And what does that look like when we then come together as people in a family, or in a community, or as a country? How does that all play together, and how can we really support people to live their best lives?

And so I was interested in food disorders. I was interested in mental health. I was interested in how does that show up in art, and the way people express themselves. And so when we came to D.C., my husband and I, he was going to law school to study immigration law, and I thought I was going to work in museum curation here at the Capitol with the Smithsonian, and really thought that I would find my way in expressing this idea of human and community through art, and then was told that that was going to be really hard and competitive, and so I dropped it immediately. So obviously, [inaudible] that was not the path meant for me.

And so had a head hunter in D.C. help me or temp agency help me get my first job, and they looked at my interests, and they said, "Oh, that's healthcare. What you're interested in is healthcare," which I hadn't really thought about it that way. And so I really think healthcare kind of found me. And so I had some jobs in Washington, D.C. at different nonprofits, and along the way figured out in those jobs what I liked, and what I didn't, and continued to hone in where I thought I was most excited, and unique at the skills I could bring, and was at the National Committee for Quality Assurance when the Affordable Care Act passed, and there I was working on quality measures, and it was perfect timing, because they needed to start a quality measurement program for the Affordable Care Act, the federal marketplace, on how do you make sure the health insurance plans that are being sold to people are the right plans.

And so I was asked to come work at what was then a startup within the government, and loved that. It was fast paced and hard, and we were doing things that had to be decided and implemented at the same time as the rules and regulations were being written, and I just loved it, and found lots of different roles in that work. And I found myself then after the healthcare.gov went down, and then came back to life, and enrolled so many people in such important insurance, thought I was ready for a break from the federal government, and thought this concept of the private sector, whatever the heck that was, was really intriguing to me. And I was introduced to then Andy Slavitt, who worked at Optum and was about to be named the administrator for CMS, and for some reason marched into that coffee we had together and said, "Here are the things I think you can do at CMS. Good luck. Could you find me another job?" And-

Lori McGraw:

Wait, wait. Hey, let me interrupt you, Natalie, because first of all, a couple of things here, that might not sound like a nice tidy package, but it kind of does. So before we get to that, I'll just call it a big break in terms of that coffee discussion, perhaps, a big moment where something large happened for you. There are lots of people who have big ideas of how to make a big social impact on the world, but don't necessarily know how to navigate, fall into, make the right connections to make that happen. Yet you tell the story, and you sort of thought about it, and then it happened. So how did it happen? Did you pursue the connections? Did you have a network? Did you have people who connected you? What was it that allowed you to go from concept to actually making things happen? It sounds a lot easier than I imagine it might've been.

Natalie Davis:

Yeah. It's such a good moment to pause and remember that. It definitely didn't feel that way in the moment. I mean, I guess a couple of things, one is being I'm someone who is very open to opportunity, and very open to the idea of something pops up, and you have to feel out if it's the right opportunity for you, but always be open to that, and curious about what a path could be. I don't think I'm someone that networks, but I do take relationships seriously. And I'm always interested in what other people are doing, and finding connections between things that maybe others don't see.

And so I do think I am able to build relationships with people, and that has been such a key part of my career, but really just kind of showing up a person authentically interested in other people, and then being really open to opportunities that come in front of me. I'm someone who really tries to focus life on how do you go with the current towards the end goal, instead of rowing upstream, and when you think about how to match that with social change, it doesn't mean it isn't hard work. It doesn't mean that you don't try to fight against something that seems entrenched, but it is finding the ways to do that, that flow, instead of the kind of banging your head against the rocks.

Lori McGraw:

I think also the taking advantage of every conversation as potential. And it does sound like a small thing to say, but actually doing that, as opposed to just sort of going through the motions and yet another meeting, does lead to other things. I do hear that quite consistently with women like yourself who have accomplished so much. So let's go back to that coffee conversation, Andy Slavitt. You didn't necessarily know what that was going to lead to, so what happened there? How did you show up with your, "Please get these things done," list? I mean, that's a bold move it seems.

Natalie Davis:

Yeah. Honestly, I look back, and I'm like, "What was I doing," or, "Why did I think this was going to go over well?" I just realized that this individual who was really passionate and smart from what I can tell with the turnaround with healthcare.gov, I was honored to have a coffee with him, but didn't think it would lead to much. And so I thought this was an opportunity to really show him from an insider's perspective on stuff that I thought he could really focus on, and decided to share that with him, and then talk to him about what I was hoping to do with my career. And thankfully, that 30 minute coffee, he ended it by saying, "Hey, why don't you just work with me on doing these things you want to do in the government? And let's do this together."

And I was like, "Oh, that's interesting." And he was like, "You could decide in the next couple of minutes," which is very much our relationship, which is still really strong, and he's a good friend and mentor to me. And it was one of those moments, I guess, that really put me on a path to where I am today. And I got to be with him while he, and a lot of other leaders, and civil servants, and the government really tried to make sure that the Medicare program, and the Medicaid program, and the marketplace program are meeting the needs of people across the country, and allowing providers to give the best care, and do so in a way that really delivers the best outcomes for the country.

Lori McGraw:

Yeah. And working at a different level with some of the largest thinkers and doers in that realm must have been incredible. So let's move a bit to United States of Care. Okay? And then founding that, co-founding that with Andy Slavitt, and then now leading that, what are you trying to do? I've listened to some of the work, and your statements about trying to have a new

conversation about care. So tell us what United States of Care is all about, and what you're trying to get done with the bigger, louder, bolder conversations.

Natalie Davis:

Yeah. Yeah. So when Andy, and I, and several others really came together and said, "There's so much that needs to be done to make sure people have access to quality affordable healthcare, and we need a place, and there's so many amazing advocates and people across the country that are delivering better care, that are fighting for better care, are making sure we're doing this in a responsible way. And can there be an organization that is a part of this that's really forward-looking, that's thinking about the needs of people, that's bringing together different stakeholders to take on some of our biggest challenges, and then an organization that still is doing?"

So we like to think of ourselves as a think and do tank. So we are doing a lot of work to innovate new solutions, but we're also going out there in the states and with the federal government, and working with partners to enact change right now. But all of that really focuses on what do people want out of a healthcare system? What does the healthcare system of the future look like if we were to build it based on the needs of people, and match that with really smart policy and political tactics?

And that's really what we're aiming to do is change the conversation at first to say, "Here's what people want. Here are the common sense solutions that people want in our healthcare system," and really bringing together the right stakeholders in the right moments, and to push for that change, and again, building new innovative solutions that are really focused on access, and equity, and having that kind of be built by bringing what I call a big tent and a welcoming table, where we're really building that with other stakeholders.

Lori McGraw:

Again, Natalie, I just want to dig into that a little bit more, [inaudible] big tent, open table, those are really nice and welcoming words, but it takes some real chops to bring together the types of I'll just call stakeholders, big players that you have on the various councils that you've created. And clearly, there has been learning as well as work you have done to hold your own around the tables with some very powerful people. So how did that happen?

How did you go from just hardworking, altruistic thinking, wanting to get something done to having the confidence, the I don't know what to feel like you could hold, and lead, and be a true contributor in a conversation with some of the true change makers, leaders, impactful, smart, and powerful people in this nation? How did that happen? Did you just go in and have it from the beginning? Did you learn it along the way? Just give us a little bit more on that if you would.

Natalie Davis:

Yeah, I guess I think it comes back to what I said before. It's really listening to other people, it's building authentic relationships, it's understanding different perspectives, and finding those commonalities, and bridge-building across people, and relationships, and finding that with

myself and other people, or connecting other people where there are shared values, or things that we're working towards. I think deep down everybody, power player, or wherever you are in the way you're helping towards change, everybody wants to feel heard, and that they can be impactful, and the best way to build bridges and make that welcoming tent and table is showing where bridges are possible, and where there are going to be differences for sure, but can we build on some of those strengths and some of the bridges?

Where then if we're all kind of going together on at least some key items, we can see that impact, because we're doing it together. I think in United States of Care, we have found that being an organization that is going out and talking to thousands of people, [inaudible] hours, and hours, and hours of talking to people, and finding shared values, and shared needs, and experiences across populations has really brought a lot of different stakeholders and power players to want to be in the tent, because it really is a unique way of thinking about change. And everybody I've talked to is seeing the change they're working on in what we're building. And I think that's been really powerful for people to do.

Lori McGraw:

What I find incredible just hearing you Natalie, I mean, so certainly, you, obviously, know how to lead this mission-based organization, you know the information that you're talking about, and nothing of what you're saying says that you are intimidated by the other people around the table. I find that unusual and terrific to hear in a leader such as yourself, because so many women find themselves, and people who have more power or more experience in tables, virtual, or whatnot, along the lines of their career, and that you are in the midst of that, and leading that, and it not missing a beat is it's really incredible to hear. Very, very encouraging I find.

Natalie Davis:

Yeah, I guess I don't want to overstate. I shouldn't overstate that. Of course I show up, and I'm intimidated at times, or perhaps there's some times where I'm naive and not really realizing the table that we're bringing together is something I should be as intimidated by. I think as humans, we're always kind of intimidated, or thinking about how you show up, and for me really finding the human connection between myself and other people perhaps is the way that I overcome feeling intimidated, but I don't want to overstate that that is not something that happens to me.

Lori McGraw:

Well, it's something that, certainly, women in particular spend a lot of time working on, and confidence, but you're exuding it. And again, it's just very, very encouraging to hear. I want to shift again, if we could, in the conversation to a little bit about modern motherhood. You are a mother of four. You have a very busy life in addition to leading the United States of Care. So modern motherhood, what does it look like for you? How are you keeping it all together in this time of a pandemic where you've got young children facing school, and all the issues with that? If you could give us some perspective there, if you wouldn't mind?

Natalie Davis:

Sure. I'll say first that every part of the success of our family, the functioning and running of my family, I totally give to my husband, Jimmy. We met when we were in high school, and started dating our sophomore year of high school, and he is just an amazing human, and has taken on the kind of lead parent, stay at home parent role for our family. And so so much of the reason I can do my job and could take on the role with CMS and at the administrator's office was because he was able to kind of keep all the trains running at home.

I'd say balance is something that I'm trying to not even strive for, because I don't think it's possible. I instead am trying to find... Moments of quiet have been really important for me to recognize, and finding, carve out for myself, and then really just thinking about the buckets in my life of what matter, and recognizing when one is too empty, and just being conscious of that, and going to fill it. So I have a great group of friends, and if I'm feeling my social bucket or my friendship bucket is running low, I send up an SOS, and say, "I need a coffee or a glass of wine," and same with my family bucket, and my rest, and work, and exercise bucket.

And I'm really just trying to manage all of those with the expectation of their time, some kind of run dry, and then you just got to focus on those. And then prioritizing more than I think I ever have is it's more quiet time, but that's also a crazy thing to say, because my house is not quiet. There are six of us that have been in this house for a year and a half. My youngest two, and my oldest is 11, and it's not quiet here, but carving those out have been really important for me.

Lori McGraw:

In terms of making those choices, so with your husband, as you called him the lead parent, so staying at home, and helping to manage the family, who is now currently mostly at home, was that an unusual decision? Was that an easy decision to make? And I say this as somebody, my husband for a long period of time was also the lead parent. This is years before what you're experiencing, and at that point in time, it was very unusual. It took us a long time to get reconciled with that. How about now? I'm a lot older than you, Natalie, but how is it now?

Natalie Davis:

When Jimmy and I decided this, it was really kind of in a moment of our son, our first child, was born prematurely. He was in the NICU for a month, and it was right at the time when I got my job at CMS, and when the Affordable Care Act passed. And we know we were both making a kind of rash decision of, "Oh my gosh, this perfect little human can never be left alone again, and so one of us has to stay at home," and at the same time, just kind of weighing who's career could be a little bit more flexible. At that time, the concept of slasher was really in, so he with his career, he was going to be an attorney/stay-at-home father/writer/blogger, and with his kind of career at that moment, we thought that was the one that made the most sense.

And mine was kind of just having a moment in the sun of working for the Obama administration. And so we just kind of took it day by day, and learned a lot about each other, and what does it look like for us, and where I think I usually try to control situations, how I had to learn how to let go of controlling what it looked like for someone to stay home and raise our kids full time. And he had to help me figure out the balance of unplugging from work, and then when I was home

and being present, which is still something that's hard for me. But Jimmy is so confident, and he's the fourth of five kids. His mom stayed home with all of them and ran a daycare out of the house. And so he was always, he loves being surrounded by kids, and people, and chaos, and it's just something he is way more naturally suited for I think. And really just so thankful for everything that he does for our family.

Lori McGraw:

Well, even in what must be a lot of chaos, it does sound like you have some balance, and I like how you're thinking about the different pockets of whether it's your exercise, your social, your quiet time, which might be probably only a couple of minutes I might imagine, while still raising this family together. That's just great to hear. Natalie, as we just switch gears, and you think about just professionally for yourself, and where you're going, how do you keep current? I mean, the world is moving at a frenetic space, a pace these days. How do you keep current? What energizes you? What keeps you professionally jazzed about what you're doing and where you're going?

Natalie Davis:

Talking to smart people. I love learning from our staff and our team, with our founders council, or friends, or others, just getting time with people, and learning from them, and asking them questions, or telling people where I'm stuck, and getting their good advice on moving forward is something that really energizes me. And I think staying current means learning how to shut out some noise, and not getting sucked into things that are noise. And then staying current on things that are in healthcare, but also outside of healthcare. Healthcare is it's just a part of our society, and it happens in the backdrop of everything else that's happening in our society.

And so making sure, for me, it's thinking about how does this thing about health and healthcare, how does this fit into people's everyday lives, and where is that working and not? And so for me that means reading literature. It means reading about environmental policy. It means reading about mindfulness. I mean, anything that just kind of grabs my curiosity.

Lori McGraw:

Give us a favorite book or something that's really influenced you, that caught your attention.

Natalie Davis:

It would be cliché to say it, but I have to. Brené Brown books have completely changed my life, her study on vulnerability and showing up. When after my third kid, I went through a really, really tough period, and that was right when I found her studies on vulnerability, and honestly, very specifically on perfectionism, and really recognizing in myself my perfectionism was so high that I didn't even allow myself to think of myself as perfectionist, because I wasn't good enough to be a perfectionist, which is just the epitome of a perfectionist. And so her kind of concept on how that is a shield to living life fully was just completely eye-opening for me. I read about two or three books a month, and I've really found that as part of my quiet time and time

away from work as really important. My husband and I get up an hour before the household wakes up, and just have coffee on the couch and read, and that's something that really fills my cup.

Lori McGraw:

Well, I'll tell you what, Natalie, it sounds like those books are really working, because it sounds like you have it together to me. As we close out here on Inspiring Women, this has been just such an excellent conversation, Natalie, any last closing thoughts or advice for listeners that you'd like to leave us with?

Natalie Davis:

Something that I am leaning into right now is believing in yourself, and being kind to yourself, and when you are not able to, find the people around you that believe in you, and let them pour it on you. We often don't ask for help, I think especially as women, and sometimes you just need people around you to tell you to be nicer to yourself, and to really bolster you up. So that's something that I offer as advice to others, if it's useful.

Lori McGraw:

It is awesome. And, Natalie, this has been an excellent Inspiring Women conversation. We have been speaking with Natalie Davis, and, Natalie, thank you so much.

Natalie Davis:

Thank you so much. This has been great, and really love the mission of what you're doing.

Lori McGraw:

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