

Inspiring Women

Episode 70: Kelly Clifton Ogunsanya

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.

I am Laurie McGraw, and we are talking to Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya on Inspiring Women today. In this time we're past two years now of this pandemic. And so the need for healthcare services to the broad needs of communities has only increased. So during these trying times who better than to understand what it takes from a leadership perspective than Kelli. Now she, today, is the chief operating officer of STRIDE Community Health Center, which has 18 locations and provides services for people in her area. We'll learn more about that. But she comes from a long line of really doing services in healthcare at organizations like Optum or Price Waterhouse. And in addition to her work at STRIDE, Kelli also believes in service and helping others with her own coaching services and her podcast, She Needs a Life Coach with Kelli Ogunsanya. Kelli, thank you for being on Inspiring Women.

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

Laurie, thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, great. Kelli, I always start the podcast the same way. What are you doing today? What is your day to day look like at STRIDE Community Health Services?

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

Really good question. And so, as you mentioned, I am the chief operating officer of STRIDE Community Health. We provide primary care services to those in our Denver area community who are underinsured or uninsured. We provide primary health care, behavioral health, dental services, and wraparound services to those who we traditionally would've considered in the safety net and really needing support for whole person medical home care. This includes my responsibility as COO. And so I oversee about 70% of our organization. And we have a team of about 500 staff members here at STRIDE.

And it's a crazy time right now where you are in this period where we feel like we've been in this quasi pandemic coming out of it for the past two and a half years. But I think a lot of organizations are trying to pull up and chart their course forward. So it is a world of running really quickly, trying to slow down, trying to think about the implications, both on a macro and micro level for broader community health. And also just trying to take care of our people who for

so long have been on the front lines, trying to take care of everyone else. And that's a tough challenge to balance on a day to day basis.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah, Kelli, I think we all really know about the pressure on the healthcare system. I mean, you use the word safety net. And the safety net is it seems quite fragile right now in terms of just the needs that are out there. This pandemic that we're two years into just seems to be just continuing to rage. Before we even get into sort of those challenges and how you as a leader are grappling with them, maybe we could just talk about you and how you got to this place of leading such an important organization. I mean, you have a pretty storied career. You've studied public health. You've served public health. You've traveled and worked internationally. How did you get here? Maybe just give us some perspective.

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

Sure, really great question. So I come from a family of educators. My mom was actually my middle school principal. My dad was a dean. First African American dean at the University of Georgia, College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. And so higher education and pursuit for more in terms of academia has always been top of my list. I had a number of family members who were also in the medical field. So I was interested in public health and medicine at a very early age. And in fact, my first job was as a pharmacy technician at Kroger Pharmacy in Athens, Georgia. And I was pretty confident that as I went to college at UNC Chapel Hill, that I was going to then pursue medical school, like many healthcare administrators have that aspiration.

And so part of that journey is that I studied abroad for about half a year in South Africa, researching post-traumatic stress disorder for apartheid veterans. And I fell in love with policy. I fell in love with how policy and research can have longstanding impact on broad populations. And so I decided to then get my master's in healthcare administration from Ohio State University. During that time, I had the opportunity to travel to Ethiopia and work on behalf of a physician who was looking to build a children's hospital and he needed a consultant to help him think through that. And there, that opened the door for me to understand the world of consulting, which I really knew nothing about. And so I ditched my aspirations for medical school, took a job with The Advisory Board Company as my first entryway into professional healthcare. And the rest has pretty much been history in terms of my journey, both on the provider, payer and larger public health side of the business.

Laurie McGraw:

And so how you got there, you sort of drawn into sort of the next thing and the next thing. But in the world of public health, isn't it also true there's just not enough people, money, resources to meet the need, that's only being stretched even further, given the current circumstances of the pandemic? What are you seeing and how do you deal with those perhaps deficits and then lead through to still get up and have the energy to face another day?

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

Yeah, I think, you know what, yes and no. What I think my time and working in really grassroots public health and especially countries in Western or Eastern or Southern Africa have shown me

is that other countries do a lot more with little resources. And I think that we have a lot to learn and still have a lot to learn from some of those countries who really have not even received vaccine or kind of on the last mile of healthcare delivery, but still have contained COVID and other pandemic-related diseases in a different way.

And so I think what is the conundrum and a bit frustrating for where we sit as public health practitioners is that we knew this equity and healthcare gap existed in the United States. And at a time where this was the opportunity for us to close that chasm, it's widen even more. And I think we see that around the disparities in who is receiving vaccine, who's not, and what now that really means on workforce. I think all of us have an example of where we are, have a favorite business that we go to, or school that have had to close operations early because of workforce challenges. And I think we are now starting to see more of the macro challenges that are implicating or, in fact, impacting our communities because of some of that resource constraint and deprioritization of services.

Laurie McGraw:

And so in your work at STRIDE, how do you go about it? I mean, those problems are large, they're systemic, and the... I can only imagine your frustration with the widening gaps given the communities that you serve. What are some of the strategies that you're using to address those challenges?

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

So at STRIDE, we're fortunate enough because of how we receive federal funding. And because of the populations that we serve, we do have early and priority access to testing supplies to vaccines. We were one of the few CHCs, community health centers, in the state that had access to vaccines first. And now even are starting to have access to some of the therapeutics related to COVID-19.

And so the way we try to address that is we offer and have grassroots community health services to all. Not only those individuals who are attributed patients, but those within our community, because we feel strongly about impacting herd immunity and getting us down to mass wide protection. I think the other thing that we are doing is really around healthcare promotion. And so making sure that we have health educators that promote good public health hygiene, community care, and really meeting and getting to individuals who are unhoused, who have housing instability, and making sure that they have the same level of access for maintaining public health hygiene that the rest of us desire to have.

Laurie McGraw:

And also in some of those comments, Kelli, the experience that you have, international, understanding how to use resources, more resources, community resources to help with the broader mission sounds like you're employing that and how you lead at STRIDE. So that's really, really interesting and, obviously, terrific. I want to bring the conversation maybe a bit to you in your ascent to leadership and how that all happened. And just different things that I've read about you, interviews you've done. You've talked about bringing together the person, the passion, and the professional ambition. I don't know if that is a life mantra or if that is just how you have always sort of strived in your leadership growth. But what do you mean by that? And how has it affected how you've approached leadership?

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

I think as I was aspiring kind of climbing the career ladder, the north star for me was the title of the work, kind of the prestige in what I was doing. When I became a mom a couple of years ago, I had this kind of reset and identity crisis of how do I now juggle being a mom and being this kind of corporate working woman when other priorities now needed to take precedent.

And as I started to work with a life coach and work with... talk to other women, what I realized is that we all have kind of these ideas and things that we have in the back of our heads that we want to do, whether it's start a bakery, start a business, become an artist. That might be in juxtaposition with who people see us as. And I found myself kind of delaying joy, delaying my happiness by saying, "Oh, in five more years, I'll do this," or, "When this happens, then I'll make time for that idea."

And I believe that it really stifles happiness. And I saw a lot of women checking out of corporate America or their jobs because they really struggle to figure out, "How do I show up as what my title says from HR when I have all of these other passions that are happening on the sidelines?" And I think it's really important that we know life is short and that when we can figure out how to make those two worlds work together, it really brings a level of confidence, it brings a level of personal satisfaction and just self-awareness that I think is powerful, that women just need to have in terms of being successful with their lives.

Laurie McGraw:

So what are some of the strategies? So the conflict of sort of personal life and professional life. Bringing it together, finding joy in the bringing it together. I mean, there's always been talk about, "Can women really have it all? Is it really a fantasy?" How are you finding a way to bring it together to find the joy?

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

I think part of it is going back to just that statement. Is that a story that we've told to ourselves that is realistic? And so one of the things for me is getting really clear on what voice am I listening to. Am I listening to the voice that I think people want to see me as, [inaudible 00:12:45] that I show up on in terms of LinkedIn or social media? Or am I really going to make a shift to say, "This is the person that I desire to be and I'm going live fully and authentically in that light"?

I think a couple of years ago we had this mantra across all of the business industry of bring your full self to work. And that's a bit of a cliché and I think it's hard for people to figure out how to do that in a way that allows them to remain professional but authentic, and have a little bit obsessed about themselves. And so for me, I had to quiet the voices of what I thought other people wanted me to be... who they wanted me to be.

I had to get really clear on what my personal values were and how do I find some of that satisfaction, both in work, but also at home. Because as you know, there are periods of our careers where we might have challenging moments. We might not have the strongest team or a project that we don't love, and that can't be the be-all, end-all. And so how do we ramp up our personal gratification and joys outside of work to balance and have a full life.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, those are comments that really help with how you feel about your work, how you have confidence. And that's often something that we talk about on Inspiring Women. That's an area that many women struggle with in terms of confidence. So I like those comments. But let's talk about the leadership journey itself. And I don't need to tell you this, Kelli, you know this. But in terms of women ascending to leadership, it often the challenges start early [inaudible 00:14:24].

McKinsey puts out the women at work study every year, every other year. And that broken rung starts early for women. And in particular it is even more broken for women of color. So I like to talk about the stories of, how did you do it? Because you obviously have achieved a level of significant leadership. When did that start for you? What was that first rung? Did you make it happen? Did somebody pull you into it? Maybe just give us your personal steps there.

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

I think I can't... not omit the examples that I saw in my parents and in my family. But I think there were a couple of things that were foundational and I say there's a toolbox that all great leaders have. And I think it's being able to not only relate and build relationships. I think it's a communication skill set. It's an ability to see a vision, but also create it and bring it along.

And one of the things that was foundational to me, although it sounds odd, is 4-H. And 4-H was a program. That's a youth development program across many states. And I was active in 4-H for many years. And one of the key skill sets that I gained through 4-H was public speaking. And so I believe that one of the gaps in terms of that broken rung is not creating enough platforms for women or women of color in particular to feel and have an area of expertise that gives them that confidence building. And to have someone, if they don't have those areas of expertise, to pull them up, mold them, shape them and give them a platform where they can stand.

I think that as I started to climb more and more in terms of leadership, consulting certainly was an industry that was a platform for me because you're thrown into so many different situations with clients, where you have to have skill sets around business acumen, research, really being able to present and tell a story around data and all of those things. If you think about C-suite executive positions, that is a foundational skillset.

What I am starting to see now, though, is that there are not enough core pipeline programs, whether it is for women or minorities, so that they have that opportunity to what I consider feel safe, safely, and really grow in their leadership skill sets. And so I'm very committed here at STRIDE to intentionally building that workforce development pipeline. I'm an adjunct professor at Metropolitan State University, and I teach healthcare HR. And I also recruit some of my students to be interns with me, so that they can see and have that visibility of what leadership looks like and where it can take you.

Laurie McGraw:

And so some of the skills, developing the skills, public speaking, and all of that is terrific. Also, I don't know how you have time to do all of these additional things, but you do in terms of giving back and helping others. But when you talk, Kelli, it sounds easy. It sounds like you just [inaudible 00:17:30] sort of was an easy ascent for you. There's no way that can be true. Maybe an example of a challenge you hit along the way and how you overcame it to break through again in the way that you have.

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

Yeah, it's definitely not easy. And I always think that when you see people's resumes or look at them on LinkedIn, it looks like it was this easy climb, but it's not. And the higher you climb, I think the harder it becomes for you to have individuals that are going to be in your corner and really sharpen your skill sets as a peer. And so I think for me, I had to have some mentors along the way that were what I call seasonal mentors. Individuals that would talk to me and give me some coaching about where I was in life. But also recognize when it's time to pivot and look for other areas of feedback.

I also had to get really clear in terms of some of that inner self-talk. And I think the hardest thing for women when we talk about incessantly the imposter syndrome, but it's really true. And we consistently hear messages of, "You have to overperform. You have to be perfect. You have to play the game, if you will, in order to be successful." And in some ways that might be true. But like I imagine, you, Laurie, have been around a C-suite peers that are very strong and others who may not be. And so the mistake that I think a lot of individuals and young women make is that we feel like we have to know it all before we can take that first step. We feel like we have to have all of the answers of how to do something when intellectual curiosity and confidence can often take us much further than having the immediate answer.

Laurie McGraw:

I agree with that wholeheartedly. And I think having the confidence to know that you don't have to know everything, but framed questions and being curious is so helpful. Kelli, we also... As you were going through all of these other things that you do in terms of bringing whether it's young women into internship programs at STRIDE or helping build the pipeline for the next generation of women leaders, those are all terrific things, yet you still have time to give back and do more. I'm curious, you started this life coaching business, you're an advocate for life coaching. So what is this coaching business, Kelli? And why does somebody need a life coach?

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

Really good question. Yes. So I did start... I became a certified coach a couple of months ago, and it was really based on my own experiences in life coaching and how transformational it has been for me really around mindset changes. And so I work with what I consider high-performing, high-achieving women who feel like, although they present very well, they dress really well, they have met every box on the mark for success, there's still something that is a little bit off internally. And that they feel completely, at times, unsatisfied with where they're heading.

And that goes back to kind of what I was talking about before of having a way to balance both work-life or life-work, depending on how you want to prioritize it, goals. And so right now I focus with a very small number of clients. But they generally are women who have followed a script. They followed what they thought others wanted to think of them. They have now had an awakening where they realize, "Is this the opportunity or the life that I want to live? And how do I pivot to make sure that my personal [inaudible 00:21:11] and my professional ambitions start to align?" And so I'm starting very small with the business. We do have a podcast that we're launching called She Needs a Life Coach. And it's just a great way to hear and give back to women who may be in the same scenario.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it sounds amazing. And I think I need a session personally, Kelli, so maybe we'll talk about that. But this has been such a great conversation. I don't know how you have time to do it all. It really seems like you've got it together. I am inspired. As we close out here on Inspiring Women, Kelli, any last sort of your best advice you might want to leave listeners with?

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

I would just inspire women to use this year... Kind of my mantra is use this year to manifest greatness. You've come into 2022 thinking about an idea that carried over from 2021. This is your year to move it forward. You don't have to have all of the answers. It's just about taking that first step.

Laurie McGraw:

That is great advice. 2022, the year to manifest greatness. We have been on Inspiring Women speaking with Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya. And Kelli, thank you so much.

Kelli Clifton Ogunsanya:

Thank you, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

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