

Cathy: Welcome to It Doesn't Hurt to Ask! a podcast where we talk about fundraising. This season we'll be talking to shift disturbers in philanthropy, people who are shaking up traditional philanthropy practices. Today we're chatting philanthropy with Dr. Krishan Mehta. It's hard to introduce Krishan because he does so many things. His full-time job as Assistant VP Engagement, University Advancement at Ryerson University. He teaches at Ryerson and Carlton Universities. He's the past president of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Greater Toronto Chapter and he recently got his PhD. Can you give us the reader's Digest version of your dissertation? So basically I want you to boil down seven years of your blood, sweat and tears into a minute and a half.

Krishan: On your marks. Get set, go. Okay, sure. I'll do my best. My research looks at how high net worth immigrants are participating in the charitable sector in Canada. So what I did is I spent time with many of the movers and shakers in this field of fundraising as it relates to immigrant in diaspora philanthropy. I spent time with high net worth donors from a number of communities. Those were who particularly born outside of Canada. But, have made Canada home, I spent time with chief fundraisers, have large charities, hospitals, universities, large arts and cultural organizations so that I could get an understanding of what their interests are in terms of working with these communities, but also to understand what their experiences have been and challenges have been as they, have been thinking about bringing on more support to help advance these communities as well. I also spent time with a volunteers from within these communities who were integral to opening doors to philanthropy for these charities. And then finally on the other side of the coin, so to speak, I was really interested in talking to executive directors of organizations that had, , a particular interest in settlement and refugee issues so that I could get a sense of how those organizations are connecting with people from their own community around philanthropy and fundraising. And I learned so many amazing things. But one of the most, I think compelling or deep lessons for me was that philanthropy is really an articulation of have sense of belonging. People give because they want to belong to something, whether it's their community or to a particular class or a particular country. They want to give so that they can say that they are not only contributors to a particular issue or problem or, or innovation, but that they are actually responsible for the imagining of a solution and innovation, a creation. And so for me that was something that, you know, isn't necessarily an immigrant story or a diaspora story. Yeah. But they inspired me to think about all giving as an act of belonging. That's

Cathy: That's really profound. No, it really is. You know what I mean? I've long maintained that in a world where faith communities have perhaps less involvement or less important in people's lives. We are looking for places to belong and ah and our sector provides an opportunity for a sense of belonging. And, and in fact, I think we as fundraisers are in many cases that first line of contact for donors so that they... how they have the opportunities to, to be part of something.

Krishan: Yeah. What was really interesting for me as well in conducting my research was that when someone leaves place of their birth and finds himself in a place like Canada, there's also this tendency to want to still belong to those places they come from to the original motherland and interestingly, philanthropy plays an important role in being able to create that network across borders and it's forcing charities to think critically about their role in a kind of an emerging story around global or international giving. So when I

was talking to many of the chief fundraisers of large organizations, many of them will talk about how important it was that these new emerging donor groups were in connecting their cars to issues and problems all over the world. And so we have a donor who's originally from India giving to a large healthcare organization and that donor through their aspiration to belong here and there contributes locally to an organization, but the impact also serves the place they come from.

Krishan: So that's what was really unique. And you know, this isn't a story that we haven't heard before. You know, we hear this from the first wave of immigrant giving in Canada through the Ukrainian community, the Jewish community, the Irish community, a bit more recently, the Italian community. These are the builders, so to speak, a global movement. So one of the things that I'm very interested in is how Canada, Toronto specifically is in some ways a blueprint or an incubator for global philanthropy or moving around global philanthropy because of an emerging immigrant diaspora philanthropic class.

Cathy: Wow.

Krishan: Yeah.

Cathy: Very cool. Yeah. And so what inspired you to spend seven years of your life on this topic? Like why this topic?

Krishan: Well, it was a bit more than seven years,

Cathy: 10 years, whatever - *laughs*

Krishan: I took some breaks here, there.... a lot of my own personal experiences came into play when I was thinking about this topic is coming from an immigrant family, I was really interested in how my own family's sense of belonging seemed to be conditional in this new place because of our, because of race, because of just all the indicators that set us apart from the mainstream. So tell me, tell me what that meant. It was conditional, so we belonged, but we were always reminded that we are new and, you know, it's interesting, I tell the story sometimes to, you know, parties for fun, but there's... there's some truth to in, into this and a good example of how belonging can be conditional for people. So I was at a fundraising event, you know, work in the room doing what fundraisers do and I had a really nice chat with someone I didn't know as a fundraiser, a sorry, a donor and you know, at the end of the conversation and it was just a nice little, some niceties exchange back and forth, you know, he said to me, Krishan, I just want to say one thing to you, welcome to Canada.

Cathy: Whaaat?

Krishan: And what really struck me at that moment was that he saw me as an outsider. He didn't see me as belonging in the place that I was born and raised. And, you know, when he asked me where I was from, I kind of challenged it a bit and said I was, you know, lived at Bay and Bloor and I grew up in Ajax and I was born at North York General Hospital.

But what it really, you know, it struck a chord with me because I thought, wow, other people see me as diverse. Other people see me as ethnic, other people see me as an outsider. And so I had to really kind of grapple with that and that in some ways I'm colored my worldview on philanthropy, fundraising. In addition to that, I have the additional intersectionality of being gay, have, you know, taking care of my mom and my family in different ways than other families might have. Having in some ways additional responsibilities outside of just my job and my volunteer work. And so, you know, everyone comes to the table with their own perspective. And so I think that's been, particularly instructive in how I see the work that I do every day. And the research itself was informed by not only that lived experience, but the fact that as I was talking about this experience of my own, I was finding other people who had that to Justin, who shared that sense of belonging and outsidership, some of the high net worth donors that you were talking to, or you bet some of those donors told me some stories, some harrowing of racism, of feeling like an outcast of not being able to secure work when they arrived. So they had to become entrepreneurs and in gender inequity. And you know, , within the emerging kind of immigrant philanthropy, philanthropic community, women are starting to also take center stage as actors in that, in that narrative. And I'm really curious about how that's unfolding. And a lot of that comes from a sense of feeling like an outcast or feeling like they didn't belong or having and converting that into a drive to really belong to become almost the model minority. This uber citizen, the one that's gonna actually rock this world through philanthropy. So, you know, it's a, it's a, it's an interesting tale of both, perseverance, determination. But also triumph, but can I say one more thing?

Cathy: Yeah, yeah. I mic's yours.

Krishan: Okay. that comes with a huge range of problems too and issues around power and you know, one of the things that I'm really concerned about as the role money plays in influencing the conduct of an organization, the ways in which we value money sometimes over, what's really right & good. What's perhaps the most dig provides the most dignity for people.

Krishan: So, you mean allowing donor dollars to.... What's the saying? The having the tail wag the dog.

Krishan: Yeah. And I'm, I'm not saying that I found that like, you know, in spades and through my research at all, but I do think it is, there's an opportunity for us to think more critically about the role philanthropy plays and cannot play in problem solving. Interesting. Yeah. And so one of the interesting things that came to the surface in my study was how donors are also really strong advocates for social change. And that in addition to her, beside their philanthropic giving, they also have a powerful voice in changing perceptions and changing policy and advocating with government alongside a charitable organization. So I'm really excited about the potential of this diversifying philanthropy movement because I think it will advance our sector in different ways along with a whole bunch of other things on top of that technology, intergenerational issues, you know, certain activist movements that have come to the surface and particularly the past few months, this is the most thrilling time to be a fundraiser.

Cathy: Yeah. So as I, as I listen to you, I wonder are you able to reflect on all of the people you met and, and things that you learned and do you have a sense of how it changed you personally?

Krishan: Yeah, the, the impact on me personally, it was really profound. I think I come to appreciate the work I do because of the stories that I've heard around how people are committed not only to change but who have worked really hard to amass the power and the resources to affect that change. So, you know, I'll tell you a very brief but powerful story, there was someone I interviewed in my, for my research that, you know, experienced so much racism upon arrival in Canada and even, you know, came from a very poor background back home and this provided a kind of resolve to not only make it but also to support others who had the ambition and drive or just need to belong. And so she spent most of her life saving, investing and working up the ladder to become a very powerful executive where she could use that power for good. You know, when I talk a bit about philanthropy kind of crossing borders. This wasn't just about coming to Canada and making their local environment really awesome and change for, you know, Toronto or Canada. But it was also an uplift communities that they come from, right? And so, you know, that was, you know, most people leave so that they can leave the place they come from, for greener pastures as they say, but they haven't forgotten the pastures that still need greening. And so they really are thinking critically and carefully about giving back. Paying it forward and giving it back.

Cathy: Did any of that change how, how you give, how you.... participate in philanthropy?

Krishan: Absolutely. I, when I make a decision about giving or when I'm confronted with a, someone had an

Cathy: an opportunity?

Krishan: sorry.. an 'opportunity' when I'm given an opportunity to give or invest, I really think hard about who on the end is going to benefit from that. I'm also really quite passionate about philanthropy providing or charitable giving, providing a voice for those who sometimes just aren't heard. And so a lot of my interests in both giving but also volunteering, teaching and learning is about creating a space where people can speak their truth and speak their mind and imagine their future.

Cathy: *introductory music starts* - Just a note to listeners....if you hear some weird noises in the background, it's probably my poodle, Brandy, trying to oversee production of this podcast. *music fades*

Krishan: This leads me into some of the work that you have been doing around inclusion. And when we met around about 10 years ago, I think it was, I was looking for members to join what at the time was called the diversity committee at AFP. And I'd heard about this guy who was doing his phd and I put this in air quotes, diversity in philanthropy told you it was 10 years ago. Yeah. Okay. So my apologies. There was only a mere seven years. Sorry mom. But for years when people would ask me if we were talking about you, I'd say, Oh yeah, he's doing his phd in diversity in philanthropy. I don't know what that

means, but that's what he's doing. But do you remember that first phone call that we were screaming and laughter. It lasted over an hour after all that laughter. You joined the diversity committee. I left it and you took it to heights. I never could have imagined. And, and I know you're going to credit the many volunteers you worked with, but I just want to give you a, the props that you deserve because I think the work that AFP is able to do now on the inclusion committee is, is in large part to the vision that you had. So. So thank you.

Krishan: You Cathy, you started at all really with the group. That was really the brain trust and the, the, the trouble that AFP needed. Right. That's what sometimes diversity is framed as,

Cathy: Right? Yeah. not in an opportunity, but sometimes the problem that needs to be solved. So

Krishan: you know, you, you converted that very quickly from trouble to opportunity and you know, so big props to you too.

Cathy: Thank you. So, so why is it important? I mean, I know I was involved in the early days and I clearly, I believe that it's important, but I'll give you the. You've got the mic why? Why is it important?

Krishan: I'm going to say something really provocative here. It isn't important.

Cathy: Oh good. Alright. Bring it on.

Krishan: Are you ready? So it's important in that we obviously need to live in a world where difference is respected and valued. It is important for us to be able to constantly be challenged by the world around us and to question the status quo. But over the 10 years I've been thinking and writing and engaging in this conversation about diversity and inclusion. What I've come to see is that what's perhaps more important and perhaps what's more life altering is a conversation that we need to have around equity and truth. Equity and truth are the two areas that I'm most passionate about these days. Equity really speaks to how we need to shift the shift the tables around power and voice and privilege where diversity and inclusion pay greater attention to kind of the mix, right? Do we have enough people with different voices, perspectives and backgrounds and experiences that allow us to think differently? And inclusion really is about, are we providing them the space for that? But I'm very interested. I'm more than ever before in how that manifests, manifests itself as opportunities to, , to own an issue, to be able to, , shape a conversation and to advocate change. And so equity really speaks to this issue around power and balance and providing people with an opportunity to think more critically about how they can get more power or share power or give up some power in order for others to be able to, , participate equitably or equally. Right? I'm also really inspired by all of the hard work and energy and effort around truth and reconciliation in Canada and you know, if we can't confront our past and our troubled past, how can we even imagine our future? And so more and more I've been thinking about reflecting on this topic of truth and whether our sector, whether we as fundraisers can actually speak

the truth? Can we speak the hard truth about what it's like to work in this sector? Sometimes, it's an, it's an unforgiving thankless job. Sometimes. There are no guarantees that that donation that you were hoping for will come through on time. Sometimes there's toxic leadership that needs to go. Sometimes there are forces out there that stopped you from doing the good work that you were charged to do. Sometimes there's a volunteer that's driving in directions you don't even want to go, and sometimes you're facing other issues, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, all of these tough topics that enter our sector almost as though you know, they would in any situation.

Cathy: I'm going to add to that. Yeah. Traa informed philanthropy. We, yeah, we, many of us work in sectors where we are faced with serving people who have experienced trauma and the people who are doing service and program delivery are often given the opportunity to be supported around trauma informed care and the kind of work that they're doing and fundraisers are often left out of that kind of conversation and that support. And so I know that Rebecca Davis, this is something that she's interested in and, and it's, I hope a topic that we will talk more about professional wide.

Krishan: Yeah, no, I think that's a really important and almost a taboo topic for, for us, we, you know, fundraisers, I like to think our tend to be very polite. People, you know, easy to get along with. And you know, we generally are personable and, and I think it's really something that we have to grapple with is being able to speak the truth and, and share our vulnerabilities. And so for me, I've really been inspired by the bravery of so many people had to share their trauma, to share their aspirations for the future or they're troubled about the future frankly. And, and I think we need to bring that into the work we do in equity and inclusion.

Cathy: So, you know, when you frame it as equity, it, it makes me wonder, because, you know, I plan on doing a number of these podcasts and having a number of people having conversations with a number of people. , and I've been wondering about how do I make sure that we talk about this topic of inclusion. And I started to feel awkward and uncomfortable and I'm a white woman who walks around the world with a certain amount of privilege. But I thought, well, you know, peer to peer communication is something that we are, , very familiar with and in the world of fundraising. And so I'm, if I'm a white woman with privilege and I'm talking to another white woman with privilege, I should be having this conversation. And yet I'm still feeling sort of awkward and uncomfortable. But when you frame it as equity, I think it allows us to have a different kind of conversation where perhaps guilt isn't a, have as big a part of the

Krishan: Asian. I think there are ways in which we can have that conversation. Everybody experiences or owns advantage and disadvantage are it's well known that women are, there are more women in fundraising than there are men. However, there are more men in positions of power entering the conversation with an understanding of where people see themselves as having power or empower and being able to also have a conversation of where do they see themselves as, , perhaps I'm wishing or desiring more power is important. I think that creates a sense of comradery so to speak. Because, , you know, in my experience talking about inclusion issues, it can be a very us and them othering type of discussion where, well, I don't, you know, I don't experience that. So

therefore I can't relate to that. That you know, you or your, your, your challenges or an. In fact, some people have a really hard time seeing themselves as part of the issue or problem.

Krishan: That's not my issue, they distanced themselves from the problem, but when we are able to relate to one another around this issue of power, I think it becomes a conversation opener. And so, you know, in talking to the straight white woman fundraiser, there is an opportunity for us to talk across difference and perhaps even look at what's similar as a gay south Asian male in fundraising, one of the few in Toronto. I have a lot in common with some of my women colleagues more so than some of my white male colleagues. Right? And so for me, it's, it's that commonality that allows us to actually to support one another and perhaps even advocate for one another. And so, you know, it's, for me, it's, it's about finding that space where we can share where we can learn from one another, but also really understand one another that, that, that really allows for change to happen.

Krishan: But can I make one more point about diversity and inclusion? I am a really strong believer that the reason why diversity and inclusion is so troubled or problematic is that we all have a particular way of approaching this question of diversity myself as a queer south Asian male, and so when it comes to issues around access, I'm looking at gender or I'm looking at a disability or other dimensions of diversity because we've created this category that says you're not a straight white male able bodied male. You are automatically into this one cluster that's so diverse itself. So how can you even have a conversation within that category where you can find anything in common with someone

Cathy: Right.

Krishan: And that's the problem with diversity. So for years and years, decades, we've been trying to grapple with diversity as an opportunity when really diversity is a deadlock issue. Is that too provocative?

Cathy: No. Can't wait to hear what people think. So you're an avowed research nerd. Yes, I am. Yeah. Okay. So am I. I'm mean I haven't....

Krishan: I've seen your library here. It looks pretty geeky.

Cathy: Yeah. *laughs* Yeah. So, why? why, why are you a research nerd?

Krishan: Why am I a research nerd? Every nerd loves this question. I am a research nerd because I am constantly looking for answers to questions and I'm constantly asking questions. This has led me down so many different garden paths, Cathy or the last few years that in fact it's become, a little bit of an obsession frankly, but I'm also really quite aware that we don't know a lot about our sector. We don't actually know a lot about fundraisers or fundraising, at least from, a kind of data empirical evidence point of view. We have a lot of stories to share battle scars to show, but we don't actually spend a lot of time studying the art and science of fundraising. And so, you know, I've been really interested

over the last three or four years, particularly as a, as I was coming to the end of my PhD research and sharing all of the amazing research that exists out there now. It's not necessarily small, but it's certainly hiding from us fundraisers and you know, outside of the great research, lessons that I gleaned from my own study, the biggest, biggest surprise was how much info is out there that we just don't know exists and so, you know, you and there are so many other people who are coming out of the woodwork as research geeks, you know, are starting to band together and think about how best can we not just take that research and perhaps translator for everyday fundraising use, but maybe even create new research questions for us to explore going out into the community, collecting data, speaking to other fundraisers, speaking to donors and theorize frankly, and imagine where we're going, who we are, what is best practice for fundraising? What does ethical fundraising look like in different contexts? You know, what are some of the political issues we need to face? What role do volunteers and boards play in fundraising results? How do we look at the question of collective impact? Venture philanthropy?

Cathy: So that's interesting, right? Because some of the questions that you're asked are the sort of things that many of us talk about, many of us share lessons that we've learned from having done this for many years, but you're right, the hard research on things is a little bit in short supply on some of those issues. Yeah. Yeah.

Krishan: As you know, there's a, there are only a few places where this kind of study or these kinds of studies are nurtured, right? In the halls of academia, in some research think tanks...but for the most part we have a tremendous opportunity to think about all of the different questions we must pursue, in order to not just benefit ourselves as fundraising professionals, but also really to support the charities that we work for and we stand behind.

Cathy: Right.

Krishan: That will make us, I think, better fundraisers, a bit more critical of the work we do instead of "I drunk the koolaid" around fundraising and I just want to do good because it feels good, that kind of stuff. But I do think it's also a chance for us to, in some ways reshape or shape frankly the future.

Cathy: Yeah. Nice. Yeah. Now as it turns out, there actually is a lot of research out there. It's just that it's done. It's being pursued through so many different disciplines that it's really hard for us to find it all. And so there is some movement around how do we curate to a certain degree, a research that's out there, , and not only how do we curate what's out there, but how do we take what's there and make it accessible for practitioners because the truth is not many of us practitioners are going to pour through, you know, how many hundreds of pages was your dissertation?

Krishan: Thousands of pages.

Cathy: Thousands of pages? *Laughs* Oh good Lord!

Krishan: It felt like thousands of pages. Just a few hundred.

Cathy: So yeah, just a few. Anyway, so the point is though, that it's ah, it's not just that the research is out there, it's how do we make it accessible so that people can, can use it. What's most interesting sort of research related thing that you read or seen or heard recently? Like

Krishan: A couple of things have come to my attention that I think is kind of really exciting for the future of understanding our sector. I'm reading right now, I'm reading a book by a researcher based in the UK, an academic named Beth Breeze and she studies fundraisers. She was a fundraiser turned academic and one of the things that I find really fascinating about her work is around the ways in which fundraisers are seen as kind of invisible players within the charitable sector within the game of philanthropy. And so she's really pulling the curtain back and studying us, which is, I find really fascinating. So, you know, I'm halfway through, so I'm not gonna tell you all the secrets. No spoiler alerts, but I highly recommend people pick this one up because it's an interesting, fascinating, enlightening read on who we are, what we do, why we do it, and what other people think about us.

Cathy: And what's it called?

Krishan: It's called The New Fundraisers by Beth Breeze. I'm also reading one more book or I have read a book.

Cathy: Smartypants *laughs*

Krishan: I'm a geek, a research geek. There you go. You asked. You asked me earlier.

Cathy: Two books at once! Smell you.

Krishan: Call me wild! It's called No Such Thing as a Free Gift by Lindsay Mcgoey. And in that book she pays great attention to the role of philanthropy in either doing harm or doing good. And she looks at how that word. That's a wonderfully provocative question. It sure is. It sure is, because you know, they always say that a philanthropy is filled with good intentions, but sometimes it can do harm to and sometimes it serves the needs and the ambitions of the donor, more than it does support the charity or provide funds for a solution. And so she takes a really critical approach to this understanding of philanthropy that we have an really asks us to question what role philanthropy should play in problem solving and innovation in, in a whole bunch of other arenas. And then for me as a fundraiser, it forces me to ask what role I can play for, what roles should I be playing or what role should I stop playing in this entire game?

Cathy: I think those are really important questions. I think sometimes we just believe that we are a force for good and and I think it's worth looking at that critically and although I hate this term, but you know, deconstructing a little bit and seeing where we, where we land.

Krishan: Yeah, or as academics would say we problematize.

Cathy: *exaggerated* problematize.

Krishan: We problematize our work, critical sociologists, problematize,

Cathy: I like that.

Krishan: I'm going to pull out all my academic jargon in just a sec. Hang on, Cathy Mann!

Cathy: Yeah, yeah, yeah. *laughs* I do love it when you're developing the course, every now and again, I'd be reading stuff and I'd call you. I'd say "For goodness sake, Krishan! You can't use that 18 syllable word in your course."

Krishan: I'm like, what do you mean? The course title is Heteropatriarchy on fire?

Cathy: *laughs*

Krishan: *laughs* You're like, no, "how about inclusion?" All right.

Cathy: Oh, if you were to give your fundraiser self of 20 years ago some advice, what would that advice be?

Krishan: That's such a good question. What would I give my 10 year old self? *laughs*

Cathy: *laughs*

Krishan: Seize every opportunity to get to know people that you would never spend time with outside of your everyday. If I could turn back the hands of time as a new fundraising professional, I would spend more time with people who are so intimately connected to the places I worked but didn't have anything to do with soliciting a donor because having a sense of their work, their commitment, their contribution to that mission allowed me to be able to tell new stories about the impact of that organization to donors, to inspire them to see themselves as contributors to that solution as well. This is a team sport and if we don't know our colleagues or our team players, we're never going to win. You know, one of the other things that I've come to really appreciate our all the mentors that I have in my life and if you don't have one, find one but don't just find one, find hundreds, but you know more than mentorship. I'm very much interested in finding and being a sponsor as well as people. And, you know,

Cathy: What does that mean?

Krishan: It was told to me in this kind of very pithy, easy way where a mentor, will provide you with guidance and advice we'll talk to you were a sponsor, will talk about you owe interest at a sponsor, will talk you up, so to speak, big you up right, so that it provides people with an opportunity to learn more about this person they would never have come across before. It's important to have someone on your side who's willing to talk

on your behalf to perhaps advocate for you. And I'm so fortunate to have a number of sponsors who are kind of part of the Krishan met fan club and are looking for my best interests as a professional and as someone who just generally wants to make a mark.

Cathy: Krishan, Brandy and I want to thank you. This has been a delight as I knew it would be. Thank you. And, I look forward to many more conversations.

Krishan: Absolutely. What a delight. And thanks for doing this podcast. And I look forward to the reviews.

Cathy: *Outtro music starts* Listen, you heard Krishan he's looking for reviews, so don't let him down. Give us as many stars as you like, as long as it's five! It was really a pleasure to talk with someone who brings such critical thinking to our work in the sector. It makes me feel like a smarty pants just chatting with Krishan. For any of the resources mentioned in this episode. You can check out the show notes. If you have any questions or concerns you'd like to share, check us out at itDoesnthurttoaskpodcast.com The great music you're hearing on this podcast is dog days by Isaac. My thanks to Anne LeMesurier for making this podcast a reality and generally being so great to work with.

Cathy: And remember, It Doesn't Hurt to Ask!

Cathy: This podcast is produced by poodle party productions *dog barks!* Good girl, Brandy! And Cathy Mann and Associates.