

Podcast Transcript

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. On today's episode I'm talking with the Ajeev Bhatia, Manager of Policy and Community Connections at Center for Connected Communities.

Cathy : Ajeev welcome to. It Doesn't Hurt to Ask.

Ajeev: Thank you. I'm so glad to be here. Cathy,

Cathy : I'm thrilled that you agreed to do this. Just to give people a sense of who you are. Let's talk a little bit about how we met and then you can tell us what you're, what you're up to now. So I met you when you were 15 years old and now you're all grown. Yeah, it was a long time ago. So I met you when I was working with the Scarborough Storefront and tell us what you were doing there.

Ajeev: Yeah, I was, yeah, I was 15 I was living in the apartment towers just a couple minutes away from The Storefront at the time on the other side of a bridge that separated Orton Park from Galloway area.

Cathy : And so this is in East Scarborough

Ajeev: And this is based in East Scarborough yeah. And The Storefront, a little history of The Storefront. The physical building used to be a police division 43 division. And so I growing up and being born and raised in East Scarborough knew the history of that building and so never stepped foot in it. And then even after it was converted into the Storefront, this community backbone multi-service hub, until a friend of mine mentioned that, uh, he got a job through this place. So I said, all right, I'm young, I'm looking for a job. let me stopped by. And got involved, got to learn about all of the programs and services and opportunities Storefront was offering. And one of those opportunities was to be a volunteer with the community design initiative.

Cathy : Right. Just interesting factoid about the East Scarborough Storefront. At the time before it got renovated, it still had a jail cell in it. So when you were there, there was still a jail cell.

Ajeev: There were four jail cells, if I remember correctly. And it was in a bit of an alcove in the Storefront. So you kind of walk in and there's somebody at the front, a

community resource specialist greeting you and greeting you with kind of concave mirrors in the background and these big cylinder concrete blocks that made up the walls of the facility. And then on the left hand side was an alcove with four jail cells and a sunroof for folks with, I think there were, it was full on toilets and, and all.

Cathy : Really, wow. Well need to say it got renovated. There's no more jail cell. It's a much friendlier, warmer place now, now to be. But it, uh, the, the Storefront it made a huge difference in your life. I think it's fair to say

Ajeev: it certainly changed my life 100%, and it mostly was through the relationships that were cultivated during my time there. Um, it was also this, you know, in this kind of area of positive youth development, it was, you know, a key recipe for getting a strong social support network, getting allies who actually saw a future and a vision for my future that I didn't at the time. So it really catapulted me and pushed me in ways I would've never imagined into all sorts of different opportunities and how I ended up here.

Cathy : Yeah. Yeah. Which we'll talk about. And I mean, you know, it was obvious to me and I wasn't as involved, um, with the youth programming as certainly the, the folks who were full time working at the Storefront, but it was obvious to me that even then you are a leader. So, yeah. You've done some really incredibly interesting things since you were 15 years old at the Storefront. So you were a youth leader at the Storefront. And maybe just talk a little bit about the, the sequence of events because you really did do some interesting things and you ended up in philanthropy. Let's talk about that.

Ajeev: Yeah and God, if you had asked me when I was 15 with what philanthropy was... So, yeah, so I, you know, I started off with the community design initiative as a volunteer. Um, and then...

Cathy : And just for the listeners, the community design initiative was...

Ajeev: Was this neighborhood revitalization project that was a super collaborative project where professionals, being architects and designers, met with local youth in the Kingston Galloway Orten Park community consistently for several weeks as part of like a multiyear project. And it was this reciprocal learning program where these professionals were coming in and learning from the young people in the program about community building and engagement and learning about the neighborhood through their experiences. And the young people were learning elements of design and engineering and architecture and looking at blueprints and mapping things out.

Cathy : And even a little bit about fundraising,

Ajeev: And a tiny bit on fundraising

Cathy : I loved, uh, watching that program because I, the, you know, there are some people in the sector right now who I think, who are leaders in the sector who learned so much from being exposed to the youth in the program 10 years ago. Right. So it really was, I loved how it really was a reciprocal learning opportunity.

Ajeev: Yeah. It was, it was a transformative experience for the young people, a lot of whom went off to do work in design. Uh, in, uh, architecture, I didn't tell you this yet, but I'm going into planning.

Cathy : No really, you're kidding

Ajeev: I'm going to U of T in the fall for planning. I am, you know, and I like full heartedly believe that CDI was, you know, the very early days of me understanding how community development and city planning were so intertwined and the impact of that and doing it in a way that's led by community. So it's, it's something that has anchored me and given me values, uh, that I, that I still kind of imbued.

Cathy : That is so cool. So U of T is lucky to have you. So, all right, so you did some, you, you worked with the CDI, you got a part time gig at East Scarborough Storefront. Then while you were off at university, you got this really cool job in the world of philanthropy.

Ajeev: Yeah. And it was completely random. I literally fell into it. I was looking for jobs. It was, every summer I worked, I worked throughout my school year and I also work throughout the summers, um, out of necessity. And it was one summer that was coming along that I didn't actually have a full time gig during the summer and I started freaking out. And so I started going through kind of community newsletters and I think on art reaches newsletter, I saw like a tiny call for applications for like a summer internship at this place called Laidlaw foundation. I had no idea what Laidlaw foundation was. I actually didn't put the connection, connect the dots that they had funded a small part of the community design initiative project. And I just read a description that "Hey, we fund young people in Ontario to do social inclusion based sort of work". And I said, "that sounds cool, maybe I'll apply." And I had applied and when I went for the interview, I was interviewed by Anna Skinner, who Anna Skinner is a longtime friend of the East Scarborough Storefront. And, and I basically shared my story and that interview about why I was so passionate about focusing on supporting youth organizing in the province, really rooted in my lived experiences and it was a perfect match. And so I was really grateful to get that summer internship and to work under Anna Skinner, who really mentored me and was my inner ally in philanthropy. I think we all need inner allies. And she

was someone who championed me way past the internship to keep me a part of the foundation for what would have been just around four years.

Cathy : Okay. So I want to come back to sort of your, your role in philanthropy, but are you, are you willing to talk about your story that, that the one that you share with Anna?

Ajeev: Yeah, of course.

Cathy : Cause I think it, it will inform the conversations we have about your role in philanthropy.

Ajeev: Yeah. And it was, it's this confluence, right? Like I think about the connected community approach where we'll talk about a little later, but it was this confluence of relationships that, that got me to where I am. And I say that because you know, connecting with you through the community design initiative project ended up meaning that you would have ultimately put me in touch with Komal Bhasin. So Komal is a healthcare executive who, uh, who you introduced me to and who ended up really transforming a huge part of my life and being a mentor and now like a big sister. And so when I was prepping for that interview, I was freaked out and I was like, you know, Komal, what do I do? What do I say? And she said, just tell your story. This is an organization that is values based and that is a, is doing and championing communities with lived experience just like you. So tell your story and that's what I did. Uh, so thank you

Cathy : Delighted when I hear that, you know, you and Komal are still, you know, really connected. Yeah.

Ajeev: And so when, you know, I was getting interviewed, I really shared that the reason why I should be on the grant making side of an organization that supports marginalized young people is because I, I, you know, I'm a young person who live, who, who grew up in a household, um, you know, we're poverty was prevalent, childhood poverty, um, and, uh, you know, with a dad who lived with substance abuse issues and a mom who lives with schizophrenia. So it was, and you know, in an under invested community in East Scarborough. So it's really like this trifecta of, of challenges and barriers that I was at the time continuing to try and grapple with and make sense of and position in, uh, in this kind of new understanding of, you know, how systems are set up to marginalize certain communities. And so when I shared that story, it was, you know, I think Anna is really an ally in this space, in that she champions of lived experience folks as the ones who should be centered in decision making. Um, and so to have a person on the grant making side who had lived experiences was I think critical to the foundation's values and to the staff team at the time.

Cathy : Okay. So thank you for sharing that. And I think it's really important for, for listeners to have that background as we talk about, uh, your involvement in philanthropy and your perspectives about philanthropy. You know, the title of this season has shift disturbers in philanthropy. And it's been so fascinating for me to listen to you talk about your experience in philanthropy and, um, and I would say that, uh, you are among shift disturbers in the, in the sector. Yeah. And I mean that as a compliment of course. So tell me about your experience of being a young Muslim man with lived experience of some of the issues that, uh, grants were, uh, supposed to be helping and, and what was it like to be you in? What is a pretty, I would say white environment.

Ajeev: Yeah. A white, hetero, patriarchal. christian environment is really, you know, is what is what philanthropy and the structures and uh, the systems that make philanthropy operate are rooted in. I think it's, it's really important to unpack that and to continue to unpack it and be uncomfortable and unpacking it. And so for me and my experiences, it was this constant, um, unpacking of duality for me. You know, being in these board rooms where people are making decisions on what ended up being millions of dollars a year on, on groups of young people who are organizing in the province of Ontario and seeing how those decisions were made, good and bad, and going back home, being in relationship with the people who are doing that good work, who are experiencing and living through the systemic injustices that those groups were organizing and advocating against. It was, it was so pervasive in my life, the, all of the issues that we were funding or not funding and the groups that we were or weren't supporting. It was something that permeated my entire being at the time. And I can give you a quick example. One of the really powerful experiences that I had while working at Laidlaw foundation was visiting the Toronto South detention center. Laidlaw funds a group called Amadeus and it was founded by Tina Nadia. And so Amadeus goes into, has partnerships with detention centers in Ontario and provides GED and credit attainment for young people who are on remand. And so remand is, uh, uh, is a practice where if a person is charged with an offense, not convicted, but awaiting trial and they for two reasons, either can't afford the bail the judge puts up or decides or if the judge determines that they are unsafe to be released until their trial, then they are in detention with a general population folks. So people who have or haven't been convicted of offenses, I think the stats are around like 40% of these people, uh, tend to be innocent, but they're stuck in remand awaiting trial.

Ajeev: And so, uh, Amadeus went into detention centers providing credit attainment for these people who are ultimately losing years of their lives. Right. And so we got to go inside Toronto South and meet some of the young people who Amadeus was supporting to do the work. And it was a moment for me where I had to pause before entering a Toronto South and send some text messages off to say,

Hey, I'm entering Toronto South. Do you know what ranges, this or that person are in? Because I'm going on a range and.

Cathy : What does that mean? What's a range?

Ajeev: So a range is a space where 40 people who are incarcerated are kind of in. This is, it's where they're detained. And so detention centers are broken up into ranges. Gotcha. So there are like dozens and dozens of ranges in detention centers. Uh, and so I said, you know, would you cause a friend of mine's a correctional officer and they say, well you know, you happen to know if this or this or that person or is in this range cause I'm going into it because they were childhood friends, really close childhood friends. And so that's what I mean by like, you know, being in spaces of decision making and then having to go back home and it being a pervasive part of my life. And so it's the, it's the same part of that recipe that compelled me to continue to do the work that also really made it challenging when the process was problematic in how grants were made. Right.

Cathy : And so what was that like? I mean to be, to be you, to be young Muslim man with lived experience of poverty, seeing this incredibly kind of, you know, as you said, white Christian, heteronormative environment, making decisions, um, on a life that you understood very differently than they did.

Ajeev : Yeah. I what's so lucky to get involved at Laidlaw because Laidlaw is really at the cutting edge of a lot of good grant making practices. And I was in a vacuum because of that, right? I was this really young kid, um, who was getting a, a really hefty taste of grantmaking but from quite a progressive organization that had it ingrained in their DNA to do grant making differently. Um, and so for me it was inspiring and it was so meaningful because we got to...Laidlaw is a small organization, I think, you know, the time that I was there, there was maybe six or seven staff. So what that meant was that I had my hands in all sorts of stuff, from very boots on the ground outreach and communications to like a strategic development of programming, uh, grant making programs and evaluation and those pieces as well. So I had the opportunity to do kind of all levels of the work, which also meant designing grant, making programs in ways that are inclusive and equitable. And so what we got to do, again under Anna's leadership was create grant making programs where young people with lived experiences were meaningfully engaged in the decision making of the grants.

Cathy : So you were very fortunate that you, uh, were at a foundation that was progressive. What about when you were involved in the broader world of philanthropy or foundation philanthropy?

Ajeev: As soon as you step outside the bubble. Uh, and this is, this was family foundations then that I'm specifically talking about, but philanthropic

foundations of Canada I think would be my like arena. Um, if you can imagine the actors who were playing in that space and so more kind of organizational institutional folks. And as soon as they stepped outside of the vacuum that was like Toronto proper foundations doing great work, including Laidlaw, you know, you really, it punches you in the face, right? And you realize that this, this progressive bubble of Toronto and you know, with the lens of private wealth then becomes a homogeneous group of folks. And so for me, it was really about how do we share the practices that Laidlaw was doing at the time and support and at least offered tools to support other foundations and grant makers to be doing grant making more inclusively.

Cathy : Right.

Ajeev: So it really charged me up. Um, it really made me spin off into different things like the PLACES fellowship that I'll talk about in the collective that we're starting to organize around. But it's, it's really about informing and educating the philanthropic sector in Canada about what's possible.

Cathy : And when you say the philanthropic sector, I mean, one of the things that, you know, one of my beefs is that people in the world of foundation philanthropy sometimes think that the universe of philanthropy is just foundations. As a fundraiser. I work in the world of philanthropy that includes individual donors and corporate donors and foundations are, you know, a part of that. So when you talk about, you're talking about, when you say philanthropy, you're talking about the world of foundations?

Ajeev: Yes.

Cathy : Yeah. Okay. All right. I, you know, I, before I read Edgar Villanova's book, decolonizing wealth, um, I had had conversations with you and your, so you and Krishan Mehta and Lisa Watson are all people who mentioned this book. And I thought, okay, I need to get on this. And I heard a lot of your stories and frustrations when I was reading Edgar's book and I think that might've been before you were involved in the PLACES fellowship. But why don't you tell me about this program that you're involved in? Cause it just sounds fascinating.

Ajeev: It was a transformative experience. And again, charged by this idea of Whoa, Canadian organized institutional philanthropy is white male, stale. Um, but there's so much potential. And so how do we shake it up? So, uh, Kris Archie, the, uh, executive director of a Circle of on Philanthropy and Aboriginal people in Canada recommended me for this S based fellowship called PLACES: professionals, learning about communities equity and smart growth.

Cathy : That's clever

Ajeev: It's program of the Funders Network, which is a US-based, a network of funders that shares knowledge, builds connections amongst the philanthropic community there. And so it places was a one year program that was site-specific. So we would go to four sites in the year. Uh, and you are placed in a cohort of 16 other folks who are in positions in philanthropy and the a, it was a Us based program. So it was,

Cathy : Is it mostly young people or is it ever

Ajeev: No, I was, I was certainly the youngest person. There are people, a very different stages of their career and experience in philanthropy there. But the focus was really around equity in philanthropy. And so how do you center that? But it was very much about doing the personal work and, and, and the, the personal transformative work about how you see yourself perpetuating harm in your position, being complicit in perpetuating kind of white centered culture. How do you unpack that and then how does that show up in your workplace? So it started very much the person and then broadened out into what is this going to look like for your organization? Keeping in mind we all had different mandates and different pressures. Yeah. So, uh, I was

Cathy : Sorry, are the members of your cohort, is it a, are they kind of a homogeneous group or is it a really diverse group? Uh, in the, in this,

Ajeev: it was an incredibly diverse, so it will be easier if I say this. There were only, so there were three white folks who are part of the cohort and it was intentional that, you know, in the U S it's really centered around racial equity, right? Or at least a lot of the conversations were. And I think the way that the program was designed, uh, was that yes, it should be a program where people with intersectional identities were the ones kind of being centered in the work and doing the work, but at the same time ensuring that there were allies. And in this case it was white folks who were also part of this transformative process that we were in together. But it was incredibly diverse group of folks, very different foundations, very different identities of folks, really different positions that everybody held. I was the only Canadian part of the cohort, so it was really interesting reciprocal learning as well.

Ajeev: They have, they have the kind of racial equity lens of things down packed and so mature and we can learn a ton from them, but they can also learn loads from us, especially as it relates to how we're centering truth and reconciliation in kind of in philanthropy and foundations here through the commitment to the truth and reconciliation and the foundations that have signed up to support it, but also our practices and how we acknowledge the land, how we are aware of how indigenous practices should be, you know, the things that are rooted in the way that decision making is made. But even just this idea that there is a different

world view of philanthropy and maybe we should be, if we want to de-center whiteness. One way to do that is by exploring other models of philanthropy who has done it before us thousands of years before.

Cathy : Yeah.

Ajeev: So coming so far, you know, the U S folks coming to one of the site visits were in Vancouver. Kris Archie actually held that one. But it, I think it was there, it was very, uh, it was a very immersive experience for the American philanthropic folks, uh, to be really seeing how we're centering indigenous practices in the, in the field.

Cathy : So how shift disturbing is this work and how confronting is it for a sector that is pretty white and Christian and heteronormative?

Ajeev: The work, meaning the fellowship?

Cathy : That fellowship and yeah, and the kinds of practices that you're trying to bring back to your foundations.

Ajeev: Some would say they're pretty radical. um, you know, I think, uh, again, like the radical work happens in the space together with the cohort, with the group, and then, you know, we call PLACES a bit of an Island, right? Because you're in this great space where like, we're really comfortable with being uncomfortable and, and, but then we're asked at the end of the site visit, okay, now go back and execute in your respective role. And so, uh, it was a really great professional development opportunity because it was very much about coaching individuals where they were at along their journey. And what it also meant was like troubleshooting particular issues. For example, you know, one, uh, uh, one of the fellows worked at the white house and one of the kind of pieces of homework to do for this fellowship was to create a racial equity definition for your organization.

Cathy : Wow. He's in the current administration with the white house?

Ajeev: Yes. Yes. So, you know, so he had to go back and he did a great job drafting a racial equity definition and then was met by constitutional lawyers who said, you gotta yeah. Stop in your tracks sort of thing. And so he came back to us and said, Hey guys, I'm fighting the system here. Right? Literally fighting the system. Like what do I do? How do I move? How do we get unstuck? And it was a kind of strategic coaching with the cohort and with the coach, um, around art. Well, what does a win look like if that's not possible? Right? So it was disruptive in the sense that, you know, we are finding different ways to be nimble around opening opportunities for community to be at the center of grantmaking. But

we're doing that in ways that it's totally upstream and going against a behemoth of a sector that is stuck in a way of doing things.

Cathy : I was, I was interested to hear that the story you told about this fellow who was, you know, faced with challenges came back and that so that you're able to kind of bring back the challenges that you're facing to this group of allies and, and get some support. I'd be interested to know, and you may not be able to know this yet, but is there an impact? Is it making a difference? Is it, is there, is the shift happening?

Ajeev: Yeah, I think so. Yeah. I think it's, you know, so what, what's happening is that there is a discourse that is being, that was once germinated and is now growing and growing and growing. And that discourse is really around people in philanthropy or adjacent to it who aren't happy with the way that the current system is designed and are certain to be more critical, especially in a Canadian context of how we can adopt things like social justice, philanthropy or just transition philanthropy and other models that are happening.

Cathy : So what was that? So social justice and what was the other one?

Ajeev: Just Transition philanthropy. But it's something that a friend of mine, John, I was explained to us. Uh, and it's, uh, it comes from I think a South American, I think it's Colombian, Bolivian or Brazil. And it's really a way to, uh, I'm going, I'm not gonna do justice here, but it's a way of supporting foundations to open up their toolbox, toolboxes to be more inclusive and equitable in their philosophy of grantmaking.

Cathy : Okay. And tell me what it's called again?

Ajeev: Just transition philanthropy.

Cathy : Just transition philanthropy. All right, look that up folks, as you're listening to this. So I interrupted you. The question I had asked you was about whether or not you see a shift happening in philanthropy and you were starting to tell that when, um, I got distracted by just transition philanthropy.

Ajeev: Yeah. I certainly think there is a shift happening in philanthropy, especially as it relates to the Canadian, um, kind of space, right? We know the U S is quite mature in, in doing philanthropy differently and have created models of doing that. Um, a Thousand Currents is a great organization that folks should look up that is really centering cross roots leadership in grantmaking and then making decisions by community, for community with pools of resources. Really cool. Um, Edge is another network that supports, that provides tools, knowledge, resources in, uh, I believe countries all over the world, uh, on how to do, how to,

um, embed the principles of social justice philanthropy into organizations. So really cool models in the U S and so when I was doing the polices fellowship, I was really energized to see, well, what's going on here in Canada? Um, are there things that we can adopt? Right. A lot of the criticism is, yeah, we keep looking to the U S but the U S and kind of totally different, they're different landscapes and whatever. So not everything can be applied. So how do we start thinking about the, like how do we start thinking about conceptual frameworks of philanthropy in a Canadian context? Right. And so these discourses are percolating and one of the things that have come out of it is the next generation philanthropy collective.

Cathy : Okay.

Ajeev: Asterisks on the name we're still working through it. We don't know if that's the name yet, but it is this informal network of uh, young ish people who are in philanthropy or adjacent to philanthropy who have a different vision for it in Canada. And so we, uh, it's exciting. We just, um, had last weekend a bit of like a strategic planning day. Uh, so the 10 of us got together from across the province, uh, met here in Toronto.

Cathy : And so I did it just start organically or how, or did somebody organize it? Like how did that happen?

Ajeev: It was, it was a bit of like an organic emergent thing. Um, John who, who run, who heads up a resource movement. Resource movement is a collective of young class privileged people who are either trustees to foundations or have a lot of wealth. And John helps them unpack how to give in a way that is truly equitable and does the work of community. So John and Holly who heads up youth in philanthropy, which is an initiative forwarding students to be grantmakers put together a session at the philanthropic foundations of Canada conference called the youth unconference. And it was a track, a side track. It wasn't a part of the formal, uh, conference itinerary, but it happened before it actually kicked off. And it was really about a group of young people, well attended, maybe 40 or 50 people, people who were trustees of foundations and people who are getting huge transfers of wealth. And then you had people who were just adjacent to philanthropy getting together and talking about what philanthropy meant to them meant to them. And I was at that and that's where I met John and Holly and well, we just started scheming. And so this was what I mean, the discourse around the Canadian philanthropic sector, this is what I'm talking about, right? And so institutions that are thought to be, the thought leaders or the ones holding the space for Canadian philanthropy, like PFC opened its doors and said, have this really radical, really different conversation about the potential of philanthropy as a part of our conference. And that was a huge, huge amplifier of this work, of the discourse. And so that's where we met. And so it snowballed.

Cathy : That is awesome. And so you've had your first sort of strategic planning session together on Saturday where, and anything that you can share that, uh, that came out of that

Ajeev: Tons, we're really exploring how we can adopt different practices that are happening around the world in philanthropy, but bringing it to a Canadian context. And so we're doing a lot of upfront work around doing some analysis of the different conceptual theories of philanthropy that exists, like social justice, philanthropy and the principles and values. Just transition philanthropy and others and taking parts of those that make sense for a Canadian context and really assembling a bit of a bit of a framework for ourselves on how we are, what we're bringing to the spaces and the rooms that we're in and how those are all rooted in, in parts of social justice philanthropy and how we see and kind of the vision of philanthropy in Canada. So, but it can look like very different things. So for now it is what we've heard. It was a resounding, there needs to be a space for people in philanthropy who have a critical lens of it to plug it into because we are operating the operating in organizations and feel so isolated in this work. People who want to see philanthropy done differently tend to be feeling like they are lone wolves in their organizations. And so one of the big things we want to do is let people know that this is a network that exists and we don't have a ton of infrastructure right now. We know we don't have like a formulated theory of change or a strategic plan, but we are an ad hoc network of young people who have a great privilege, who have a great insight into the sector, who have a ton of lived experiences and want to see it done differently.

Cathy : This is so cool. Wow. Ajeev. I didn't, I mean I knew nothing about this man before, before we, uh, started talking today. So that's, well, that's really exciting. I'm really glad that you're part of that network because I think you have such an interesting perspective to bring to the sector because of your lived experience, because of your work as a grant maker, but also because of the work that you're now doing and have been doing over the years, really on the front lines of social change. And so do you want to talk a little bit about what you're doing with Centre for Connected Communities these days?

Ajeev: So, uh, for those who don't know, Center for Connected Communities is an organization that grew out of the East Scarborough Storefront. And really what it is, is a sharing the connected community approach. And the connected community approach was basically a series of values, principles and kind of keys, calling them the 10 keys that really, uh, were the driving force of success of the Scarborough Storefront. And so we kind of did the thing first and then went back and reflected on it. And, uh, and as you know, you wrote the, the Little Community that Could for the Storefront and, and other pieces are now teaching the connected community approach. Uh, we ran workshops and we are practicing it in communities all across Toronto.

Cathy : So essentially you've taken what you learned working in the community of East Scarborough Storefront and now you're sharing it with other communities. Yes. Yeah. Okay.

Ajeev: And it's quite a complex theory and it recognizes every community is different. It's not a cookie cutter approach. It is a like good practice for doing community development work.

Cathy : Yeah. As Anne would say, it's not replication.

Ajeev: Right, exactly. And, uh, and so really our work there, um, you know, there, I'm the manager of policy and community connections and my role is to center grassroots groups and policy and strategy development in, you know, with institutions and with the city and just connecting that to the work that I was doing at Laidlaw. It centers on this notion that grassroots leadership is what should be the driving force and key to informing, influencing and making decisions on decisions that impact to the communities of the people who were a part of what you're talking about.

Cathy : And so I believe that's important. How do you actually make that happen? How do you actually have people in the community empowered to be able to make decisions with the, you know, governance structure that our city and province and country has?

Ajeev: Well, we've been finding is that it's a grassroots leaders are, so we have the local champion network, which is a, a network of a community of grassroots leaders. So grassroots leaders are different from residents in that they, they bring a collective perspective, a neighborhood based perspective to all of the spaces that they're in. They're not coming at it from an individual perspective. So for example, uh, a resident who might be a part of a consultation might be talking about their experience living, working and playing in that community and how it might affect them. Grassroots leaders seeing how are the current initiatives that are happening in the neighborhood, the community garden, the resident groups, the, you know, the Bhutanese festival. How are these things being enhanced and built upon acknowledging that there's already could work happening in neighborhoods when we're talking about city strategy and policy. And so for us, what we've, what we've been learning is that it's mostly about building new process at the city or supporting the city to engage these grassroots leaders in ways that acknowledges their knowledge and wisdom in the spaces as experts and as partners in this work.

Cathy : So I think that's so important that the work that you're doing isn't just with residents and community groups, that in fact you're also working with the

governance structures that we have, um, to help them understand how to engage resident leaders and community members more robustly.

Ajeev: Yeah. Yeah. It's very cool and uh, and funders and so all sorts of folks. So, you know, I think where the magic really happens at the intersection of grassroots groups and philanthropy is really about how are we creating new systems and structures and processes that gets the flow of resources from foundations and from donors into the hands of grassroots leaders who are typically invisible, who are typically under the radar of institutions and charities and who don't have the stuff like the charitable status that you need to receive funds to do good work.

Cathy : Right. So, uh, I'm really fascinated in fact that was going to be one of my questions was how do you, where is that intersection between, in the world of philanthropy, you have access to bureaucrats and politicians at the city level and maybe at the provincial, I'm not sure, but I think that sharing your expertise with the philanthropy community, both foundations and individual donors is a different, well, with individual donors, I think it's real different kettle of fish. Um, any thoughts or have you had any opportunities to do that yet?

Ajeev: You know, a lot of my opportunities to do that have been sharing the ways that Laidlaw has done it because I really do believe Laidlaw has done it well. And Laidlaw has fascinating structure set up. So when we talk about like how philanthropy is rooted in white centered culture, we really have to think back on the ways in which the bylaws of foundations have been written and how they have been written in ways to protect and preserve private wealth as opposed to distributing it into the community. And so what's so unique about Laidlaw is written in its bylaws is that, uh, the founder was really intentional about saying that on the board of Laidlaw there needs to be representation from community. And so instead of actually Laidlaw is a family foundation, instead of having all family members on the board, there needed to be, I think it was around nine community folks or folks who are adjacent to the work of the foundation and the mandate and then three family members. So what that also meant was that the opportunities for grant making were different and the system and structure that they all use was different. So one of those systems that are sort of practices that are used that they've allowed to support grassroots groups is the way in which they, uh, assign contracts to applicants, successful applicants who are grant recipients. So at Laidlaw, we were able to fund individuals directly by at the foundation, by taking on the liability of risk. And so there's a particular contract that was created by a contract lawyer that allowed us to grant, uh, anyone who applied who don't have charitable status, the funds directly.

Cathy : Okay. Oh, very cool. So I'm really interested, I mean, so you're going to U of T in the fall. Does that mean you're going to be not working at a C3?

Ajeev: No. God, no. I don't want to let that happen.

Cathy : So you're still going to continue with, you'll be working and going to school part time. Okay. Uh, I'm glad to hear that because my, my next point is I can't wait to see the work that you're doing around connecting community leaders to the donor community, uh, beyond the foundation community because I think the foundation community, there's, there's a certain set of systems and processes to access them, right? They're public. You can for the most part, figure out how to reach them. Donors, individual donors, they're a much bigger group of people and harder to, um, to reach right, because they're just, they're everywhere. So I'm really interested to see how you connect the community leaders to, um, a constituency of donors who might be interested in something like this.

Ajeev: Shameless plug. We just launched shape my city, my city is inherited by, uh, C3 from Liz and team who originally put the site together to connect a city builders in Toronto. And so when we inherited it, we shifted the purpose slightly to connect grassroots community builders to each other and to Toronto acknowledging that there's a ton of amazing work happening in the suburbs of Toronto. And so what we've done is created a site shape my city where anybody can go on, create an account and map their initiatives and events around grassroots organizing in their neighborhoods and for anyone in Toronto to see. So to your point around how are we connecting donors and grassroots leaders? Here's one way to make the invisible visible and it's a great place to just like look at the map and start checking out who's doing what in neighborhoods and understanding their work.

Cathy : So now we just have to figure out how to get shape my city in front of prospective donors. Exactly. Okay. Well I think there's a conversation to be had with the Toronto foundation.

Ajeev: I think there's been an ongoing conversation to folks over there.

Cathy : So we've been having this interesting conversation about the work that you're doing and the shifts that you're helping to disturb and it implies that that the sector needs to be shaken up a little bit, but why does it need to be shaken up? Maybe that's a good place to go.

Ajeev: It is, and this was a bit of a thing that I really unpack during the places fellowship experience on a Skinner shared with me this great article by Rodney Foxworth, who was I believe based in Baltimore. It's called, why black rage is needed in philanthropy. You can check it online. I'm going, I'm not going to do a justice here, but, uh, Rodney basically tells a story about, I believe it's him who meets with somebody who's a CEO of a foundation they're in, in, uh, Baltimore, I believe it was during kind of the Baltimore uprising time and basically said, look,

our black youth are dying and you have the resources to start, uh, catalyzing some work to move this, uh, to, to address this issue. Yeah. You know, how are you changing your grant making, uh, to, to which the response was, it's not a great time in our strategic planning to start thinking about that. And so Rodney unpacks this piece of rage in philanthropy and it's something that, again, uh, with my lived experiences and seeing how decisions are made and how slowly it can be something that I was really dealing with in my position and time, I laid low. And so it got, it got me to a point of understanding why urgency is so needed in philanthropy. Why we need to be distributing more than 3.5% of foundation endowments. Um, in order to sit on a ton of money that's being invested in the market markets, right? When there are people dying, right? When there are issues and there are systems attacking communities. And so for me, the reason why I think philanthropy needs to change is because it lacks this, this ethos of urgency that the communities that they've made grants to are consistently feeling and experiencing. And so, you know, I think that if philanthropy offers, obviously offers a great degree of privilege and power and it's really dependent on the folks who are in those positions to either act with urgency in order to change the way things are done, to be more meaningful and impactful or to continue to do things the way that they have already been done and not change the way the practices are happening in foundations and grant making has done. And in doing so, you know, perpetuating a lot of problematic issues.

Cathy : Right. Well, you know, I have to say Ajeev that this conversation has given me great cause for hope because I see the work that people like you are doing. And I see the work that Centre for connected communities is doing to give community leaders a platform. And then I see groups like Toronto foundation that are working to show donors a different Toronto and a different opportunity for their philanthropy. And uh, as those two come closer together, I think some important and interesting shifts will continue. So you're part of that shift that's a, that's taking place and uh, I think the sector couldn't be in better hands.

Ajeev: Yeah. Thanks Cathy. And thank you for doing this podcast. Well listen, thank you so much.

Cathy : I'm, I uh, am always really interested to hear your take on things and to um, to listen to what your vision is for, for the sector. So thanks for joining us and for sharing your thoughts, observations and wisdom with the listeners of it doesn't hurt to ask.

Ajeev: Thank you. Thanks so much.

Cathy : I really feel like the sector is in good hands with people like you, leading the charge and supporting the change that I think needs to happen. If you have questions, kudos or concerns you'd like to share or you want to stay up to date

with the latest news, a better podcast, visit Cathymann.ca/podcast and sign up to our email list. The great music you hear on this podcast is dog days by Isaac Joel. My thanks to Angela measurer for making this podcast a reality and genuinely being so great to work with and like my mom always said it doesn't hurt task.