



Photo of Shkëlqim by Carlton Canary

Seattle Metro Chamber – Under Construction with Shkëlqim Kelmendi

Marilyn Strickland Welcome to Under Construction. I'm your host Marilyn Strickland -- CEO of the Seattle Metro Chamber. In each episode, we take you behind the scenes with the people shaping our evolving region. Today, we meet Shkëlqim Kelmendi, who is the executive director of the Housing Connector, a new program that we at the Chamber are incubating. Shkëlqim, I'm so glad to have you join us today.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Thanks for having me Marilyn.

Marilyn Strickland So I would venture that many of our listeners have not heard of the Housing Connector. So let's start with the basic introduction from you about what exactly the Housing Connector is, how it began and where the idea originated.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yes so Housing Connector is a brand new organization. Just a few months old. And it's a business to business approach to tackling our housing and homelessness challenges in the community. So really our mission is to work with property partners throughout King County to increase the housing capacity. And the way we do this is we build relationships with private property owners and incentivize them and provide them risk mitigation to lower their screening criteria and allow individuals experiencing homelessness to access units in our community. The other piece is we act as a bridge between the private community, the nonprofit community and the government sector -- by connecting the dots and allowing a streamlined approach for how individuals who need homes are matched with units in the community.

Marilyn Strickland No. And I think this is really important because the human services sector and social services folks are not housing experts and the landlords and property owners are not social services experts. And so you serve as a bridge between the both of them and you know given your background you know it's a perfect fit. Can you tell us who qualifies to get help through the Housing Connector?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah. So we, the majority of individuals that we will be working to house are individuals directly experiencing homelessness. They may be people that are couch-surfing. They may be sleeping in a car. They may be in a shelter. But it's individuals that are ready to be in units and are ready to be in homes. Now we don't work directly with the tenants. We work with the businesses and the organizations that are supporting them. And really it isn't -- as you said it's not our job to act as the case manager. It's not the property owners job to be the case manager. What we're trying to do is let every organization do their job and focus on what they're good at. And we again bridge that equation to allow property owners to fill their units and to allow service providers to find homes for the clients that they're serving.

Marilyn Strickland Great, and are you aware of this type of program working well in another market? Is there an example that we're mimicking to do this?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah. So we are taking an example from Atlanta. In Atlanta there's a program called Open Doors and they take a similar approach they take a business approach to the challenge and they really bring the private property owner and manager community to the table to open doors for individuals in their community. It's had significant success in Atlanta, and we're trying to replicate it here in the Seattle King County area. Obviously you know it's a different community. There's different challenges. So it's not a one size fits solution.

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So, we're adopting it to make sure that it meets our community's needs.

Marilyn Strickland And why is the Housing Connector something that makes sense for the business community or property owners?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So, so in my opinion I think for the business community to be involved it has to make business sense for them. And this is a solution that directly ties into what businesses specifically property owners and property managers already do. They house individuals. And what we're doing is coming in to make the equation work so that they can continue to house individuals. But it's now housing individuals that are most in need of homes and this is something that they can stay within their sphere of influence but still expand their scope of impact.

Marilyn Strickland And I know one thing that you and I have discussed at the office is the fact that, you know, property owners do not want their units to be vacant. And so by having these relationships, it reduces the amount of time that a unit is vacant. At the same time, it houses people who are in the most need.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi That's right. And that's why this makes so much business sense. It's a win-win solution where property owners are generating revenue because their units are not sitting empty. And then the people who need a home are getting access to home as quickly as possible.

Marilyn Strickland That's great. And I want to give credit where it's due -- because the funding mechanism to do this work actually comes from government. So could you talk a bit about kind of the history of this type of a model and how government is helping fund Housing Connector today?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah. So the idea kind of came from the Poppe report which was released a few years ago to influence and guide the city in the county on how to address the homelessness crisis in our city. And the city, the county the city of Seattle and King County as well as United Way stepped in to fund this model.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi But there was a missing piece. This could not live in the government sector or the non-profit sector. This had to be a business led initiative and that's really when the Seattle or the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber comes in. The Seattle Chamber took a step and said we want to be a part of the solution. We want to take ownership. And help incubate this idea and stand it up and so currently the organization is under the umbrella of the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber. With the support of not only you and the leadership there as well as all the businesses that are members of the chamber.

Marilyn Strickland That's great. And I know that when we talked about this particular opportunity to incubate the Housing Connector with the Chamber, our executive committee was enthused about it. Our board was enthused about it. And it's really again a great way of leveraging our relationships. So as the executive director of the Housing Connector, you are its first employee and you're building this program from the ground up. So what made you decide to take a chance on this startup venture?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi I think two parts. One: the challenge itself. I think very few times you have an opportunity to take something that's from scratch and build it. And for me the way I look at this is -- you know this organization is a is a blank slate of paper that I get to design with the help of others and stakeholders. And make it into something that can truly change our community and our city. And that is exciting for me. I've always tended to get bored doing the same thing over and over. And so the idea of taking something brand new and really driving a vision and thinking strategically -- on not only how do you execute but also how do you build trust with community to get the support to make something like this happen was exciting for me. The other piece is I believe in is the solution. You know we have not made as much progress as I think we should in our community to address homelessness. And we need every tool that we can get to help individuals that are experiencing homelessness. And I think this is a tool that can really leverage again the private community the nonprofit and the government sector to make an impact and move the needle. And so I believe in the approach and the fact that then I can help and drive that vision forward is something that I couldn't turn down.

Marilyn Strickland Right. And you know even though you're not on the human services side of it, could you share with our audience about some of the challenges that renters face trying to find a unit to rent?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah. So it's not enough, you know in Seattle that we have high rents in the Seattle and King County area. So even if somebody has a voucher a Section 8 voucher or they have other rent subsidy assistance -- there's other barriers that keep individuals from homes. Specifically thinking about credit -- low credit scores, criminal history, which is outside of the Seattle area. And also a tenant history, specifically around past evictions. And really what we're trying to do is come in and say, how do we remove those barriers so that those individuals aren't being hindered by past experiences past setbacks to getting housing today? And those are the barriers that the partners we work with are lowering or completely waiving to give access to people that normally would not have a chance to, to get into these private units.

Marilyn Strickland I think that's really important that's why I wanted to have you elaborate on that a bit. So you know, I've seen the business plan that you've written. I've heard you speak about this in public and every time you go out and explain this you just crush it and audiences always want to learn more about it. But can you talk about how you're going to measure success here? Clearly you know, the number of people housed will be you know one barometer. But, but let's talk about how you're gonna measure, measure success let's say a year from now.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Obviously, the number of individuals housed is one. But for me actually it goes before that. It's the number of units that we can access in the private market. So what is our ability to penetrate the market? And then not only be able to access units -- but more importantly, how many of those units can we retain? Because it is going to be key for us to provide good customer service and solutions so that property owners are willing to expand their doors and open opportunities to more and more individuals. And that's only going to happen if we can provide the right service at the right time. And so for me, accessing units, retaining units and then getting individuals housed. But not just getting them housed, how quickly we get them housed.

Marilyn Strickland Right. And also too, how long can we keep them housed.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi That's right. Yeah. That's right. Right now, I think it takes about 87 to 89 days to house someone through the Rapid Rehousing Program. You know, that's, that's a really long time for someone to be in their car or on the street or in a shelter.

Marilyn Strickland That doesn't sound rapid, does it.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi It's not. And again, organizations are working very hard to try to reduce that gap. There are those barriers that they do not have control of.

Marilyn Strickland Exactly.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And that's an area we can step in and really add value.

Marilyn Strickland Again and this is really about building trust and relationships and having strong partnerships. And speaking with partnerships we know that you're partnering with one of our members Zillow to create a platform using technology. So can you talk about what we're proposing and how this platform can be important to the work that you're trying to do through the Housing Connector.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah. I think it's, you know it's not enough for me to just open up a few units. The scale of the problem requires a solution that matches that scale. And the only way we're able to do that is by incorporating technology to create efficiencies in the system. And that's really where Zillow comes in. Zillow has been the key to make this work, and for us to be able to scale and sustain the vision that we have. So what Zillow is doing is they're building a platform that automates the matching process for individuals seeking homes and property owners who have vacant units and by utilizing this platform we will reduce the amount of days that's taking for the matching process for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Marilyn Strickland Excellent.

Marilyn Strickland So you know Shkëlqim, you're out building your advisory board -- talking to different businesses, private sector partners. Is there one issue that tends to be recurring when you talk to folks about this program in the private sector?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi You know I think there is, there is a perception.

Marilyn Strickland Yes.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Of what it means to rent to someone experiencing homelessness.

Marilyn Strickland Talk about that.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And it's a challenging issue. I think first our vision of who is experiencing homelessness has shifted. And you know there's a, there's a lot of debate and discussions happening in our community today. About what do we do and who are the individuals experiencing homelessness. And I think there's some myth busting that I'm constantly doing with property owners about, who are these individuals or families? The truth is the individuals that we're working to house are more related to you and I than we may think.

Marilyn Strickland And they're highly motivated.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Absolutely. And it's individuals that have had one bad break, one medical bill, one job loss that have led them to lose their home. And it's something that we may not see ourselves in. But the truth is over half of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck. And they don't have the savings to withstand a hit such as a job loss. And those are the individuals we're trying to house.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So kind of battling back and pushing back on the myths of what it means to be experiencing homelessness is one of the areas. I think the other piece is obviously we're facing a uphill battle with the rental market. There's low vacancy rates, high rents -- and so being strategic in how we solve this problem and how we enter the market to make it a win-win solution where property owners want to be a part of this program.

Marilyn Strickland And you know, if you're out talking to property owners and you're getting folks on board, clearly they want to be part of the solution. They're open to the idea. And so I definitely want to again commend you for your business plan. You know this is not going to be easy work. But I know that you know you're confident you can have an impact. And so I look forward to hearing from you a year from now. To get your take on how this is going. Now I want to shift a bit about your personal history. And I tell folks that everyone has an origin story. You know my origin story is that my father fought in the Korean War. He met my mother. I was born in Seoul. And this is how we landed in America. And you know your story is very interesting. You and your family fled Kosovo during the Kosovo War when you were only 8 years old. So can you talk a bit about what you remember about your childhood and how did your family make it out?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yes. So really that's, that's my origin story. It starts in a small country in Eastern Europe that I think very few people had even heard about until the war. My early childhood really the memories are mostly positive. And I think that is a testament of my parents and their ability to shield me and my sister from the tragedies that were going on in the country. So I remember the beauty of the country.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi I remember spending weekends at my grandmother's village. And there was so much natural beauty there. And unfortunately the politics and the violence that came in took most of that away. For me, where things turn is really around 1998. That's when most of my memories shift from being positive and happy towards thinking more about what was happening in the country. Specifically in 1999, I think a, a key moment in my life and my family's history is in April '99. We were forced to flee our home in the capital Pristina. And along with thousands of others were put on trains that were being sent towards the border of Macedonia.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And it's tough to explain you know what that feels like. In that moment we weren't sure whether we were going to survive and what was going to happen if you didn't get on these trains. And so in the mad rush of people trying to climb on these trains, my father actually threw me into the train through a window. And as parents out there I don't know how you do that but he made the decision to put me in the train through the window thinking that that was the best way to potentially save my life. And it

wasn't for you know I think it was like 45 minutes to an hour later -- that I was reunited and found out that they actually had made it on the train. And so we went to the border. We slept for six nights on the border of Macedonia and Kosovo. And what I remember about that time is that it rained every single day.

Marilyn Strickland Oh my goodness.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And we slept on the ground with trash bags. Just holding it over our heads. The scenes that you see in movies and that you see happening all over the world of people fighting for bread that was being thrown out of the back of trucks. And so those memories are very vivid for me. And it's interesting cause it's been 20 years now.

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And every time I think about it or talk about it.

Marilyn Strickland It's so clear in your mind.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah absolutely.

Marilyn Strickland So for some of our listeners who don't know the geography of where Kosovo is, can you explain exactly where it is?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Sure. So Kosovo is in Eastern Europe. It's north of Greece, Macedonia and Albania. And it used to be part of the former Yugoslavia. And there was the conflict between Albanians from Kosovo and Serbs -- which led to the war, led to the U.S. NATO eventually getting involved and putting military boots on the ground to stop the genocide that was taking place. And you know even in my family we were able to get out with my immediate family. But my grandparents, two of my uncles and my 14-year-old cousin were actually massacred during the war. And so it's, it's tough to find an Albanian from Kosovo who wasn't directly impacted during that time. It's a small country and really everyone carries that trauma with them today.

Marilyn Strickland Sure they do. And it's, it is a tragic story of survival but you made it out. And you're here and it's just remarkable.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi It's an interesting thing because I wouldn't obviously there's so much pain that that went through that. And it's tough because it also made me who I am today.

Marilyn Strickland Absolutely it did. That's great. So what was it like coming to the U.S. and where did you land when you guys got here to the United States?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So we ended up coming to Dallas. We came as refugees and were placed in Dallas. What's interesting is you know, Dallas actually was scarier at times than the war zone. And part of that is we knew how to navigate a war zone. But coming to a

new foreign country and you know -- even I think a lot of Americans that go to Dallas don't know how to navigate it. Let alone when you don't speak the language and you've never seen a overpass that's 15 stories high like, like they have there. We had a lot of individuals who helped us get on our feet and a lot of support. And just trying to find jobs when you don't speak the language. Trying to get enrolled in schools, find an apartment, all those things that we may take for granted. But when you don't speak the language become almost impossible to do.

Marilyn Strickland So tell us what was like to have to learn English and was the transition hard for you or was it easy because you were so young?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So it was easier for me because of my age.

Marilyn Strickland Yes.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Obviously significantly harder for my parents.

Marilyn Strickland Yeah.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Sometimes you can tell a slight accent that I have but not really.

Marilyn Strickland Yeah.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Whereas my parents obviously have a very strong accent. I think, for me, what was interesting is I was really just thrown into school.

Marilyn Strickland Yep.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And kind of forced to learn. And my first school the majority of the school was Hispanic. I actually learned more Spanish I think than English in the first few months in America. The thing is I didn't know what was Spanish and what was English that I was learning. So I was just kind of mixed.

Marilyn Strickland It was just another language.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yep. I loved watching TV growing up. And so I picked up the language quicker than anyone else in my family through just hearing it on TV and then repeating it.

Marilyn Strickland Do you have any favorite TV shows you'd like you remember when you were a kid?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So I watched a lot of The Simpsons. I'm not sure if my parents knew exactly what I was watching. But I think I watched the Simpsons every single night. I think I watched Friends as well growing up. And again I didn't even understand what they were

saying most of the time. But it was just seeing what was happening on TV and the words that were associated with the actions. And quickly you start picking up what's happening.

Marilyn Strickland Interesting.

Marilyn Strickland So you talked a bit about your parents. Tell us more about your mother and father. And how did they influence you? Because I think about you and involved in the young professionals, you know, you're educated, you have a social conscience. Talk about your parental influence.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So my parents. Well I'll say this. First, the older I get, the more I appreciate my parents.

Marilyn Strickland Indeed.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And the more I appreciate what they did. Because you start understanding just how difficult it is.

Marilyn Strickland And the sacrifice.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Absolutely. My parents. So my dad was a lawyer. My mom was a doctor. So you know they were well educated. Which was a huge privilege that I have coming to the U.S. and having that background. My dad -- who I idolized growing up -- he is one of the most compassionate individuals. I actually remember when we were growing up, he would bring strangers home that didn't have homes that he would meet in the street. And he would bring him home to let them sleep in our house.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi He's also incredibly resilient. And I think that's part of this, based on the circumstances of where he grew up and what he experienced. But he has an ability to be unshaken regardless of what's happening. And it was, it was tough growing up, because when you're complaining to your father who's been through so much, there's not a lot of sympathy.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And what's interesting though is actually more about my mom. I've realized just how strong my mom is. And the things that she went through and that her ability to have so much love and compassionate -- when she was struggling through so much. So as I mentioned, my mom end up losing her two brothers, her parents in the war. And when we moved here, she dealt with that trauma and that hurt.

Marilyn Strickland Yep.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And yet we never felt it. It was never something that we, my sister and I saw. And that it impacted the way we lived our life. She was still happy. Had a lot of joy.

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi But I know now that she struggled with so much. And there's an interesting thing. So in our country -- we say that hope dies last. And what was hard about that situation is actually they never found the bodies of my family members. It was about five or six years later that they found them. And even though I think we all knew -- my mom never could give up that ounce of hope. And it's, you know, thinking back now that hope also I think caused so much pain in her. Because she was never able to truly let go and start healing, the healing process of that loss. But I have so much admiration for them. You know my parents were working multiple jobs as I mentioned. A lawyer, a doctor -- cleaning houses, delivering pizzas. And so it taught me a perspective that I still carry with me today. And really reminds me of where I came from and the sacrifices that they made.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So for me to have this opportunity today.

Marilyn Strickland No, and I think it's interesting. You talked about the professions your mother and father had. But often, when immigrants come to America, they end up taking other jobs. And, you know your mother was grieving. But at the same time she had to show strength for her kids. And so it was, it was a lot that she had to experience. So you went to college at Southern Methodist University -- where you studied economics.

Marilyn Strickland So talk about why you chose that as a major. And how does that inform the work that you're doing now with the Housing Connector, Shkëlqim?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Well my first major was actually astrophysics. And I think after about three months, I decided that wasn't for me.

Marilyn Strickland All right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi The reason I chose economics is just how applicable it is to every part of our lives. You know, we may not think about it, but every decision we're making, every time we decide to do or not do something -- economics is at play. And the opportunity cost of that.

Marilyn Strickland Yep.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And I love that it's transferable to every part of your life. And I learned economics for me was more about problem solving and the way you view the situation as opposed to the theories themselves. It's really applicable to what I'm doing today. Because again, we're taking an economic approach to this problem we're seeing. In this economic equation, there is a factor that's keeping individuals who have units and homes from renting to people that need homes. So how do we make that economics work to kind of bridge that equation?

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And so when I am approaching this problem in my work today, that is the vision and that is kind of the mindset that I take. And it's a mindset that's resonating -- especially with the business community. And to say, we can do good but it can also make business sense.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And I think we're gonna go further that way than simply maybe taking the approach of, you know, open up your unit because there's a need. Like yes that is an aspect of it -- but we also have to understand that that business owner, that small property owner, you know they need to pay that mortgage on that unit. As well, so how do we approach this in a way that's a win-win situation?

Marilyn Strickland No. And that's really important. Because the public sector alone cannot address the housing crisis. We know they cannot build enough publicly-funded housing exclusively. And so how do we engage the private sector and property owners so as you said so the economics work but we can also do good? So you're a Millennial and you're passionate about community engagement. Let me just read your auspicious accomplishments here. You're chair of our Young Professionals Network and that's where I first met you. You're on the board of Seattle Works. You chair the City of Seattle Human Rights Commission -- and you're on the South Lake Community Council. So of course my first question is, where do you find the time to do all this?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi That's a tough one. I think you make time for what you're passionate about.

Marilyn Strickland Indeed.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi I think that's the first thing. So, but there's obviously sacrifices that have to be made. The first is I don't spend a lot of time sitting on a couch. Even though I may want to after work go and just relax. I've, you know for me it's really important to kind of lean in and, and get involved in my community. And so I think it's about prioritizing -- figuring out what is impactful for me and this stage of life. You know, how do I make that work and balance my career, my community involvement and then also my relationship?

Marilyn Strickland Yeah.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Because you can't you know. You can't sacrifice. If you sacrifice one of those -- kind of the entire equation falls apart. And so I put my home life first. My work life second, and then prioritize the community aspect throughout.

Marilyn Strickland Absolutely. And I, you know, I have said in interviews. When I was interviewing with for GeekWire, I said don't apologize for putting your family and your friends first. Because you have to have that grounding to really excel. So what would you tell your fellow young professionals about the importance of what you just described? Active participation and being present.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So this is our community. I think that's the first thing. We can't wait for other individuals to shape this community. We need to step in and be a driver in the direction that our city -- that our country is going in. And I've never been good at being passive and kind of being a passenger in that. And so I would encourage others to do the same. You know we, we have an ability to shape the direction that this city, that our country is going in. That we and our kids and our kids' kids are going to live in for the years to come.

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And so that's something that I think is really critical. The second piece is I would say you know it's really impactful professionally as well.

Marilyn Strickland Yeah.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So, you know, being early in your career, the one thing that I learned very quickly is I can't change the number of years of experience that I have. But what I realize is I that I can change the quantity of experience that I have in those years. And so if you find something that you're passionate about in the community, it's not only a way to give back to your community. It's also a way for you to grow professionally.

Marilyn Strickland Indeed.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And put yourself and operate in situations and leadership dilemmas that you may not otherwise get in your day to day job. And what that does is it accelerates your career as well. And I know that, you know it's helped me in my career. I've dealt with situations through chairing different committees or chairing different organizations. That I did not have in my day to day job.

Marilyn Strickland No, and that's absolutely true. And it's, it's the relationships that you form. It's the connections you make. You know, and I tell folks that you know, when it comes to volunteerism. Yes there is altruism and you want to do good. But think about how it benefits you professionally. There's nothing wrong with that. And it's a good thing when it's mutually beneficial.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Absolutely. And I think part of that is really committing to it.

Marilyn Strickland Indeed.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi It's not about and I think people understand, it's not about just putting something on your resume.

Marilyn Strickland Exactly.

Marilyn Strickland And you really do you see yourself developing leadership skills that you may not have gotten elsewhere. So last year, Shkëlqim, you were part of the Harvard Business School's Young American Leaders program. Can you talk a bit about that program and what you learned from being a participant?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah. So I was one of 10 individuals representing Seattle at the Harvard Business School. And really the goal of this organization is to end this program. Is to bring a different cities together and leaders from different cities throughout the country to discuss, what are the issues that are facing our cities? And what are these solutions -- specifically cross-sector solutions that we can deploy to address them? It was you know, we meet with our cohort here in Seattle and then we all went together to go to Boston with other cities and discuss. And for me the first thing that I realized is that the issues that are facing cities are really complex.

Marilyn Strickland Yep.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And they're not necessarily the same ones that Seattle's facing.

Marilyn Strickland Can you talk about some of the other cities that were part of the program when you went to Harvard?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yes -- so you know one of the key ones that stands out was Detroit. And I remember specifically because we had the conversation of, is growth good?

Marilyn Strickland Interesting.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And the challenges that growth in Seattle is causing specifically around housing and homelessness.

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And the, you know, transportation hub. And I remember very clearly a colleague from Detroit saying, give me those problems.

Marilyn Strickland Yeah.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi They said, give me the problems -- as long as the jobs are coming with them. And you know it's an interesting perspective. Because you have to be careful what you wish for. Yet also you have to understand that cities are in different stages of the cycle of an economy. And when you are at the downturn of an economy as a city and struggling to claw back and attract jobs, attract residents and you know, have enough opportunities for your citizens. It's a completely different situation than we're in. You know, it's tough to say whether it's easier or harder but it's different. And it requires different skill sets to solve those.

Marilyn Strickland No. You know what I like about the Harvard program is that like you said, it gives you context. And a way to compare. Because you know when people think of Detroit, I think some people forget that Detroit was one of the America's largest cities at one time. And well, they're contracting. And so through that contraction though, you know, does it mean that they're able to concentrate on some very specific issues? But you know like you said someone said well, God give us that growth. Give us those high wage jobs. And at the same time, we're lamenting the growth and the impact that it's had. So you know, you lived in Dallas for a while and you're, how long you been in Seattle? And why did you come here?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yeah. So I've been in Seattle for three years.

Marilyn Strickland OK.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi I moved in April of 2016.

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So I have to be careful because of all my friends in Dallas.

Marilyn Strickland We love Dallas.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi We love Dallas. And I do love Dallas. But Dallas is a different city than Seattle. Texas is a different state than Washington.

Marilyn Strickland Right.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And I think from a natural perspective there's no comparison.

Marilyn Strickland No.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi I wanted that that ability to be closer to nature and closer to the outdoor activities that Seattle provides. While also having the, the access to growing city. And I think Seattle's really unique in the sense that you have the professional access and you have the access to the outdoors.

Marilyn Strickland Yeah, the proximity is incredible.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And so that was one of the big reasons. And you know my, my now-wife and I decided that it was time to leave. We were both actually working at the Federal Reserve Bank at the time.

Marilyn Strickland Interesting.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And I think we ready for a career change and just a change of scenery.

Marilyn Strickland Excellent. So you know we talked about you being part of the young professionals group. You're a millennial. You're part of the Harvard Business Leadership Group. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi I think the first I see myself as a dad. And first and foremost I think that's something I'm really excited about. I think the other piece is either one, taking Housing Connector to a national level. And along with our partnership with Zillow, we're not thinking small. We're saying how do we take this you know, test it out here in Seattle, King County. But how do we scale it and take the solution elsewhere? So you know that's one possibility. I think if that's not it, it's probably leading another organization or working with another organization that has ties to the community. I think that's something that's really important for me. And probably something that will be a part of my career going forward.

Marilyn Strickland So let's do our lightning round -- or the get to know you better part. And you talked a bit about the physical beauty of Seattle. But talk about what your ideal day in Seattle looks like.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi I think my ideal day -- probably wake up, grab a cup of coffee or two, and then go on a hike with both my wife and a couple of our friends. Probably after the hike, go grab some Thai food and then finish the day maybe grabbing a beer in Fremont or Ballard.

Marilyn Strickland Is anything more quintessentially Seattle than what you just described?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi No, but you know what, not having this as a part of my life before the last three years, I still love it. It may be something that everyone, that's the answer for everyone but the truth is if you haven't been outside of Seattle and have grown up here, I think at times we take it for granted. And it is something that other communities just don't have. And so any moment you get to go out there and go, go on hikes and appreciate the natural beauty. Please get out there. And do it.

Marilyn Strickland No, I lived in Atlanta for five years which I loved.. And I went to graduate school there. But just viscerally something felt different to me and I realized it's like I'm used to being on or near the water. And so there definitely is something special about where we live right here.

Marilyn Strickland So everyone has a motto. Mine is less is more. What are your words to live by?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Words to live by. I think it would be, loyalty to your comfort will complicate your destiny. And it's something that my old pastor actually in Dallas had said and it stuck with me.

Marilyn Strickland Interesting.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And it's something that you know in every stage of life it's so much easier to stay where we are. And I've experienced this with the decision to take this job and the decision to move to Seattle. But oftentimes our comfort to, our loyalty to.

Marilyn Strickland What we know.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Yes. And would we feel good about actually is going to hinder us from accomplishing what, what is out there for us. And so that's something I try to remember every single day. To not get too comfortable and really stretch myself into other opportunities.

Marilyn Strickland I love it. So one more time, what are your words to live by?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Loyalty to your comfort will complicate your destiny.

Marilyn Strickland Interesting. So you told this amazing story about your family coming here. You lived in Dallas for a while. You're in school now. What is something we would be surprised to learn about you Shkëlqim? I think probably that -- so I love sports. I love sports maybe a little too much. I'm really competitive when it comes to sports.

Marilyn Strickland Oh my goodness.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi And so I try to keep my competitive side of me in control in other areas but when it comes to sports it just comes out. And I love competing. I love regardless of what sporting event it is.

Marilyn Strickland Do you a do you have a favorite sport?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So I grew up playing soccer.

Marilyn Strickland OK.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So I still play soccer. And that's kind of my go to but beach volleyball is another one. You know again I will play anything. Doesn't mean I'm necessarily good at it. But yeah probably soccer and volleyball would be my two.

Marilyn Strickland So, soccer or football would, do you have a favorite team that you follow?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So I, you know growing up in Dallas, I did follow the Dallas Cowboys. Slowly transitioning to a Seahawks fan.

Marilyn Strickland Yep.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi You know when it comes to soccer probably a Liverpool fan.

Marilyn Strickland Right on, right on. Cowboys, oh my goodness. Oh well.

Marilyn Strickland So what's the last good book that you read?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi So I actually recently finished up Boys in the Boat. And it's a book that a mentor of mine had talked about years ago. And I never got around to it. And then after I moved to Seattle it was something that I felt like I needed to know because you learn about the history of kind of Seattle and the University of Washington. And yeah great read. Highly recommend it.

Marilyn Strickland So you know that I'm a fan of music. And I talk a lot about music and playlists. What is on your playlist right now?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Right now. Probably Dermot Kennedy, The Killers and then every once in a while, certain Albanian music that I still try to keep up with probably what's on there.

Marilyn Strickland All right. And one final question about music. And this is a bit about sports. When people play baseball, you watch the Mariners play and there's always a song that every batter comes up to. They have walkup music. So what's your walkup theme song?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi That's a tough question. So there's a, I'll give you an Albanian song.

Marilyn Strickland OK. I love it I want to hear it. And I want people to go look it up so they can listen to it.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi There is a song called N'dardani bjen nji tupan. It's about a basically there's, there's a drum in Dardania. It's a part of Kosovo. And so I love that song. It's just a basically a hard beat over and over again. Definitely go and look it up.

Marilyn Strickland So now in the name of the song and the artist how would someone find that?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Gosh. So it's [N'dardani bjen nji tupan](#).

Marilyn Strickland How do you say it again?

Shkëlqim Kelmendi N'dardani bjen nji tupan.

Marilyn Strickland I definitely hope that our listeners will look up the Albanian song which you described.

Marilyn Strickland Well Shkëlqim, thank you so much for being our guest. We appreciate having you on here. Best of luck to you with the Housing Connector. From what I've seen so far it's going to be a smashing success. And I love the fact that you're thinking big and talking about how you can really scale this up with some good partnerships including Chamber member Zillow.

Shkëlqim Kelmendi Thanks, Marilyn.