

Seattle Metro Chamber – Under Construction with Solynn McCurdy

Marilyn 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 and companies shaping our evolving region. Today we meet Solynn McCurdy, CEO of Social Venture Partners. Solynn thanks for being here with us today.

Solynn Thanks for having me, Marilyn.

Marilyn All right, so Social Venture Partners. Will you tell our audience exactly who you are and what you do?

Solynn Well, Social Venture Partners is a 20-year-old organization founded back in 1997 by a number of individuals who had retired from Microsoft at that time.

Solynn And many of them were new to wealth but did not know, kind of, ways they wanted to give back to community in meaningful strategic ways. And so Social Venture Partners was really birthed out of that with this idea that was two-pronged. One, to help individuals who want to give back to their community do so in very intentional ways through philanthropy, education, through understanding what it means to really dive into the nonprofit sector: be a good board leader, good steward of the community and then alongside that, fund small nonprofits mostly in education, environmental justice who really need support around the general operations of their organizations. And in doing that, have served over a hundred organizations locally in this region, given well over 18 million dollars and have really taken that initiative to scale to be in 42 other areas globally.

Marilyn Oh so you are an organization with a global reach.

Solynn Yes.

Marilyn My God, that's amazing. Well that's a very very big job. And for those who don't know Solynn has had a very interesting career. So he was in charge of community relations and social impact with Premera Blue Cross for a few years. He was director of external affairs at Seattle University for a few years and then he was director of community engagement with Washington STEM. And like me he has a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Washington, and of course he's also a board member with the Seattle Metro Chamber of Commerce. So Solynn, you know having been born and raised in Washington and lived in this area for a long time, tell us about some of the changes you've seen. And let's focus on not your entire life but maybe you know as a working adult, what changes have you seen here in the greater Seattle region?

Solynn Well I think those who know me well know that I have a lot of pride growing up around Capitol Hill and the C.D. I went to Garfield High School and it's been interesting to watch the city in the last 20 to 30 years and the individuals that I grew up with that I knew as I was coming of age, many of those folks no longer live in the city. Either for reasons of

affordability, for reasons of not seeing themselves represented, but there's been a real shift where people of color who I knew very well, you know, they live in the outer parts of South King County and Pierce County now and there just seems to be a completely different kind of community here. It's not a bad thing. You know, I'm not saying that to slight anyone who's new to the city or who has kind of grown in the neighborhood but it's just different. And it concerns me because I feel at times there's been a real level of inequity that's associated with that. And while I feel like it's great that we have tremendous growth as a region and as a business community, I wonder in many ways how we might have done a disservice to individuals who may not have the financial capacity or wherewithal to really have a place here for the long term.

Marilyn Yeah. You know, and I think you're right when you talk about growth is a good thing. I remember for years, you know, hearing leaders in this region say, you know, we want to be world class and then you have the growth happen. I think, you know I mean, and I don't think anyone intentionally tries to leave people out of a thriving economy but that does happen. So, you know, and so that's a good segue way into the work that you're doing. So, you know, talk about the work that you do and especially: How is there a nexus between the work that you're doing at Social Venture Partners and really, you know, what the Chamber is. You know, we are a regional leadership organization. We are a business advocacy organization but we also understand that there are many issues in which we have an interest. So talk about the nexus between your work and the work of the business community in the Chamber.

Solynn Sure. Well so, fundamentally as a professional when you when you look at my career, much of my work has been rooted in being in service to individuals who are historically marginalized and victimized. And so for me every move that I've made in this realm of kind of philanthropy and commune engagement has been a way to be a voice for those, really to have resources and give them power. With Social Venture Partners it's been interesting, I think for them in the last couple of years, well they've done great work in philanthropy and community engagement. There is now a real appetite to further unpack issues of equity particularly around race, because I think funders have been very well-intentioned. Have been stewarded by best practice and yet we haven't really moved the needle in terms of, you know, the major tenets like education and economic development.

Marilyn Even household wealth.

Solynn Household wealth and health and things like that. And so when you look at all of those issues, whether it's income or what have you, race is always the leading indicator in terms of who is not being served. And so many leaders in philanthropy including myself just want to have a different conversation and want to invest in different ways to really break down some of the systemic long term issues. And for us, we've always been a real partner with the business community. I think individuals have kind of come from the corporate sector, have been retirees who may not have a direct tie to the public sector and nonprofit sector. But even moreso, there's a real need now for collaboration because foundations, nonprofit organizations, we can't do it on our own. We need a more collective

approach, a regional approach in the business community, given their resources, their social and political capital, they're partners in that. And many of them have corporate social responsibility initiatives that have real traction. But again, if we could pull that synergy together I think the outcomes could be tremendous.

Marilyn No, I agree with you and, you know, I just think about my professional career over time and you know I remember being an intern at Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco in the 90s when I was in graduate school. And there was just the conversation about diversity, remember diversity was a thing. And then now if you look at 2018, just about every organization, whether it's public or private really talks about equity and inclusion. And we're finally feeling more comfortable addressing race. It's not comfortable for all people. But you're starting to see that come to the forefront of discussion and embedded in core values and people really trying to take it seriously. So in that respect, at least people are talking about it. But I think again to your point: The measurements. You know, are we really helping people build wealth? Are we really trying to address some of these systemic issues that keep people from fully participating in the economy and in society?

Solynn Yeah, I agree. And, you know, I think part of it starts with this notion of: How do we even change the way that we talk about it? The language we use. Because in many ways when you when you talk about social responsibility, we always talk about this idea of giving back and giving, in a way, kind of giving down to individuals who are less than.

Solynn And there is a really great author who's done some work here in Seattle with Marguerite Casey also now with the Shock Foundation for Public Education out of New York. Edgar Villanueva just wrote this great book called Decolonizing Wealth. It is moving like fire across the region and the nation right now. But we just hosted them a couple of weeks ago, and he talked about this idea of giving up. You know, giving up your power, giving up your privilege, paying it forward to those who really are the hearts of the community. And knowing that by doing that you are in fact creating a ripple effect that will affect all of us. But you have to give up your power to make that happen. Because when you have power, you have the ability to change the rules. You have the ability to impact the system. And those who are without power will always be marginalized unless we are willing to give up some of our own privilege.

Marilyn You know, and even the conversation about having a more equitable and inclusive economy. I mean, you know, for a lot of organizations, yes there is the moral imperative, but it's just good business. And the example that I like to use is, you know, Nike said that we're going to have Colin Kaepernick be our front man. Now yeah that was a great statement. But that was a business decision just as much as it was anything else. And so I think the point I'm trying to make here, yes it is the morally right thing to do, but it's also smart business.

Solynn Absolutely.

Marilyn Let's talk about some of the partnerships that you establish because I know that that really drives the work that you do at Social Venture Partners. So you have created partnerships with a lot of social service agencies including HopeLink, NeighborCare Health and Sound Mental Health. Can you talk about how social work benefits from those key partnerships?

Solynn So it's been interesting. Many of those organizations I partnered with during my time at Premera Blue Cross. And the way that that really came about was twofold. One, it was, when I was talking to the leadership team at Premera, again they had gone through this very traditional approach of social responsibility. We're essentially going to fund things that in some ways get to our triple bottom line and make us look good, right?

Solynn And sometimes without real strategy, that results in going to every chicken dinner, going to every gala, going to every walk and run because you can put your brand on. And it's not a bad thing. God bless those who do that.

Solynn It's just not strategic in terms of getting to a systemic long term impact and getting to the root cause of issues. And so in talking to Jeff, who's a wonderful CEO, I love the man. I think part of what he talked about was this idea of wanting to make health care work better. Wanting to make it more affordable and simple and really giving people the health care that they need and understand. But ultimately also driving down costs. For people who couldn't afford it.

Solynn And so as you unpack the data, many of the drivers around cost and some of the leading health indicators, it wasn't about heart, it wasn't a heart disease. It wasn't about diabetes. It wasn't about obesity. It was about addiction. Mental and behavioral health. Mood disorders. Suicide. All things that are rooted in kind of adverse childhood experiences and mental disorders. And so the second piece for me was as I went out and talked to individuals, talked to organizations so that we weren't just talking to ourselves as a corporation. Talked to those who were doing the work on the ground. It was interesting to see the parallel that they said, when you pull back the layers, the areas that were not being funded or underfunded were around addiction, were around behavioral health. And so there was a gap. So for us it was like, let's let's meet this need and figure out how to strategically put resources there.

Marilyn Why do you think that is?

Solynn I'm no expert on that, but I think for many reasons there is a stigma about mental health. There is an assumption that for many of us, it's actually not a problem.

Marilyn Or it's a character defect.

Solynn Yeah exactly. And that we should be able to cope and that-- and I don't think people see the kind of, the interplay, the interconnection with you know mental health and issues of, again, addiction, issues of homelessness, issues of economic stability.

Solynn And so this expectation that we should just be able to deal with our depression or drink away our sorrows really is just a Band-Aid for that for the larger, kind of, root cause of why so many people are struggling. And I think that the systems at play, be in the social sector, where you've got different resources that are trying to help people deal with homelessness and deal with housing affordability, they're not always talking to each other and they're not always working in sync. And so at times you can actually miss the opportunity to really help these people and get them out of their struggles. But we keep, kind of, throwing them through shelters, we keep putting them in these different programs, and not really getting down to the issue of, you know, I might be struggling with some type of disorder that I, if I could just get it medicated and treated and supported, it would dramatically change everything in my life.

Marilyn Yeah. If someone is diagnosed with diabetes, there is a course of treatment. And if someone is diagnosed with a mental health issue, it should be treated the same way. But like you said, there's a stigma there and we sometimes judge people and say, oh it's a character defect as opposed to, you know, a physical illness. So, you know, one thing I didn't talk about when I introduced you, was your relationship with Seattle University. You have a graduate degree there and you actually worked there for a while. So can you talk a bit about Seattle U and what it means to you.

Solynn You know Seattle U is just, they used to say this thing when I was there, because I worked in marketing communications. That Seattle U was kind of, the best kept secret in Seattle. You know, the Jesuit education, the values, the conviction around real, being a real servant to community just always spoke to me. And for me as a student, it was a really nice and interesting shift kind of coming from the larger public institution that University of Washington is. Where Seattle U was both a place where you could actively get engaged in your community and be given very intentional ways to do that, but you also just had access to your faculty members, to the administrators, I mean to leadership. Where you had a real sense of community on campus. And I feel like the experience in the classroom and in the student environment was so rich because of that commitment to that community. And then as a, as an employee there, I was given such a great opportunity to really tell the story of the institution. To be the connector for many individuals in the surrounding area and to work closely with individuals like Father Steve and executive vice president Tim Leary. Where they really positioned me to kind of help them show up as better leaders in the community and have a strong voice about our kind of goals and conviction around the things we cared about.

Solynn One thing that I would highlight which I really pride them on is the Seattle University Youth Initiative, which in many respects has set a tone for how universities can be anchor institutions in a region. The Youth Initiative, in short, aligned with Seattle Public Schools, with the Seattle Housing Authority and with the city office for early education. Because there was a real need around this, kind of, four block radius that included Yesler Terrace, serving Bailey Gatzert, Garfield High School, Washington middle schools. And many of the kids and families in that region just weren't getting the academic services that

they needed. But through that partnership, and through the shift in the housing development at that time, essentially these organizations wrap their arms around those communities and really have lifted them up in some great ways. And while doing that have built partnerships that they never would have established, had they not committed to it.

Marilyn No, and I think that's really interesting. The idea of anchor institutions and, you know, historically, you know, you sometimes saw universities in communities but they kind of stayed secluded and they had barriers and walls up. And I think Seattle University is a good example. I use the University of Washington Tacoma which considers itself an urban serving campus. So the city is their campus. And even the University of Puget Sound, whose president, Dr. Isaiah Crawford, came from, where? Seattle University.

Solynn Yes, he did. A big fan.

Marilyn Yes. As am I. Now let's go back to the idea of all this growth happening here. And, you know, one of the things that we talk about at the Chamber is, you know, we need the economy to be more inclusive. And we see all this prosperity but, no surprise, you know, there are folks who are not benefiting from that prosperity. So if you could think about things that we could do as a Chamber or even as a business community, you know. What things can we do to really help promote the idea of an inclusive economy and bring more people into the fold so they can also benefit from this prosperity that we're seeing?

Solynn That's a great question. I think that there are a few things that come up for me. One is, again, this idea of having a different conversation about collaboration. It feels like there are certain issues that come up that are on the ballot or that has some type of political tie to leadership that's being recently voted in, and that tends to drive certain things that the business community feels they need to do. And I would prefer a much more intentional conversation around, what do we want this region to look like in the next 10, 20 years? And how do we set the course for that collectively.

Marilyn So you're talking about leadership really. Leading on some big things.

Solynn Yes, yes. And I just feel like, there's I mean, just if you look at the Chamber, at the Seattle Chamber itself, there are enough major heads of organizations and CEOs to really take the time to sit down, maybe break through some of the differences, and constructive, and have a real constructive discourse around, what is it we want to achieve collectively for our region? For our organizations, for our employees, and how will that not only get to things that we would benefit from now, but how will that collectively help us and our brand be strong for the future? I think also that there just. There has to be real intentionality around wanting to serve those who may not be part of the dominant culture.

Marilyn Or serve those who've never envisioned themselves as being employed by Company X in a certain role. And I think so much of it is about demystifying what it means to work someplace.

Solynn Exactly. Exactly. You know I think that, again, we've talked about this idea of diversity, inclusion within organizations. But again, to help individuals think about you know, how do I create a pathway to this corporation? How do I, then once I get there, grow in my professional development so that I'm not only attracted but I'm retained and kind of built up in my talent? And then from, not only from a larger business side but from a small business side, you know who are we contracting with? Who are we supporting? Are we looking at women and minority-owned businesses in ways that really allow them to be lifted up and be part of our growing economy? I don't know that we truly are in the best ways.

Solynn And so I would love to think about what that could look like. The last thing for me, just being one that is always having to be out there speaking and talking and writing about my perspective. For what it's worth, I feel like the Chamber can have a really strong voice. I mean you as a leader are setting a great tone for that. But I also feel like given that the membership of the Chamber and the business community, there are individuals who could be speaking up, taking a stand, having a really clear point of view. Again, in ways that are kind of framing a collective agenda but being unapologetic about it. Because I think if you don't do that, then people are going to create their own story.

Solynn They're going to have their own narrative. And many times that narrative might be a very, be of a very negative tone. So why not step out, write some op-ed's, put a point of view out there, have podcasts and see where it goes to really drive the agenda.

Marilyn No, I think that's important. I think that's one of the reasons I wanted to take the time to do a podcast. Because there's, this is an opportunity to go deeper behind the people in the brands. And again, really demonstrate that there is work happening. But we also know that we can do better. So I'm going to shift this more to more personal. Some advice here. So, you know, you're a well-respected leader. You're leading an organization that does amazing work. So, if you were to give advice to a person just entering the workforce right now. What are some of the most important skills that you have to have to be a leader in a 21st century economy? Because things have changed since you and I entered the workforce, dramatically.

Solynn Yes, they have. And it's just such an interesting question. So, I think some of the top things for me. Number one includes this idea of leading with kind of humility and grace. Like not taking yourself so seriously, because you're going to make mistakes. You're going to come out with some battle wounds. You are going to come out with some scars. And many times have to check your ego or ask for help from others to learn how to do better and grow and stretch. It's not, leadership is not easy. It's not something people are born to do. Like, you really are molded into it. And I have only grown because of the great people that I have pulled around me to make me a more humble and better leader. With that, I would also say this idea of stretching yourself and in a way that actually is more about being a lifelong learner. There are always great professional development opportunities, membership organizations, reading that I continually do to refine my craft. To think about, kind of, the changing landscape and best practice that is out there. To just

help me be more informed in my leadership and perspective. And also to be a better, kind of, teacher and coach to the employees that I bring around me. Because they look to me for vision. And they look to me for strategy. And I need to know, kind of, what's happening out there and the best and the latest to inspire them at times. I would also say I think mentorship is huge.

Solynn I kind of alluded to this. I have probably been my very best at the times that I figured out, like who were the five or 10 people that I need to kind of pull skills and learning from. And think about how that is incorporated into my daily leadership. There are great philanthropic business leaders, political leaders who are local, who I look up to, who I have constant conversation with. Who are kind of, part of my kitchen cabinet. And they are the ones who really ground me in this work. And at many times keep me motivated on the really tough days.

Marilyn Yeah. You know, and it's interesting about mentors because we tend to think that it is someone with more experience. And often, it is someone who is your peer and sometimes it's even someone that teaches you something as a mentee. And so it's interesting just to think about the different relationships that you had. You surround yourself with a lot of different people with different perspectives, and you know there is an African proverb. And you talked about making mistakes and it says, smooth seas do not make skilled sailors. And it just really points out the fact that it's going to be bumpy. You will make mistakes. And, of course, the question is always, how do you recover and what do you learn moving forward?

Solynn I agree. Well, and with that, the final thing that I would share is, you've got to find some type of personal passion.

Marilyn Yep.

Solynn You can't. I think the worst thing to do is to be stuck on something that is a chore to go to every day. There's got to be a reason, a purpose behind what it is you do. And even if the current role or the entry role isn't the end goal, there's got to be some alignment there. You know, like I said, I care about serving, kind of, marginalized communities and in many respects, the work that I have continued to grow in is connected to that. And that is what gets me up out of bed every day. That's what makes me go through the blood, sweat and tears, and the hard conversations and stay committed to this work.

Marilyn That is so true. So, I'm going to ask you something. So, you know a lot of people. You are known as a community leader. What is something people would be surprised to know about you, Solynn?

Solynn Well, I think. Many of my friends and colleagues have figured this out. That I am a complete comic book geek like to nth degree. When I was growing up, my grandfather used to take me to Walden Books, for those of you remember that.

Marilyn Oh, I do remember Walden Books.

Solynn And he would always buy me one comic book because I was so patiently waiting for him and my grandmother to finish shopping. And so eventually it turned into a huge passion of mine. Where, you know, I follow Batman and Spider-Man and X-Men and would try to draw them as best, best of my ability and pretend what it would be like if I was ever cast in a movie of those sorts. And so now, with all this onslaught of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC Universe, I think I am a true geek every time a movie comes out. I am in the seat opening night with my kids. And they just love it with me.

Marilyn So on the record here, Solynn McCurdy is a comic book geek and he loves all the characters and the films that come with it. I have to ask you, one of my favorite series on Netflix is Luke Cage. So are you a Luke Cage fan?

Solynn Oh yeah, absolutely.

Marilyn So music, what is on your playlist?

Solynn It's such a mix. Of mostly hip hop, R&B. So anything from Jorja Smith to Sabrina Claudio to Kendrick Lamar. Common. I'm a huge J. Cole fan. I have much respect for his, for his lyricism. So artists like that definitely give me drive. But I'm also a little bit of a, growing up in the church, still appreciate my gospel music. So people like William Murphy and Kirk Franklin and Skywalker. All of that definitely gives me some inspiration through the day.

Marilyn Very cool. Very diverse taste in music indeed. So what is your guilty pleasure?

Solynn I think it's a close tie between nice sports cars, which I don't own but I love and appreciate. And anything that has some type of chocolate in it. I have a horrible sweet tooth and a serious infatuation with anything that's over 400 horsepower that makes a nice growl going down the street.

Marilyn That's great. So, during baseball season, when people come up to bat, there's walkup music. So what is your walkup song when you're up to bat? About to hit a grand slam or do something.

Solynn Oh my goodness. So, you know, I think I'm going to go back to my comic book geekdom. I think the theme music from Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight Batman music would be what I would walk up to. Like dramatic, dark, broody, unpredictable and strong.

Marilyn Something that would completely intimidate a pitcher.

Solynn Absolutely.

Marilyn That's great. Well, thank you so much for being our guest. You have taken us on this amazing personal journey of learning about what drives you and why you're so passionate about the work that you're doing. We are thrilled to have you on the Board of the Seattle Metro Chamber.

Marilyn So thank you for sharing with us.

Marilyn You've been listening to Under Construction with Marilyn Strickland. Thanks for listening in, and we hope you return. Special thank you to our producers Alicia Teel and Maggie Wilson of the Seattle Metro Chamber, and our engineers at Cloud Studios here in Seattle. To learn more about the podcast, visit SeattleChamber.com/UnderConstruction. You can find us on iTunes, on SoundCloud, and if you like what you hear, please rate us and subscribe. And stay in touch! Follow the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce on Facebook and follow us on Twitter @SeattleChamber.