

Transcript for NFOA Bridge Let's Help Robin St James

Bumper music lead in...

KB: Welcome to this 10-minute episode of the NFOA Bridge mini bodcast. N-F-O-A is the acronym for Not for Ourselves Alone, Washburn's motto. And the virtual bridge is located right here on Teaching Tuesdays, connecting Washburn with the Topeka community and beyond through community-engaged learning, also known as CEL.

I'm Karen Barron, Community-Engaged Learning Coordinator for the Center for Teaching Excellence and Learning and host of this series. Today, our featured guest is Robin St James, with program and community outreach at Let's Help. Welcome Robin.

RS.: Thanks, Karen. It's great to be here.

KB: We're happy to have you. So, first, please give us a brief overview of what services Let's Help provides for the Topeka and surrounding community, your overall goals and mission.

RS: Well, our mission statement is that Let's Help is committed to building a better community by inspiring hope, promoting self-sufficiency, and breaking the cycle of poverty one person at a time, and to reach those goals we provide emergency services such as rent and utilities, vouchers for emergency dental care, and help with prescriptions. We have a food bank, we offer sack lunches three days a week, and we have two clothing banks, which, one of which is a career closet, which provides interview and business casual clothing. But the two main ways that we achieve our goal is, the first one is the Older Kansans Employment Program. We provide employment placement services to Kansans 55 years of age and older, and that's the program I work most closely with. I will do anything I can to help someone find and keep a job, develop jobs, provide job skills, teach computer literacy, and then our second one is our tie-in with Washburn Tech. We are a satellite location for the adult education program and, we, because of our location, we are able to serve a different population than the other two facilities, and we offer everything they do including the AO-K [Accelerated Opportunities in Kansas] Program. Right now, we only offer morning classes, and our instructor is Becky Gilliland, and she's been with Let's Help for 26 years.

KB: Well, that's wonderful, and you, Let's Help is very wide-reaching and provides, you know, many more services I think than maybe a lot of people realize, and I know by going to your website, you know, all of those are explained there, and so I, you know, I appreciate your explaining it here.

I know that Let's Help has partnered with individual Washburn students in the past through LinC (Learning in the Community), which was started by Rick Ellis and Kris Hart, and I know that many of their Bonner students have been involved with Let's Help. I'm kind of another end of it, the faculty and classes end. Have you, or would you be interested in partnering with faculty members and classes of students?

RS: Definitely, definitely.

KB: Okay, well, good. You know, as I was listening to, to you talk about older Kansans and just all the variety of, of ways that you reach out to many different populations in the community, I thought of a project that I'd heard of before, and it was to, to take portraits of individuals that are not typically seen in the community and, and make them seen, and this particular project involved like, you know, photography students, for example would take the portraits of people that use your services, whether that is the people that, the homeless population that comes to, to eat, or maybe, just hearing you talk about the older population, maybe it's, maybe it's those people, but, but anyway, someone who is typically not seen and photography students for example could take their portraits in a way that they would like to be represented, and then this particular project, you send these portraits off and they are blown up to big, you know, sizes so it really catches the eye, and then they can be essentially wallpapered on the sides of buildings or something, and so it's very publicly visible, and writing classes could, you know, write the stories of these people or, you know, interview them in some way, so I just see a lot of different opportunities to work with Let's Help and I, I'm excited about, about exploring those.

RS: I am too. I think it's, it would be a wonderful collaboration. We are going to have a new facility at some at some point and one of my goals is to get local artists do a mural or you know some kind of artwork on the outside of the building so this would, this would just be wonderful.

KB: Oh, that sounds great, and that idea, I love the idea of, you know, of using local artists and, and you know publicly displaying their work. I, let's see, oh gosh, I lost my thought on that, oh, I know, it's that with, with the project I was talking about, which is really cool and very eye-catching—that is not going to last forever because, you know, with weather and so forth, our, our wonderful Kansas weather, from the heat beating down on it in the summer to the you know cold and rain, and snow, and all of that, this, the, the paper photographs that would be, you know, on a building, for example, would be wonderful to raise awareness, to have people think about those particular populations maybe in a different way than they had before, but they, it wouldn't last. Like your murals. You know the murals, that could be maybe a precursor or something till you get your murals up, but the murals will last, and we have wonderful murals all throughout Topeka that I, you know, just think are meaningful and add so much to our community, you know, thinking about social issues in a visual way.

RS: Well, when we move, we will probably move into an existing facility, and maybe you've got some architecture or design students that might be interested in helping us get things lined out and figure how we're going to make everything work, and, of course, your, the students in the school of social work, that would be wonderful because, I say this every time I talk about Let's Help, no one ever comes in needing just one thing, and everybody's got a story, and it's just a wealth of opportunity for students to learn and engage with the public, and to have fresh eyes and ears from somebody that's in the classroom. That's a great opportunity, too.

KB: Thank you so much, Robin, for sharing your, the info about Let's Help and for potential partnerships with Let's Help and Washburn faculty, staff, and students. It's been a pleasure talking with you and we look forward to partnering with you in the future.

RS: Well, thank you so much for allowing me to talk about my passion. I love this place; this place made me fall in love with Topeka. Everything we're able to do for people has made me appreciate this town so much, so to get to talk about it makes me pretty happy.

KB: Okay. Well, good. I'm inspired talking to you about it, so that's great. Okay, well for more information on this bodcast, or how you can get involved with Community-Engaged Learning at Washburn, please see the CEL Pillar on the Center for Teaching Excellence webpage, and contact me, Karen Barron, Coordinator of CEL for CTEL.

To Tom Morgan for composing our bumper music and the Washburn jazz band for recording it, featuring Craig Treinen on sax. Thanks! See you next week on the NFOA bridge.

Bumper music fade out