



Kelly Scanlon:

Welcome to Banking On Kansas City. I'm your host, Kelly Scanlon. Joining us on this episode is Father Justin Mathews, the Executive Director of Reconciliation Services, a not-for-profit organization that, among other things provides social support services in Kansas City and in particular the community surrounding 31st and Troost. Welcome to the show Father Justin.

Justin Mathews:

It is a pleasure to be here.

Kelly Scanlon:

So let's just get right into it. Give us a brief overview of what Reconciliation Services is and what it does.

Justin Mathews:

Sure. So we are located at 31st and Troost right on the dividing line. And the best way to really give you a picture of who we are today and what we do is to tell you just a brief story about our history. We were founded by two co-founders named David and Thelma, and they could not have been more opposite. They met in the mid '80s, and David was a Johnson County financial services guy who was from Leawood and was really compelled to do good in his life. So he went down to an apartment building on Linwood and began to do food work for people that were hungry. He was really convicted by the fact that we were hearing a lot about trickle-down economics at that time, and he found that there wasn't much trickling, at least not there on Troost and on Linwood. So while he was there, he ran into a 5 ft African-American woman who actually lived in Section 8 apartment housing and came from the segregated part of Arkansas.

Justin Mathews:

I don't think she finished more than the seventh or eighth grade. Her name was Thelma. And they began a friendship. Now Thelma was already doing incredible work on Troost. She would be the woman at two in the morning who would go out at 31st and Troost and bring the poor and the cold and the hungry and prostitutes into her one-bedroom Section 8 apartment and feed them from her kitchen. And she was doing so much good just on her own. And the two of them met in that apartment building and began to do this work together.

Justin Mathews:

And as providence would have it, they fell in love, these total opposites. Rich and poor, black and white, east and west. And he's about 6'3" and she's 5 ft, so you can imagine they were an amazing and odd couple. But from their love and from the forge of the suffering that they went through in the '80s as an interracial couple, which is a much longer story, Reconciliation Services was formed. He learned a lot from her being a wealthier white man, and I believe that she learned from him as well. But the two came together and really started caring for their neighbors.

Justin Mathews:

They literally just went door to door. This wasn't a nonprofit. This wasn't a church. This was two individuals who came together, found reconciliation between the two of them and began to spread that kind of mercy, love and reconciliation throughout Kansas City. That's how we were formed.

Kelly Scanlon:

What I love about that story is that it so aptly demonstrates or sums up what your organization continues to do. Despite all their differences, they found their commonalities. They found their strengths, and they built upon those strengths, and they brought those strengths out in each other. And that's what you attempt to do in the community.

Justin Mathews:

Yeah, you use an important word for us because we always talk about revealing strength. Our ultimate mission is reconciliation. But as we go about doing that work on the macro and on the micro level, you're really talking about revealing the strength of individuals and revealing the strength of a community. You know, we don't talk about the East Side of Kansas City where we primarily work in those 10 neighborhoods. We don't talk about those as crime infested, weak and broken areas, needing people to come in and to fix them. We talk about them as strong and resilient neighborhoods that have survived unbelievable things throughout the 200-year history of Troost. And we talk about them as having hidden strength just waiting to be revealed. So, for us it's historic discrimination and economic disinvestment that is connected to the problems that we see and the struggles that we see.

Justin Mathews:

So if we're going to attempt reconciliation as a one-word mission statement, both racially and economically, we have to bring that history into our present, and we have to try to find the precious within the worthless and to cast out the worthless and begin to cultivate the precious and to reveal that strength that is there just waiting to shine forth.

Kelly Scanlon:

You have so many programs that you offer. Specifically, I want to talk about first Thelma's Kitchen, which obviously the namesake is pretty evident based on what you said, but tell us about what Thelma's Kitchen is and why there's a need for it. What you're hoping to accomplish with it.

Justin Mathews:

Well, Thelma's Kitchen ties directly back to Thelma and her story in her kitchen right there on Linwood and Troost. Thelma's Kitchen is a social venture restaurant. In other words, it runs like a restaurant, but it's different because our primary goals are not only the fiscal stability and the operation of a business, but we have a very strong social mission.

Justin Mathews:

So when you come into Thelma's Kitchen, we are a donate-what- you-can restaurant or a donate-what-you-can community cafe. We are part of a national organization called One World Everybody Eats, and there are about 50 of these kind of cafes across the country. But ours is different, both in scope and in scale and in the reality that we embrace that it is the reinvention of the front door of a 30-year-old social service and trauma therapy agency. So we literally moved the front door of that agency to the side of the building and made the front of the building this incredibly welcoming and inclusive restaurant that not only fulfills our economic community building work that's a part of our theory of change, but it creates a context whereby you can bring together people and folks who wouldn't ever really meet each other in normal life.

Justin Mathews:

So you've got rich and poor and black and white, people living on East Side and West Side of Kansas City, all breaking bread together-

Kelly Scanlon:

Because anybody can come there to eat.

Justin Mathews:

Absolutely. This is the farthest from a soup kitchen that you can imagine. So let me give you a quick idea of how it works. You'd walk in the front door and you're greeted by somebody who's there to volunteer. And so you get a warm welcome to Thelma's Kitchen and, "Do you know how it works?" And usually people say, "No, I've never been here." Or the regulars know. But when you step up to the front counter, you encounter one of our staff members who will either take a donation of \$3, which is our minimum, \$9 for a small plate or 12 for a large plate or you can donate anything in between. Even more.

Justin Mathews:

Our goal is that those who are able to donate more, pay it forward for those who can't or even sponsor an ID or an hour of trauma therapy or case management that happens on the second and third floor of the building. And those who are suffering from food insecurity and hunger and don't have enough money, we invite them, if they don't have the \$3 minimum to actually volunteer a half hour of time before they eat. And in that half hour, what we're really doing is enabling true ownership and participation. We want to bake equity into the mix of the social venture.

Justin Mathews:

So you have folks serving together as equals when they're volunteering. Some might be homeless and coming to volunteer for a meal, and some might be folks who have plenty of excess time or who are retired and they're coming from Johnson County or elsewhere. These different folks, often when they come together, you've got one on one side of the counter who is usually white and wealthy in Kansas City's context, and you have somebody on the other side of the counter who oftentimes on the East Side of Troost is not wealthy and who's African-American. And so I'm just calling it what it is.

Justin Mathews:

And the reality is, is that that type of dynamic in a normal soup kitchen context does a good job at addressing today's hunger but doesn't get at the root issues, which is the need for equity, inclusion and

for friendship. And so baked into this whole model is not only an incredible restaurant, which by the way, we're 5-star Yelp rated in Kansas City.

Kelly Scanlon:

Excellent. Congratulations.

Justin Mathews:

We have unbelievable food. I mean, I'll put our lunch up against anybody's, and our chef is incredible. But you also have, when you come there, true social impact. Not just for somebody else but for you. Because when you come, your well-being is increased, and your sense of making a difference locally can be so deep and immediate. We like to call it slacktivism. That idea that you can be kind of a philanthropic slacker. You're just having lunch, but you're also having lunch and you're an activist. Every time you come to eat at Thelma's Kitchen or you have a business meeting, you're contributing to solving the issues in Kansas City that hold our neighbors back from revealing their strength.

Kelly Scanlon:

You mentioned before we started talking here that this type of social venture is really not as common in Kansas City as it is in other parts of the country. So how are you helping to cement it further into Kansas City and to create more awareness and stability for this type of a venture?

Justin Mathews:

It's a great question. I think what I need to do to answer that is to just lay a little bit of groundwork about what social venturing is because I think very often the business community doesn't quite understand. Is that corporate social responsibility? Is that charity? Where does it fit on this mix? I like to define social venturing as the best of business, faith and philanthropy for social good. And usually along the way we're creating some market disruption as well, or systems disruption.

Justin Mathews:

So imagine a business that doesn't just create return on investment and then give charitably from its excess, but a business that has really deeply within its framework, even within its Board of Directors, an expectation that you'll not only create ROI for the investors, but that you'll deliver SROI, or a social return on investment, that's measurable, trackable, and something that can be delivered back to the investors who are interested in returning that social value.

Justin Mathews:

Now look, that has an economic impact as well. So it's great to deliver immediate social services, trauma therapy services to those who are in need today. I think of that like the triage in the ER, but nobody ends their journey of healing in the ER. They all end up in that long-term recovery or in some sort of long-term healing. Well for us, we need to be finding ways to self-generate revenue to continue and to scale the kind of long-term recovery that, to be honest, philanthropy can't fill. So when we look at capitalism or we look at business, we like to take the best of business, which I think is its ability to move capital to market and to be able to scale and create meaningful work and jobs for people.

Justin Mathews:

So the issue is in a social venture you're doing those three things. You have scalability, you have jobs and you have economy of scale, but then you're also bringing in social good. And that creates this system whereby we move beyond what some have called toxic charity or charity that is never quite going to go far enough or creates dependencies. And we're getting to the place where we can have transformational and long-term change that everyone can participate in.

Kelly Scanlon:

What are some of the other kinds of services that you provide at Reconciliation Services?

Justin Mathews:

So they really fall into three large buckets. The first would be social and trauma therapy services. The second would be our healthy community services. And the third would be economic community building. Let me give a quick example. Under social and trauma therapy services, we're the largest provider of IDs and birth certificates in the state of Missouri. Last year we helped over 1,500 people secure a state ID so they could get a job, access public benefits, access education for their children.

Justin Mathews:

We're the largest single site medicine cabinet in Kansas City. That means that we're providing all sorts of medical supplies as well as actual non-narcotic medicines for people who can't afford it or who don't have adequate insurance.

Justin Mathews:

We're helping people to access housing. And this year I'm very proud that we've already had eight people who went from homeless to permanently housed. Now, that doesn't sound like a huge number, but if you understand and dig into the amount of work that it takes to get somebody into permanent, sustainable long-term housing ... We did over 150,000 in utilities and housing support. That's a great number, but the better number to me is the smaller one. It's that long-term investment. Once we build relationship and we kind of enter into that triage moment through social services, the heart of the work comes through our reveal trauma therapy program.

Justin Mathews:

That's where we're offering cutting edge trauma therapy modalities that are evidence-based and those are offered donor-sponsored for our 5,000 clients. And every year we have 150 to 200 people that go through that program. That's where we're really digging into the issue because people that we're serving have unresolved deep traumas. They have depression and PTSD like a veteran coming back from war, but the war that they've lived through might've been foster care or hunger or an abusive home or an addictive father or some other trauma. There's a lot of sexual trauma as well, let alone just the violence of poverty itself. So when we're able to enter into a 90-day case management and offer healing trauma therapy services like our kids would get, that is a game changer.

Justin Mathews:

The next thing that we would talk about is our healthy community services. We've already talked about Thelma's Kitchen. That's where that fills. The last bucket would be our economic community building. So, that's where we talk about our foster grandparents program.

Kelly Scanlon:

I was hoping you'd bring that up. Yes.

Justin Mathews:

Yeah, so if you can imagine almost 100 seasoned adults who are over the age of 55, which doesn't seem that old anymore, and those folks unfortunately are all living 200% below the federal poverty line. So those 100 people in Kansas City are having a really difficult time aging in place. What we do is we bring those folks together monthly. We do an inservice and we build community, we offer training, and then we deploy them like an army of grandmas and grandpas into 31 different schools across Jackson, Clay and Platte County. And they work with three or four kids each to love them in the classroom. So in the aggregate, that's over \$1.1 million of social impact benefit that we're offering to KC, MO schools and those other public schools. It's transformational.

Kelly Scanlon:

You have another program that is set to launch this spring sometime, but it is involving the businesses in Kansas City. Talk to us about that program.

Justin Mathews:

So our theory of change is not only to bring forth strategies for client guests, but also to bring forth strategies for what we call our partner guests or people who don't need our services. But again, bringing both sides of the table. So this new program, we're so excited, and we've actually been talking to the bank here and to some of your customers about participating. The program is called the 12X Leader Program. And a 12X Leader is somebody who is striving to not only do well economically, but to do good at the same time. And so the program is an experiential learning program where you're building a massive network of people who are thinking like you're thinking about how to build community and do good while you're doing well, but it's also a chance for a leadership up close. You might think of it as a follow-on to the Chamber's Centurion's Program or to the KC Tomorrow program at Civic Council.

Justin Mathews:

And so the difference might be that it's available not only to C-Suite executives, but to anybody. We're looking for 12 founding companies, and those 12 companies would each put five people into the program this year and it would be \$5,000 a person. But think about that. \$5,000 over the course of 12 months is less than 2.50 a month. I mean, it's incredible value.

Justin Mathews:

Let me tell you what the program will deliver though. It's going to deliver real tactics and real training while building a network for the individual so that they hone and sharpen their leadership skills with regard to the areas of social impact and the social context that we operate in, in Kansas City. Here's why that's important. There's a lot of effort being put right now into what might be called second chance employment. There's a lot of need in a very tight labor market to hire diverse and highly sought-after candidates to work.

Justin Mathews:

People want airport jobs, and they need to hire men and women of color and they need to retain those folks. There's millions of dollars being spent on building a more diverse workforce all across Kansas City. The problem is, is that we're putting all of our resources into the training of those candidates. The question is what resources are we putting into training our leaders and our foremen and our companies

to be able to adequately lead and respond to and retain those employees who come with very great skill sets but different backgrounds and struggles than other employees who haven't struggled in the same way?

Kelly Scanlon:

Bingo.

Justin Mathews:

By and large, we can't categorically say all men and women of color come with that background.

Kelly Scanlon:

No, no, no, no.

Justin Mathews:

That would be ridiculous. But the reality is, is that there are low skill, lower wage entry level jobs that are not being filled and people are losing economic opportunities regionally. And we have 5,000 clients a year just in our agency who are looking for meaningful life work and a living wage.

Kelly Scanlon:

How can our listeners engage with reconciliation services?

Justin Mathews:

We would love to have folks go to our website at rs3101.org. We have an incredible website with a ton of short videos where they can really begin the education process of having a deeper understanding of what we do and also having a deeper understanding of who our neighbors are, who their neighbors are in Kansas City. In addition to that, you can go to thelmaskitchen.org. You can see the menu. You can see the beautiful and incredible 5-Star Yelp rated food that we offer every lunch between 11:00 AM and 2:00 PM Monday through Friday. You can come and just eat lunch at Thelma's Kitchen. That's a great starting place. You can move from there to become a volunteer in Thelma's Kitchen. Here's the cool thing. We give you an app, and you schedule when you want to come down. It's on your own.

Kelly Scanlon:

Very convenient.

Justin Mathews:

Yeah. Once you go through the orientation and you get access to the app, it's web enabled. You decide when you come and when you can't come. We have folks from the corporate community who want to come down once a week, and we have folks who want to come once a year. The next level of engagement for, particularly for an audience that might be a group or a corporate audience, would be to become a LunchOnMeKC sponsor. That's an incredible program, kind of a taste of the 12 X Leader content where we're going to deliver an hour of orientation and curriculum that comes from the 12X Leader. Then you're going to put an apron on, and your team of eight to 12 is going to come and run Thelma's Kitchen and have a totally amazing team building experience.

Justin Mathews:

We ask people for only \$1,200, and so if you take that kind of quality of trauma-informed care and diversity training and you smash it together with an hour-and-a-half to three-hour long team building experience, you're getting all that for \$1200. By the way, again, that \$1200 goes right back into our programming. I would challenge an HR director for any company to find something as valuable as that. And by the way, it's a ton of fun.

Justin Mathews:

And so last year we did that with 43 companies. It was unbelievable. So, that's a next level engagement. And then of course from there, participating and signing up for the 12X Leader program. Here's the last really cool thing I want to mention. We just launched this year our newest social venture in addition to the 12X Leader, and it's called Thelma's Kitchen Box Lunch Co. So we are bringing forward a box lunch social venture, where you can find on thelmaskitchen.org the way to email in an order. The box lunches are \$10 a piece. I'm sure that your listeners are ordering hundreds of box lunches a year. And we would love to put our incredible food from Thelma's Kitchen into your office where you can really drive home your corporate social responsibility while you're doing your meetings. And by the way, incredible food from Thelma's Kitchen.

Kelly Scanlon:

Oh yes, but you're spreading the word to their clients who eat it when they want to know where it came from. Then they get to hear about Thelma's Kitchen or the other employees there. Yeah, brilliant strategy.

Justin Mathews:

Thank you. Well, we are so grateful for Kansas City and especially the corporate community in Kansas City who has truly embraced Reconciliation Services and Thelma's Kitchen and who are the ones who are making the difference. We are there as trauma therapists, as social workers, as social venturers, but we're not the ones who put the gas in the gas tank. It's the donor. It's the patron at Thelma's. It's the corporate community who is participating in the 12X Leader Program or donating philanthropically. You are the ones who are making the difference, and we are eternally grateful for the work that you're doing at Reconciliation Services.

Kelly Scanlon:

Father Justin Mathews, Reconciliation Services. The website is rs3101.org. You can go out there and find everything he's talked about today and probably more as well. Father Justin, thank you so much for all the work that you do here in Kansas City.

Justin Mathews:

Thank you, and thank you on behalf of all of those we serve.

Joe Close:

Doing good and doing it well is something that we live by here at Country Club Bank, and it's also something that Father Justin Mathews and Reconciliation Services live by. As their mission states, Reconciliation Services aims to cultivate the community seeking reconciliation, to transform Troost from a dividing line into a gathering place, revealing the strength of all.

Joe Close:

And with Thelma's Kitchen, Kansas City's first donate-what-you-can cafe, Father Justin and his team are doubling down on that mission. Thelma's Kitchen was founded to meet the needs of the neighborhood, providing affordable food access and to reconcile the division along the Troost Corridor. As Father Justin says, "When we serve together and sit and share a meal together, you begin to understand what it means to be a community." I encourage you to visit Thelma's Kitchen and grab lunch. You might consider buying your neighbor lunch and you might just find a new friend.

Joe Close:

Thanks for tuning in this week. We're banking on you, Kansas City. Country Club Bank, member FDIC.