



Kelly Scanlon:

Welcome to Banking on KC. I'm your host Kelly Scanlon. Joining us on this episode is Mary Esselman, the CEO of Operation Breakthrough, a nationally accredited not for profit corporation that began in 1971 by Sister Corita and Sister Berta and they started that as a response to requests from parents in the central city for quality childcare for children of the working poor. Welcome to the show today Mary.

Mary Esselman:

Thanks for having me.

Kelly Scanlon:

What is Operation Breakthrough? What does it do? I know it's expanded over the years.

Mary Esselman:

Well as you mentioned it was started by two nuns who were teaching on the east side of Kansas City and a couple of parents came to them and said, "Hey we have no one to watch our children while we're at work." The sisters thought about it and they thought you know what we've got this and we've got space and so they started out with four children and before you know it the four turned into 40 and turned into 400 and then recently actually expanded to close to 700 children and families. We're actually the largest early learning center in the region and I think what makes it really unique is the fact that we include education, social services and health for the children and families that we serve.

Kelly Scanlon:

You take a very wholistic approach to the child.

Mary Esselman:

Exactly. It's really two generational. We're not just working with the kids. We are working with the whole family. That's one of those mission components that was there at the beginning and is still there today. I think the sisters really understood that what happened outside these doors was just as critical as what happens inside the doors. What you find is every family that enrolls in Operation Breakthrough were organized into neighborhoods. They're not geographic, but basically where families build relationships from the time their child is a baby all the way through the time when they leave us as age 14.

Mary Esselman:

Each of those neighborhoods has a licensed social worker who we call a family advocate. There's a child and family therapist who works with families and then obviously the teachers who provide the early learning education and as children go off to school before and after care.

Kelly Scanlon:

One of the things that I recall, we talked about the two sisters starting this in 1971, Byron Thompson past chair of Country Club Bank played a role in that. Can you tell us that story?

Mary Esselman:

That is actually a great story. In fact, it's highlighted in a book that was recently published by the Family Foundation called *Angels with Angles: The Rogue Nuns Behind Operation Breakthrough*. I think the story with Bryon would probably fit. It's actually in chapter eight of the book. Basically the sisters once they started to run the school independent, it was called Saint Vincent's independent of the church, they really had to raise money. There was a gas station that had been run by Saint Vincent's Church and the lease was up and the sisters thought this would be a great way for us to earn money for the school. They thought we'll just go get a loan and this will be our way of raising money.

Mary Esselman:

They of course they started making the rounds and no one was too keen on lending the sisters money because they just had no history. They had no credit. They finally got to Byron. When they went in and explained the mission and what they were doing, he said, "You know what the bank can't loan you money but my wife and I will." That was the start of a relationship that's gone on for nearly 50 years with Country Club.

Kelly Scanlon:

What a great story and so they bought the gas station and as I recall they were able to use that too. They got the kids. They were starting to teach the kids skills by having the kids work at the gas station too, right?

Mary Esselman:

Oh, absolutely. Not only were all of the staff pumping gas, but the seventh and eighth graders helped pump gas. They had to do the accounting. Imagine all of the real world skills they were learning. There are a couple of stories where it was in a difficult part of town and so there were a couple of cases where there were a few challenges they encountered but what a great story.

Kelly Scanlon:

We talked a little bit about the wholistic approach that involves two generations and that you don't just treat one thing. You try to look at the whole picture. Talk to us specifically about some of those programs that you offer.

Mary Esselman:

Well children started Operation Breakthrough as young as six weeks and once they enter as I mentioned before they enter into a neighborhood and that's where we start looking at school readiness the minute a child enter Operation Breakthrough because there's a whole set of developmental milestones that

we're going to be looking at over those first five years of life. We're very conscious of the fact that most of the child's brain development occurs during the first eight years of life. We know that oftentimes those experiences children might have that are toxic can be made tolerable by the support systems they have in those early years. That's really the role that Operation Breakthrough tries to provide.

Mary Esselman:

We have a Children's Mercy Health Clinic on site in which we're making sure that children have all of their health needs met. We have licensed social workers who are really working with families to really build their protective factors. That's everything from concrete supports that a family needs like housing, food, helping them find jobs, all of those things become critical. The more stable a family is the more likely children are to develop and hit those developmental milestones. We also have a full clinical team that involves child and family therapists and not only are they working one on one with children, they're also working with parents and then really closing that loop.

Mary Esselman:

There was a study that was done a while back that was basically a study that was trying to define the root causes of obesity and what they really found in the study, it was called Adverse Childhood Experience, they found that many of the adversities that children experience when they're young end up causing different kinds of social determinants of health as they grew older. The average number of experiences that are adverse such as having an incarcerated parent, being a victim of violence, a witness to violence, separation from a parent, I mean there's a whole list, the number of individuals nationally that would experience four or more is roughly 13%.

Mary Esselman:

At Operation Breakthrough, over 45% of our families have had four or more ACEs and what makes it significant to look at is typically if there's no intervention then a parent's A score will likely become their child's A score. That's one of the things we try to do is provide that intervention so that doesn't happen. That's where our family therapist come in and so they're able to really work with families who have strong adversities. When I think of our families, I think of the fact that that they tend to come from some of our most under resourced neighborhoods in the city and in many ways there's a lot of vulnerability, but I also find our families to be some of the most resilient.

Mary Esselman:

About 15 years ago, Sister Berta started a bus tour. She called it the City You Never See. She felt it was really important for members of the community to have an opportunity to see what it was like to raise a family in poverty. It was never intended to be a tour of looking at woe is me, but really the resilience that it takes for a family raising children in poverty. I think that's one of the things that we see with our families, 70% of our families are working yet their average income is only \$1000 per month. Those are some of the things that we're working with to help increase stability. We want families to start needing us and leave not needing us.

Kelly Scanlon:

You know you had talked about the four children that started out back in 1971 with the childcare program and now the numbers in the hundreds of children. You've had to expand physically as well to accommodate the growing number of children and their families that you serve and you recently took

over the old Jones Store. Talk to us about that expansion, why you did it and how that is allowing you to continue your mission even better.

Mary Esselman:

Oh, absolutely. One of the sisters greatest wishes was to serve more children. They saw the waiting list. At some points, it was at least a thousand children. If you didn't get in as a baby, the next chance was when your child was in preschool. What was happening is we would work years then to prepare children for kindergarten and then we would have to say, "Goodbye" because we just didn't have space in our before and after school program. One of the things we wanted to do is we wanted to make sure that every child could stay with us longer and so by purchasing the Jones Store it allowed us to add over 300 more seats for our school-aged children and it also allowed us to add additional classroom space where the school-aged program had been originally situated.

Mary Esselman:

Then that was huge for us because the ability to keep families moving forward I think in many cases involves making sure that their child has that safe, quality place before and after school. We're actually seeing it in the data. When you look over the past four years, we've sent over 90% of the children to school ready and we've seen their achievement keep pace with that. When we look at our kindergarten to second graders who had been in the first three groups we see them 93% are still reading at or above grade level.

Kelly Scanlon:

Wow. That's incredible.

Mary Esselman:

One of the things that we did is we really started to focus on early STEM and so we added a maker space in our original building and a robotics lab for the preschool children. Currently, we have a program there that are called Tinkering, Making, and Engineering [crosstalk 00:10:28] all kinds of problem solving when they're as young as three and four. I can remember one of our first projects this year was how does an architect know what to build. The kids learned about blueprints. They actually designed buildings. They got a chance to build them and I know their culminating engineering project in that particular challenge was to rescue Rapunzel from the tower [crosstalk 00:10:55].

Kelly Scanlon:

One of the things that having this new space here in the old Jones Store has done is that it's allowed you to bring schools actually to the children.

Mary Esselman:

Exactly, we didn't want it to be empty while all of our before and after school children were at school. We actually have four local schools that bring their first, second, and fifth graders in to do their math and science through a STEM approach. They come in and do hands on activities in all of the different labs. Imagine if you're a first grader studying sun, moon, and stars and instead of just reading about it in a book, you're doing projects in the arts lab, in the robotics labs, the maker space, in the teaching kitchen or the life science lab.

Mary Esselman:

We also have freshman and sophomores from De La Salle High School who come in two mornings a week and they do career exploration and entrepreneurship, so it's been really amazing to just watch how it totally engages kids when they have these opportunities as well as their excitement each day when they get off the bus and their ability to come every week.

Kelly Scanlon:

What great work you're doing. You're building a foundation for these individual children which will serve them throughout their lives. I mean it's transformational for them, but it's also transformational for the city. In building a foundation for the children, you're also building a foundation for our community. What else does Operation Breakthrough do to make Kansas City a better place that maybe people don't know about?

Mary Esselman:

Well I would have to say given the moment we're in right now, it's been amazing to just look at how much we've been able to respond to the current crisis as we've had to shelter in place. Just in the last five weeks we've been able to through the help of the community pass out over 50,000 pounds of food, hygiene products and toiletries. That's really about the community banding together with us. When I think about us making the community a better place, I think about over the past 50 years the community has really looked at Operation Breakthrough as an anchor for serving families and it's allowed the community to figure out how they can share in that growth of the families that we serve.

Mary Esselman:

In addition like right now, we're one of the few centers that's actually open in the city. We're providing care for all of our families that are involved in the health industry so whether they're home health aides, they're nursing assistants in the hospitals or working with companies that are producing medical devices we just increased by another 10 so we're serving about 80 children right now. I think that's one of the reasons we're able to make Kansas City a better place. I think Kansas City makes us a better place because we just see a vested interest in people sharing their talents with our kids. We have individuals that come in weekly. We have over 200 volunteers that spend at least an hour a week here reading to children, working with children, running our clothing closet. I mean just all of these different areas.

Mary Esselman:

We have nursing students who come in and push into classrooms as part of their practicums. All of those things I think make Kansas City a better place because the children we're serving today are the future of Kansas City tomorrow.

Kelly Scanlon:

You mentioned earlier Mary that there are multiple ways for Kansas Citians to interact with and become involved with Operation Breakthrough. Can you tell us about what some of those opportunities are and if there's any that you are particularly looking for tell us about those as well.

Mary Esselman:

Well I'm going to start with volunteering. I mean what better way to support our families than volunteering. There's so many ways whether it's pushing into a classroom, working in our clothing closet, helping provide food and other resources for our pantry. I mean there so many ways you can do it on site. One of the things though that's been interesting is we realize that sometimes it's hard for

people to be able to actually get here to volunteer. As part of our Twilight STEM programming we've decided, well what if we take away that barrier and we push into companies.

Mary Esselman:

We just finished a five week session at Burns & McDonnell and basically we took kids out to the company and they recruited engineers to do a five week internal competition where the kids spent four weeks with the engineers programming robots and then we had an internal competition on the fifth week. The beauty of that is not only did they have eight engineers that volunteered to participate, they have 60 on the waiting list. We're getting ready to do the same thing at Garmin where we're not going to maybe do quite as many technical because with the pandemic right now we're going to try to do something remote.

Mary Esselman:

We've been developing different challenges that can be done by just a regular business person or an engineer, but it gives us an opportunity to give experiences to our children that have mentoring as a part of them.

Kelly Scanlon:

Any other ways that Kansas Citians can support Operation Breakthrough?

Mary Esselman:

In addition to volunteering, we often have a wish list on our website which gives people the opportunity to donate. We actually have a young professionals group which is called the OB Network where we're trying to foster monthly giving just \$10 a month and different community-based services which has been growing. I think they now are up to close to 150 members which is exciting and once a quarter they do a give back. There's different ways. I think the best way is to reach out to our volunteer coordinator or check out our website. Both of those have all kinds of ways. Right now during the crisis, we've been posting educational resources that we need to make our kits each week or food items that we need and it's been amazing the response that we've gotten from the community.

Kelly Scanlon:

Go out to operationbreakthrough.org, take a look at the different programs, take a look at the different volunteer opportunities. You can just continue on that tradition that the sisters started 50 years.

Mary Esselman:

Amazing.

Kelly Scanlon:

Continue that tradition that the sisters started nearly 50 years ago. Thank you so much for all the work that you do for the futures and the foundation that you're building for these children, for their families, and for all of Kansas City. We really appreciate it.

Mary Esselman:

Thank you for having me. We have amazing families and we have an amazing team here.

Mary O'Connor:

This is Mary O'Connor, Executive Vice President for Country Club Bank. Our thanks to Mary Esselman for joining us on this week's episode to share the important work Operation Breakthrough is doing in Kansas City. My mom Jeanne and my dad Byron Thompson, former Chairman of Country Club Bank recognized early on the importance of Sister Corita's and Sister Berta's mission and believed in their vision. Our parents not only shared that vision of a better Kansas City, they supported it at a critical time. Now nearly 50 years later, the good work of Operation Breakthrough continues in Kansas City. At Country Club Bank, we still actively pursue that vision and unite with Kansas Citians in supporting businesses, individuals and causes that make Kansas City a better place for us all.

Mary O'Connor:

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