

Stocking the Pantry - Episode 1

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[00:00:11] Colby D'Onofrio: Welcome to *Stocking The Pantry*, a CalFresh Healthy Living podcast from Leah's Pantry, where we share fresh thoughts, and fruitful conversations. On this show, we discuss any and all things community nutrition, food equity, and nutrition security. This is a space for thought leaders to share success stories and strategies for equity-centered and resilience-building initiatives. We hope to foster collaboration and community, as well as leverage strengths among listeners, guests, and hosts as we share ideas and dreams of building a more equitable future, where everyone has access to healthful, nourishing food.

[00:00:55] Tee Atwell: Hello, my name is Tee, and I'll be one of your hosts for the *Stocking The Pantry* podcast. A little about myself, I'm a program coordinator for the training department at Leah's Pantry, and a practicing nutritionist who lives in the gorgeous Mojave Desert with my beautiful partner of 16 years, and our rescue tortoise, Papi Tortellini. I'm an absolute lover of science, travel, food, and family, which has greatly impacted my purpose in life. My upbringing and exposure was diverse and include being born and raised in Alhambra, California, and is a mecca for some of the most delicious cuisine, hands down, as well as an abundant food is medicine scene.

Through life experience and following my passion, I ended up getting a bachelor's of science in athletic training from the University of Laverne, which is where I met my partner. Then eventually, I obtained a master's of science in nutrition from the National University of Natural Medicine in Oregon. After graduating at the top of my class of an accelerated master's program, while working full time-- talk about not knowing what sleep is, but all worth the while, because it really opened up doors and guided me into a variety of professional opportunities from the higher education sector, to now, Leah's Pantry.

Which I must say is so rewarding to be a part of an organization that fosters a rich trauma-informed culture, where leveraging my strengths, while supporting opportunities for me to blossom and grow is the norm. Look, I could talk about this all day, but we'll save it for next time. I look forward to embarking on this new podcast journey together with you. Remember, if you want your world to change, your words must change.

[00:02:40] Colby: Hey everyone, I'm your co-host Colby D'Onofrio. I come from a background of nutrition, fitness, and food banking with a sprinkle of 1960s hippy ideals, and a desire to leave the world at least a little better than I found it. I am a program coordinator for our nutrition pantry program here at Leah's Pantry, and I'm coming to you all from beautiful Berkeley, California.

I've always loved to cook, grow, and harvest food, share meals, and geek out about food science. This love of food pushed me to pursue a bachelor's in health sciences with a

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nutrition concentration from Ithaca College. There are so many important and interesting aspects of food beyond the hard sciences and calories in, calories out. The role food plays in each of our lives can't be boiled down into one equation for health. First out of college, I went into the fitness and sports nutrition field working as a personal trainer in New York State and then Northern California.

As a long-term athlete, I love sharing knowledge around exercise, and the role that diet plays in reaching fitness goals, but there was something missing. I knew that some of the people who might benefit most from exercise and nutrition counseling, were the people who didn't have the time, the money, the transportation or whatever resource to hire a personal trainer. I didn't want to work in a field where health was a commodity only for those who could afford it, so I switched gears and took a job with my local food bank as their nutrition educator, and I loved it.

I loved interacting with and being of service to my community members, and the way customer's faces would light up when they received a bag of fresh, local produce. The way farmers and neighbors came by our distributions to drop off extras from their fields or gardens. Then to be able to turn that around and give it right to someone in the same community ignited something inside of me, or maybe it met a need within me that had been previously unfulfilled.

Then in the spring of 2022, I saw that Leah's Pantry was hiring. I didn't fully know what I was getting myself into, but I knew that this was an organization taking about the relationship between trauma, and food, and community, and how to build nourishing lives, and resilient communities. I thought, "That's where I want to be." Luckily the hiring team thought the same. Now, I am the program coordinator of our nutrition pantry program, also referred to as NPP. I still get to work in the food bank and pantry realm, which I love, and I get to talk about more than just recipe cards or informational handouts, which are great, don't get me wrong.

I do still get to talk about these things, but I also get to teach empathy, compassion, and the importance of relationships in healing our severed world and broken food system. Food is so much more than calories. It is a vehicle for healing, connection, and community, and I am beyond grateful to have a job and now a podcast where we get to spread these ideas far and wide.

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[00:05:48] Colby: Today we are talking with Adrienne and Monica about the creation and background of Leah's Pantry. We will cover what it means to be trauma-informed, how that came to be a key aspect of the organization, and the importance of quality relationships.

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[00:06:04] Tee: Monica Bhagwan is a trainer, community educator, and program manager at Leah's Pantry. She has been with Leah's Pantry since 2013, and during this

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time, she introduced the translation of trauma-informed principles into food and nutrition programs. Her primary efforts now are to build trauma-informed curricula for use in CalFresh Healthy Living, or other SNAP-Ed programs and healthcare settings. She is based in San Francisco and has a master's degree in food studies from New York University and has been a professional cook.

[00:06:38] Colby: Adrienne Markworth is Executive Director of Leah's Pantry, the organization she founded in San Francisco in 2006. Over the past 16 years, she's had the opportunity to teach, write, train, present, and collaborate across different settings and sectors, moving her work and the organization's efforts towards equity and trauma-informed nutrition security.

She's worked in different areas of the CalFresh Healthy Living Program, including subcontractor, local agency, and state-funded partner. Leah's Pantry is also a training provider for SNAP-Ed programs across the country. Adrienne lives in the San Diego area with her husband, three children, and a golden doodle named Taco.

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[00:07:28] Colby: We are here with Adrienne Markworth and Monica Bhagwan. Thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:07:33] Monica Bhagwan: Thank you.

[00:07:34] Adrienne Markworth: Thank you.

[00:07:35] Colby: We'd like to kick our conversation off today with a bit of a discussion about the origin of Leah's Pantry. Can y'all share a little bit about that?

[00:07:43] Adrienne: Sure. Leah's Pantry started in 2006, although the idea started in probably 2005. I had the opportunity of being an advisor for a group of Jesuit volunteers that were working in San Francisco, and at the same time had a new baby and was doing some work in baby food and homemade baby food. I just learned a lot from the volunteers at the time about what was happening in terms of supporting people when they had babies and they might be recovering from homelessness or in shelters. At the time in San Francisco, there was not a ton going on that was supporting parents to feed their children well.

I had an opportunity through the Golden Gate Mothers Group, which I was a part of as a new mom, and I was in charge of their service projects and just had an offhand conversation with one of the interns at a affordable housing, long-term transitional housing site in San Francisco about this. I said, "I think it would be really fun to come in and work with parents about making their own baby food and feeding." And they said, "Great. That sounds good. Let me connect you with the executive director," and so it worked.

I went home, I started to write a curriculum, I started doing some fundraising and really just had an amazingly rich and informative and community-building time working with the parents at Clara House and learning from them and watching them support each other and also providing resources and skills myself. That's really how Food Smarts was born in San Francisco. After that, it started to gather a little bit of interest from other homeless shelters in San Francisco and then we very quickly got into affordable housing, which is a contract we still have with Bridge Housing, doing cooking and nutrition workshops for people of all ages.

Not just young parents, but kids and parents and seniors speaking lots of different languages coming from lots of different cultures and backgrounds. The fun thing about doing that was that I had to quickly hire other people to help across the state, which then just spurred a model of collaboration and listening and everybody joining together to figure out what was working in community. That's the story of Food Smarts, which is also the story of Leah's Pantry since that's all we had back then.

[00:10:00] Colby: Wow. I love that. Thank you so much for giving us that insight. I want to take it one step further and let me open this both up to you and/or Monica, how did you first draw the connection between nutrition and security and trauma-informed approaches?

[00:10:17] Monica: I had been working in public housing here in San Francisco. I had a garden-based nutrition afterschool program. Actually, during that time when I first started working there, Adrienne, you and I crossed paths. I didn't realize it until I started working at Leah's Pantry because I came and did a little cooking demo at one of your children's school events. I do remember you [laughs] in the audience. That's what I was doing. Because it's public housing violence was very present in the community.

Having also a new child was more aware of how important early childhood and child development is and was paying attention to what was happening in the community and how that was impacting the children's ability to engage fruitfully in a program, learn things, experience things, be present for the activities. There was so much going on in their lives that that was really difficult and challenging. At the same time, the program offered a really wonderful respite for the kids to have a safe space and to decompress from what was going outside the walls of the program.

I just became really interested in how trauma was affecting children's lives and how programs could be used to not just encourage them to connect to nature and to food, but to feel safe and connected and to get more out of a program. Because sometimes we have expectations for our programming and we might not look at the context that is happening enough to really make it a really good experience for participants.

[00:12:00] Adrienne: Specifically, within Leah's Pantry, we had an opportunity to continue our partnership with Bridge Housing. It's interesting because initially, Bridge said, "Oh, thanks, but no thanks on Potrero. We have a dedicated educator. It's really important for us to have the same person in the room." They were experimenting with a

model they were calling trauma-informed community building at the time. Monica and I ended up going to a meeting there and talking with them about what they needed. They said, "Listen, our educator just left and we're wondering whether Leah's Pantry would be able to step in."

It was just a different ask. It was not like the other workshops we'd been doing for that organization where six weeks at a time here and there. It was very flexible. This was like, "No, we really want you guys to be here for three years." Not only that, we'd like it to be the same person, so that's a different request. This was coming out of their trauma-informed principles translation into their very specific setting was to be doing a redevelopment of a public housing project as well as running the programs and appreciating the destabilizing effect that all of that had on the residents.

They were contractually required to offer program services. They were also really aware of what the building impacts were. They were very thoughtfully trying to align their programs with what was needed to keep the residents of Potrero feeling included and safe in the community. Even as they might be asked to leave or even as things might come up in rentals or the number of people in the houses or whatever kind of the issues were. At that time, I think Monica drawing on the thinking that she'd already done about this issue was able to stand up and say, "Yes, I'll do it. I will commit to every single Thursday going to Potrero and being a relationship with the residents, not just being a service provider."

After that, I think she and I were both on the same page pretty quickly, that there was quite an opportunity for us to look at the translation of this trauma-informed community, building all the SAMHSA principles, specifically into nutrition and food security. It was nice to have that opportunity for such a specific and transparent request by a partner. It took a long time after that for us to really get where we needed to go, but it was very thoughtful work, and it was hard work.

We were also busy doing a lot of other things with the organization. It wasn't as though we could just stop and make this huge pivot. The actual official pivot didn't come until 2019. Although we did start working very intensely in that area, probably starting in 2016.

[00:14:45] Monica: It was a good synergy in that some of the conversation was starting to percolate in services, but not as heavily as it is now.

[00:14:55] Colby: That's very interesting and a great story to know. We had Leah's Pantry. You all were starting to talk a bit about this TI approach. Can you speak a bit about how the TI approach came to be a part of Leah's Pantry's vision, culture, and within the organizational structure as well?

[00:15:13] Adrienne: I think it came in phases and initially, we did come in through programs. The first thing Monica did was start to draft a one-pager, which was the trauma-informed nutrition. We would use that in our trainings. Then I think as she was doing a lot of that research, she was also pulling different assessments and different tools that had been used in the field to try and get a sense of what this looked like in organizations, in

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meetings, in hiring, in how we talked to one another. I think the first thing we did was we did form an internal subcommittee that Monica led to start working on this.

[00:15:51] Monica: I think when we started, like you said, thinking about how we would apply it to programming, but also underlying that fundamentally knowing that the system had to be able to support it. We were simultaneously thinking about how do staff and agencies interact with these principles and what structures are needed for a good implementation of a program. Our staff was very interested and curious about all of this. I think we realized how much staff and the agency just needed to be as trauma-informed as much as our programming is.

We initiated, I think subgroups and then started doing some trainings and conversations internally with each other to start to shape our own approach to how to develop our core competencies. Not just at the... we had started creating our curriculum around the table with an explicit intention of bringing trauma-informed thinking into it but realizing that we wanted to infuse this into other existing programs as well.

[00:17:02] Tee: I love that you saw this opportunity, you were like, let's get everyone on board and brought everybody to the table around this discussion. Now, are we practicing what we preach? Can you speak a little bit to the process of how trauma-informed-- Yes, you were trailblazing the way programmatically but did that also have to translate into becoming a trauma-informed organization as far as individually your staff adopting these principles that you were out there speaking about?

[00:17:37] Adrienne: I think Monica was always really firm about processes having to be explicit if this stuff was going to work beyond just a group of people having a feeling that they wanted it to work. We didn't really start building processes initially, but we did hire, I guess it was right at the beginning of 2020 because this was happening as COVID was unfolding as an organization. This is almost three years ago. We did hire two consultants that really helped us look at our mission and vision, well really just more our values. We had a group of values as Leah's Pantry that we'd adopted.

The question that the consultants brought to our staff was, are these values the right values? Are they reflective of your interest in moving towards a model of being a trauma-informed organization? They led us during a retreat through some investigation of that. Then out of that retreat came some values that were both aligned with trauma-informed care, but also aligned with Leah's Pantry, how we do our work, the innovation that we bring, the enthusiasm we bring, the relationships. It did really serve as a good grounding for the process discussions.

The other thing that they did that was helpful for us was we identified places where we might need to align better. Places where we were aligning better. Then we were able to take that and say, "Okay, we have these values, we have these areas. How do we start building processes that are in alignment?" About that same time, we discovered appreciative inquiry and that process of appreciative inquiry was really focusing on our organizational strengths and what we were already good at and then building processes

around that. Which is good because if you're talking about your values, hopefully those are things that you're pretty good at.

I'd say it was fairly balanced between an inductive and a deductive approach. We had this deductive thinking of here are the principles, we want them to filter down, here are our values, we want them to filter down. Then we also tackled really specific things and then that ended up informing, "Oh, this is like how it could actually work. Here's all the little decisions we might be making on a day-to-day basis."

An example I'll share, which I think has bore a lot of fruit, organizationally as the organization was growing, it became more and more important was just transparency around project planning. Kicking off a project, debriefing a project, what were the roles and responsibilities and saying like, by not having a really explicit process, we were not really leveraging our strengths as an organization. There are people that are really, really activated when they have a lot of transparency, so we need to make sure we get that transparency built in right away.

That was really instructive for me as a leader to watch my staff be able to develop these processes that were such a good fit for the organization. Then also go through a process of listening to themselves and not being too attached to it. I don't think we hold too tightly to anything at Leah's Pantry. If it stops working, it's like, "How do we go there?" I think that's one perspective on how we tried to embed it in the organization.

[00:20:44] Colby: Was there a framework that you could work off of when you started bringing these trauma-informed principles to the organization? Or was this a figuring it out as you went along process?

[00:20:55] Monica: A lot of it came about because I just think Adrienne's leadership style is inclusive already. That's an important part of trauma-informed principles. Like Adrienne said, we had strengths in the organization and that was definitely one of them. We had a collaborative approach. When we came up with processes, it was really much Adrienne opening up, asking us to really put our recommendations forth, asked for what we needed, and collaborating on solutions that everyone had some input in, in talking through what parts work for them, what we had flexibility around a process where people can adapt a process to work for their own individual work style.

We pay a lot of attention to our own work styles and talk about that, but also what does the organization need to have a unified process around so we can be efficient and move together? That's been a process and it's always ongoing. I think we want to make it clear that being trauma-informed is not a state of being and it's not a fixed end. It's just a practice we commit to and have all felt really comfortable thinking about evolving and investigating and asking and being curious rather than checking off, did we do it right, did we do it wrong? We looked beyond the top-line check-off and asked ourselves a lot of questions when we make internal decisions.

[00:22:20] Adrienne: I think that also aligns with appreciative inquiry is the language that we use drives the conversation. How you talk about something drives the direction. I think
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that's part of what has continued to catalyze us as an organization, is just this real belief that being grounded in appreciation and strengths while not shying away from discussing difficult things. What trauma-informed practice has given me as a leader is just not only humility, but also strength to handle feedback differently, to evolve as a leader.

I notice now that when I receive feedback, I am much less, I guess, upset by it. Monica remembers back in the day where I would have-- and Leah's Pantry has been incredibly fortunate not to have a lot of drama [chuckles] as an organization. Every once in a while a project goes sideways and you have to deal with the repercussions. I think having the expectation before adopting a trauma-informed model of having to be perfect as a leader, perfect as an organization, especially as a new leader, not coming up through the nonprofit sector, just doing things on my own, my standards are high and remain high.

Nothing has changed about my standards and certainly nothing has changed about Monica's standards either. I think we both have high professional standards. However, what has changed for me is my internal reaction when I'm given an opportunity to improve. I no longer feel like I failed. I don't persevere in the same way over things like what could I have done differently or as much frustration. I find I'm much stronger to move through a difficult challenge because I think that appreciative aspect keeps me moving forward instead of, I want to go back and change the past.

That's been a real benefit for me and I think it's also benefited my personal life and I hope I can model that as a leader. I think most of our managers and directors do a really good job of that. I think that is really one of those underpinnings of this model of constantly doing it, is we try and eliminate that shame and stigma, not only from our programs, not only to eliminating CalFresh, but also just to this idea that we have to be perfect at all times or that there's some fixed state of being that is better than another one. Like Monica said, bringing that curiosity, bringing that joy, bringing that humility, bringing that listening, that's what we're asked to do. As long as I'm doing that, [chuckles] I'm doing okay.

[00:24:59] Monica: I think we've learned that we might want to set up a process or a policy that fits trauma-informed thinking. Those things don't define to me what it means to be trauma-informed because those things need to change and involve and exist in a context. We need to be nimble to be able to really be trauma-informed. I guess I say this because sometimes I worry that we can set ourselves up if we're like, "Well, that's not trauma-informed, therefore you're not trauma-informed." I really think we can have a not great approach or policy or process for something that doesn't mean we're not trauma-informed. We're committing ourselves to that conversation and that evolution.

[00:25:43] Colby: I think that's just such a good reminder for individuals and organizations as well that there isn't-- when you're being trauma-informed, it's not like, "Okay. Well, I did all the things so I'm good to go for the rest of my life. See you later." It's something that you constantly work at and what works in one situation might not work in another situation. If you're able to adapt and see the differences and see the benefits of both and appreciate the differences as well, I think that's being trauma-informed and to

do that on a personal level like you mentioned Adrienne, but also to be able to do that on an organizational level is hard and it takes work.

As someone who joined Leah's Pantry in April of 2022, I'm already seeing the differences that our work environment has compared to other places that I've worked. We've heard that Adrienne was making baby food in her kitchen in San Francisco. You got in touch with Monica, y'all started working at Potrero with Bridge and now all of a sudden we are in 2023 and Leah's Pantry holds the statewide training contract for CalFresh Healthy Living. Adrienne, you did mention there's a good story there, so I want to bring it back and I want to hear that story of how this CalFresh Healthy Living partnership came to be.

[00:26:53] Adrienne: Initially, we had gotten involved with CalFresh Healthy Living through the San Francisco now SF Marin Food Bank as their nutrition partner and that's when Monica came on board. That was a lot of just direct community implementation of Food Smarts. We also built EatFresh.org and we also built the Food Smarts training program. None of that was operating in any kind of trauma-informed framework.

That was just your standard SNAP-Ed, nutrition Ed. It was good. Food Smarts is still a terrific curriculum. EatFresh.org is still a terrific website. That was not the entry point. What we did during that time was we really established very strong relationships with our funders at San Francisco Human Services Agency and also the state. When our contract ended up moving up to the state level, we had more and more interaction with the state team because EatFresh.org was a state-level program, so it was more appropriate for it to live up at the state level as opposed to locally.

CalFresh Healthy Living has conferences every year. Times to get together and to network and to really build those relationships. I was very invested in my relationship with the state team. I wanted to understand more about the program strategically. I wanted to make sure I was doing smart things for my organization. I felt very comfortable in sharing what Monica and I were up to on the side. We were sitting and talking after a conference one day with one of the representatives from the USDA who was attending our conference.

I just tongue in cheek was, well first I was sharing about what we were doing and then the USDA said, "That sounds great, is there any opportunity for you to bring that into SNAP-Ed?" I said, "Gosh, if only I was sitting next to somebody able to make that happen in SNAP-Ed." A little tongue in cheek because our contract was already executed. In that moment, Ana Bolanos, who now has left the CalFresh Healthy Living Program and is working for the Office of Health Equity just said, "Yes. Let's make this happen. Let's get it into your contract. I'm committed to figuring out how this works in SNAP-Ed."

We were able to make some contract adjustments and really bring around the table into CalFresh Healthy Living. Around the table was developed really in almost all partnerships with CalFresh Healthy Living. That was not originally the plan. The original plan was, oh, we'll have to build this outside, we'll have to get other funders. That just isn't what happened. The investment that the CalFresh Healthy Living Program has made in Leah's

Pantry's trauma-informed curriculum training, really just thought development has been extraordinary and has been an incredible catalyst and then has really paved the way for those ideas to go nationwide because then it just becomes something that other states can do.

Thanks for bringing up partnerships because this just wouldn't happen if we didn't have people that trusted what we were doing and were real visionaries in their own right. Seeing that alignment between equity and trauma-informed care and just seeing which way the wind was blowing and wanting to do it this way. I remain grateful till the day I die of the CalFresh Healthy Living Program and the leadership there for facilitating this as well as my internal team for doing all the work and doing all the hard thinking. You need both, right? You need it all.

[00:30:17] Colby: I just love would love to point out here that by embodying a trauma-informed approach through relationship building, through transparency, through having conversations and collaboration and mutuality, you all were able to bring this trauma-informed approach onto a much bigger platform. It's the intersectionality of living a trauma-informed approach to bring it to more people who can then live it is layering on top of each other and I just think that's beautiful.

[00:30:43] Tee: Totally agree with that, Colby. As my mom always said, a closed mouth doesn't get fed. Way to put it out here in the universe [laughter] and for it to come back and answer right now right here. Okay. Get ready, if you stay ready, I love that.

[00:31:03] Monica: I just want to chime in quickly about the experience of doing this within CalFresh SNAP-Ed. Because when we were first talking about trauma-informed staff before we started working on the SNAP-Ed Project, people felt the institutions were not serving-- When I would talk about trauma-informed care to educators and other not necessary SNAP-Ed educators but in other community settings, people wanted the system to be broken for us to be able to do this work.

What I found by working within CalFresh Healthy Living and SNAP-Ed was that there was so much that you can do within something that's established, that can be transformative. That's this idea of starting where people are at can just yield so many dividends. I think that's been the process. With Adrienne understanding how things work and how the system works and how people do their work and seeking to serve that and not just redo everything and tell everyone they're doing everything wrong.

People have things that work. Really, I found that it's just a very valuable experience and I feel it feels more powerful.

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[00:32:24] Tee: Thank you for joining us today for part one of our discussion with Adrienne Markworth and Monica Bhagwan. Stay tuned for episode two to hear the second half of this fruitful conversation here on *Stocking the Pantry*.

[00:32:39] Colby: Thank you so much for hanging with us. I want to ask you this question. Do you know of any thought leaders or someone doing great work in your community? Well, we would love to interview them and we'd love to hear from you. Find us online at leahspantry.org or on Instagram handle [@leahspantry](https://www.instagram.com/leahspantry) or email us at stockingthepantry@leahspantry.org.

This podcast is a product of Leah's Pantry made possible by the funding from the United States Department of Agriculture and their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP an equal opportunity provider and employer. Visit calfreshhealthyliving.org for healthy living tips.

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