

Episode Nine – Explore The Meaning of Food w/Tulsa CARES

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[00:00:18] Colby D'Onfrio: Welcome to *Stocking the Pantry*, a CalFresh Healthy Living Podcast from Leah's Pantry. We'd like to acknowledge our funder, the CalFresh Healthy Living Program, an equal-opportunity employer and provider. 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.

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Hello and welcome to Stocking the Pantry. I'm your co-host, Colby D'Onfrio.

[00:01:19] Tee Atwell: I'm your other co-host, Tee Atwell.

[00:01:21] Colby: In today's episode, we are talking about the different meanings that food holds in our lives. Food is often thought of as just fuel or calories or a means of survival, but we think food is so much more.

[00:01:36] Tee: Yes, I know for me, food is a means of connection to other people, to our health, spirituality, earth, beauty, culture, and it's just so much more than just calories.

[00:01:49] Colby: To help us understand the different meanings that food holds for each of us, we at Leah's Pantry are a big fan of The Meaning of Food in Life questionnaire, which can be found in our show notes.

[00:02:02] Tee: If you've taken the Leah's Pantry training, I'm sure this sounds familiar. If you're new to our world, let us explain. Here at Leah's Pantry, we call this questionnaire The Meaning of Food in Life, which was adopted by a questionnaire developed by researchers at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania. It is a survey composed of 22 questions and divided into five sections. Each section has about four to five statements, which are asked to rank on a scale of one to seven. One being I strongly disagree, and seven being I strongly agree.

[00:02:37] Colby: After ranking each statement, you are given a number for each of the five sections, which we refer to as domains. The domains are moral, social, sacred,

File name: STP Episode 9 Project.wav

aesthetic, and health. The higher your number in a domain, the more meaning that domain holds for you in your relationship to food.

[00:03:00] Tee: Not to say that any of the other domains are less important, but that some may resonate more with us overall or in this moment in time in our lives. To give you a little more insight, for example, the moral domain refers to how your food choices impact the world and your connection to nature. It contains statements like, "I care about the impact of my food choices on the world." And, "When I eat food, I think about where it came from."

[00:03:28] Colby: The social domain reflects how strongly you use or associate food with social connection. It has statements like, "Sharing food with others makes me feel closer to them." And, "Making food for others is a main way I show care for them."

[00:03:46] Tee: The sacred domain is about how food can be a reflection of our spiritual beliefs. It contains statements like, "My food choices are a way for me to connect with the sacred." And, "From a spiritual perspective, some foods are better than others."

[00:04:03] Colby: The aesthetic domain reflects how food can hold beauty and be visually appealing. It has statements like, "A good meal is like a work of art." And, "I can appreciate the beauty of a dish even if I do not like it."

[00:04:18] Tee: The final domain, health, usually a common one amongst health educators. This domain sheds light on the connection between food and our personal health and well-being. It has statements like, "I get satisfaction from knowing that the food I eat is good for my health." And, "I eat in a way that expresses care for my body."

[00:04:40] Colby: As we shared about these domains and some examples of statements in each, there may have been some that really spoke to you, and there may have been some statements that didn't resonate so much. The point of this questionnaire is to get us thinking about the variety of meanings that food can hold for us.

[00:05:00] Tee: Both Colby and I score highest in the health and social domains, which makes a lot of sense since we both come from a health sciences background.

[00:05:10] Colby: When I was getting my bachelor's degree in health sciences and nutrition, people often asked me why I chose nutrition. Even before I had any idea that these different domains existed, I would always say things like, "I love food and I love that it brings people together and creates community." Little did I know I was speaking to my very high score in the social domain.

[00:05:33] Tee: I bet if we were to give this questionnaire to people working in sustainability, they would likely score high in the moral domain. Someone with a strong religious practice who follows a halal or kosher diet might score high in sacred.

[00:05:52] Colby: We like to talk about the meaning of food in our lives because it highlights how food connects us to what is important to us and that importance might be placed in different areas for different people. It also helps us understand how difficult it can be when we cannot connect to that meaning that food holds for us. If we don't have enough money to buy the foods that speak to our domains or we don't have a lot of control over what we eat.

[00:06:22] Tee: As people working in food security, we think it's important to understand these different aspects of food because when we can support our customers, clients, participants, and community members in connecting to food in a way that is meaningful to them, we are able to support them in showing up as their best selves.

[00:06:41] Colby: One organization that is doing this so beautifully is Tulsa CARES, a social service organization in Tulsa, Oklahoma that specializes in providing services and compassionate care to folks who are low-income and living with HIV, AIDS, and/or Hepatitis C.

[00:07:01] Tee: I have to highlight their program that I think is so awesome. The Second Cup Lunch, a bi-weekly lunch held every Tuesday rooted in supporting the different aspects of food and how they show up in our lives.

[00:07:17] Colby: I was very fortunate to get to speak with Casey Bakhsh, chief programs officer of Tulsa CARES, and when I say fortunate, I mean it was a true pleasure and privilege to talk to Casey. Her enthusiasm for her work is palpable. We laughed, we cried, and I left that interview feeling so inspired and like, "Thank God there are people like Casey in this world."

[00:07:43] Tee: She has a whole team of amazing people by her side.

[00:07:48] Colby: Yes, indeed.

[00:07:51] Tee: As you listen to this interview, see if you notice where and how the different domains show up in Tulsa CARES' Second Cup Lunch program. As a reminder, these domains are moral, social, sacred, aesthetic, and health.

[00:08:06] Colby: Enjoy. Can you describe the mission and services of Tulsa CARES?

[00:08:15] Casey Bakhsh: Sure, of course. This is what I'm most passionate about. What's fantastic about Tulsa CARES is we are the largest and most comprehensive provider for prevention and care programs serving individuals living with HIV or Hepatitis C in the state. What's great about that is we have the capacity to specialize in wraparound client-tailored care that's rooted in those principles of empowerment, self-worth, inclusion, and hope. We've had the honor of doing this important work for the past 30-plus years.

Our current wraparound model, it consists of prevention, medical care coordination, mental health, housing, nutrition, and we offer lots of additional services such as

File name: STP Episode 9 Project.wav

transportation, happy home packs, and prescriptions, all those little things that help address those barriers of maybe why someone's preventing or not really there for their medical care. It helps encompass their quality of life better when we're able to address some of those needs.

[00:09:14] Colby: Yes. Wraparound care is key.

[00:09:17] Casey: It is.

[00:09:17] Colby: I think as people working in social services, we hear again and again and again that someone has to go to six different offices in one day just to get basic needs met. If you don't have transportation, if you're working, if you have kids, if you don't have a partner, the barriers just add and add and add. Wraparound care is key.

[00:09:37] Casey: Yes, we totally see that too. What's fantastic is our agency's ride on a bus stop. Again, you try to always reduce those barriers and get them that place at the table. You're right, the more opportunities you have for them, the more likely they're able to be able to make that one-stop shop. For sure.

[00:09:54] Colby: What I want to talk a bit more about today is your Tuesday lunch program. Can you describe that program from an administrative perspective.

[00:10:05] Casey: [laughs] Yes, because that's my hat for it. I want to say it definitely is a labor of love and it sure does take a village to ensure that everyone has that seat at the table, that it's meaningful because it's not about food. Food's a piece of the pie. It's about the relationships and the community and the safety and what you bring together for that inclusion and hope. For me, it's just bringing everybody to the table to make the event possible for clients.

[00:10:34] Colby: Definitely. What work are you doing behind the scenes? How are you building the menus, where is it held, what communications do you have to have with other staff members? When it comes to Tuesdays, who's setting up the dining room, who's cooking the food, what does that look like from your end?

[00:10:53] Casey: Sure. I love that. We really start off traditionally when we create programs or we want to enhance our programs is that golden circle approach that why are we going to do it, what's the mission, what's the purpose behind it, how are we going to do it, and what is it going to look like at the end? When we're starting up at the very beginning of that why, we're incorporating client advisory feedback, client surveys, comment box statements. We're talking to case managers, we're talking to the nutrition program who's going to be facilitating it.

Then we are reviewing budgets, staff capabilities, building, agency feasibility. Then we look at nutrition guidelines. What's the research? What's the best practice? What are our client's medical needs that we need to take in consideration like drug medication interactions? For when you do food, you want to also incorporate all the pieces of that.

What's in season, what is currently in our food market, and our produce that we can put out that they can see how to use in their kitchen?

How do we infuse color because it's about color and it's about taste and flavor. Then when you have all those pieces, then you're like, "Oh, we need to advertise." How are we getting the message out because we're super hyped and excited about this, but we need people to start coming and feeling like they can be a part of the table. Then we're looking at flyers and marketing creations and how to do a text blast and newsletters. I think what's really nice is it takes really that tapestry of people to come together and make this beautiful product for clients to feel as great as we feel when we create it. Planning the menu really comes from a joint effort from the nutrition program.

We have a great team that consists of our program coordinator, a registered dietician, and a cook. Of course, during all of that process of planning the menu, we're looking at client feedback because we want that to be a huge encompass piece of that because if you don't utilize what clients want to eat and how they feel about food, you're making it for yourself and that's fantastic, but that's not the goal. It's about about creating that community. We really have our amazing cook, Deborah, who's in charge of our cooking.

She's been cooking for over 30 years and it's a labor of love for her. She incorporates volunteers at all kinds of levels from clients who want to come in and have that piece to give back and they also want to be a part of that, to community members who want to volunteer, to staff who love to cook anyway. They love to be able to do the prep and the cooking and the serving.

Really everybody, I think it's like when you want to have an event, we tend to see at our organization where everybody wants to be a part of that. They all want to support that and make that happen for that community feel. I know another question that you had was how does the food or ingredients come about.

[00:13:46] Colby: Yes. Where are they sourced from, so food sourcing?

[00:13:49] Casey: Yes. I think what's really cool about this is we really like to take a step back and go back to those whys and we think about who is food sourcing. It really isn't just about the box store, it's about the farmer and where did it come from and how was it done. We really try to purchase locally. We really try to look at the smaller-run grocery stores. We really try to utilize our leftover farmer's market produce to reduce waste. We really like to utilize items that are currently in our food pantry market. That way they can see it in action. Like, "Oh, I could actually pick that up in my market because they have it available for me and I could use it in this way."

I think that's really cool and empowering for them. We also like to use the area food bank when it's appropriate and accessible. Then we also, of course, use retail stores like Aldi and Walmart, but we really try to see how we can maximize some of those smaller-run owned grocery stores for sure.

[00:14:47] Colby: Oh, amazing, and the farmer's market.

File name: STP Episode 9 Project.wav

[00:14:50] Casey: Yes.

[00:14:52] Colby: Local farmers get involved in it, very community-based. Do you guys have a food pantry on site for participants, and also what do you refer to the people who access your services as?

[00:15:03] Casey: Yes, we do have a food pantry. We call it the market, and it is available for all clients who access our services here. We serve about 1,000 people a year. There's different types of food assistance they can receive during the nutrition program, anywhere from accessing it monthly to our market, the food pantry itself, where they get an allotment of about \$40 of food that they can pick out, to emergency groceries, to supplements, vitamins and so forth.

[00:15:30] Colby: Amazing. My understanding is that people who do have HIV/AIDS and Hep C are often taking a lot of immunosuppressant drugs. Their diet is super important in bolstering what immunity they do have, if I am understanding that correctly.

[00:15:46] Casey: Well, and plus our population's aging. On top of having a chronic health condition, and you might have more than one because you might be working with diabetes, you also are aging. I think you're right. Diet is very important and it's a very hard topic sometimes to talk about. When you have an engagement like a pantry on site or they've got their own little shopping cart and it is a shopping cart and they're able to pick out their items, what we've done is the supplied healthy items in the pantry.

That way if they're less likely to buy those items at a grocery store with their SNAP benefits or their own financial assistance, then they can utilize our pantry and try out some fun things that they might not have before that maybe could be considered something that would help produce more of a healthier outcome for their diet.

[00:16:30] Colby: Oh, absolutely. That's really great that you guys have a pantry on site. I love what you said earlier about using food from the pantry so that people can try something new. I come from a food banking background and I know that one of the biggest things that gets people to try new foods is tasting it, because we know that taste is the number one director in what people eat. If it doesn't taste good, doesn't matter how healthy it is, how expensive it is, how cheap it is. Doesn't taste good, people are not going to eat it. If they get to taste it and then they say, "Oh, that butternut squash was actually really good. I had no idea that it could taste like that. I'll go grab a butternut squash next door."

[00:17:08] Casey: Yes.

[00:17:09] Colby: That's so cool.

[00:17:09] Casey: Yes, and I love that because that's what tends like we produce so much nutrition education over the year. The one thing that flies off the shelves for us, are our recipe cards that we use from Second Cup Lunch. It's like that's what they want.

[laughter]

They want to repeat the recipes that they had at Second Cup Lunch for sure. Traditionally, it started off as almost like your Second Cup of coffee where people could come, have a little bit of a snack, enjoy some kind of community environment feel, and then it got to be, "Oh, we wanted way more than just a snack-

[00:17:42] Colby: [laughs]

[00:17:42] Casey: -we want the lunch." [laughs] That Second Cup is where it came from. Yes.

[00:17:46] Colby: I love that. Well, this is a great segue into, can you describe what the experience from a client's perspective of Second Lunch is like? Like what does the lunchroom look like? How are the tables set up? What does it look like? What does it smell like? Essentially, can you give me an audio-sensory tour of walking into the space and getting your lunch, eating, dining from the perspective of a client?

[00:18:15] Casey: Sure. I'd love to. I'd love to. We've been very fortunate. Our building is pretty still new. We moved in, it was an old church that we converted into a community one-stop shop. What was nice is it's only been about six to seven years, so everything is still brand new looking. We have a restaurant-grade kitchen, we have fantastic tables, chairs, lots of natural light. We were able to design the space in what community feeling we wanted it to look like. What's nice is the dining hall is where we participate with Second Cup.

It comfortably can sit 60 chairs so the tables are all lined up in different sections so that you can create conversation. There's circle tables, longer tables, but not too many people at the table. That way it's not overwhelming. You can still have some of those intimate, more fulfilling conversations with the folks that you're sitting with. Tons of natural light. We really believe in that. It's so important to have. We have tons of natural light. The space is just really welcoming. We don't have a lot of stuff on the walls just yet in art because we're redefining that space, but the colors are light and airy and everything is very comfortable.

We have wood finishes tables, we have little décor on each table. The tables are set up where you've got your condiments, you've got your plastic silverware or silverware depending on what we're going to eat for the day. There's little education nudges or nutrition like getting a conversation started if you're a little anxious about the moment. Again, it's almost like that fun lit or dinner party you're going to have with a small group of family and friends. We want to create that atmosphere here.

The big room is right off of our lobby. When you walk into the agency, the lobby is the first thing you go into, sometimes we have community partners set up in the lobby, so if they wanted to take a stop before eating lunch, they can touch in with other opportunities that the community has.

File name: STP Episode 9 Project.wav

Our clientele tend to be isolated, especially because of stigma, especially because of their chronic health condition, so it's important for us sometimes to bring community to the organization instead of them going out do it, so we like to encompass that. Then we also have restrooms that are really close to the place that are universal restrooms, so there's an important unique feel of we want you to be yourself.

We don't want you to have to identify as a certain gender, or a certain personality, or a certain thing. We want you to be uniquely yours. I think we've done that throughout the building. Once you enter into the space, you get to see what the menu is for the day. You sign into our little sign-in sheet with just your name, and then you can go through. We have a fantastic--

It's like a hot and gold server bar. You go into a line like you would if you walked up to a deli, I guess you could say, and then you're able to see all of the options. They help plate whatever you're interested in. The food's always fresh, hot, cold, you could tell, and it was so fantastic when I just-- Gets me giggled is everybody always has smiles. You always know everybody's excited for you to take your first bite.

They want to talk to you about the food, they want to engage in conversation. You're so overwhelmed that people are happy. You're like, "Whoa, okay. Getting excited about it." That's the whole hype of the whole experience itself. Is that feeling of you're in a safe place, we want you to be here, we're excited for you to be here and we want to share this meal with you. It is not just about the food. The food is phenomenal, but it's about the experience. The experience of the meal, that community experience, for sure.

[00:21:51] Colby: It sounds like a community experience by the community for the community.

[00:21:57] Casey: Yes, exactly. Colby. Exactly.

[00:22:01] Colby: It sounds beautiful. Oh my Gosh, I'm just-- I can feel your excitement. I have goosebumps on my thighs right now from just the space itself and the natural lighting. I think so many community service providers end up in old buildings with no lighting for funding, but it's just so rare that you hear about community-based programs that have such beautiful spaces and it can be such a barrier.

People don't want to walk into a place with fluorescent lighting and feel like they're in an undignified environment, but it sounds like y'all are really doing the opposite, and the conversation cards. I can imagine coming to this for the first time you see everyone else talking, you're maybe a little overwhelmed, not sure what to do. Maybe you don't know anyone.

You see everyone else interacting and it'd be so easy to feel like an outsider. You mentioned that stigma before too, so that might be a feeling that clients might be familiar with and it might be easy to fall back into that, but then there's conversation starters. There's reasons and ways to facilitate interaction and that social aspect of food. Really acknowledging that part is just absolutely beautiful.

File name: STP Episode 9 Project.wav

[00:23:12] Casey: We love to do that, and what we also do is we don't strategically place staff. Staff eats also with the crew.

[00:23:19] Colby: Oh, nice.

[00:23:20] Casey: What's really nice is you have, from our rockstar CEO to our fantastic receptionist, to case managers, to our medical team, all of them come down to the space to help create the community. What's fantastic is you might be sitting next to the CEO having a conversation about what's the best dog food, or where's the best dog park, and you don't even realize it, or you just feel that connection.

We really try to not create that hierarchy of like, "Oh, well you'll never be able to talk to these people, or you don't know who they are." We want them to invite them to that community of we're all one, we're all together making this happen. We're all building these relationships. I think that's really a little bit different than maybe sometimes you see in food settings of who's there at the table with clients and that hierarchy of, "Oh, it's just staff serving them."

No clients are serving, clients are volunteering, community partners are volunteering. We've been really blessed in Tulsa to have such an open-minded, very inclusive, very empowering community that want to support communities like ours.

[00:24:25] Colby: That is so dignified. Talk about leveling the playing fields, right?

[00:24:30] Casey: Yes.

[00:24:31] Colby: This lunch and this event are so great that staff and CEOs want to come and join. The words are failing me right now, to be honest.

[laughter]

[00:24:41] Casey: I think people sometimes we forget our why. I think if your why is always at the top of like, "Why am I doing this? Or why do I want to do this." I want to create that for other people. I think that energy just comes with the project, and I think our agency's been so great with our why and really reminding ourselves of it that we're excited about these events, where we want everybody to be at the table, we want to have these conversations with clients. We want to hear the good, the bad, and the ugly, and we want to fix that.

[00:25:11] Colby: It's equally as inspiring for clients and customers as it is for staff on all levels. Like I said, leveling those power dynamics is so key to trauma-informed care. I bet it's great for clients and case managers to get to talk about something besides the nitty gritty and the fill out this paperwork, now go to this place. You just get to talk about your dogs, like you said. [laughs]

[00:25:35] Casey: I think that's what's so much fun is we always try to have some fun in this. It's always somebody's got some really great jokes or always somebody wants to

share the next best fast food tip or something. It's not like that, "Okay, now I got to go to my case manager's office." It's, "No, let's enjoy the day, and let's just talk like we're here. We're here, we're people, and we enjoy each other."

[00:25:58] Colby: We're all humans at the end of the day, whether we are a CEO, whether we are a receptionist, whether we are living with HIV/AIDS, Hep C, whatever it might be. We're all human. We all got to eat. We all want some connection, and y'all are really facilitating that. Can you tell me about the relationships that have developed among diners and with staff as a result of the lunch program?

[00:26:22] Casey: I think what's really fortunate about our community is we're more of a long-term community. We don't have a lot of people that go into care and then we don't see them six months later or three months later. We have long-term relationships because we're working with folks with chronic health conditions. I think you already have some barriers already addressed on how do you create these relationships where you get enough or understand enough of what's going on with the person to really help them with their quality of life or help them move to what they would like to see for themselves.

I think this opportunity is really-- I can't express enough how amazing it is to create more meaningful relationships. It is so hard sometimes to do that when you're in your own case management office. I'm saying that as a case manager. You have somebody sitting across from you, you're trying to get paperwork, you don't want to do the paperwork either. Now, it's just something you have to do, but you're on a timestamp and all of this. This gets them out of their office. They have a different hat on their head. They're enjoying food, which is a great way to break down barriers because you're enjoying good food and you're having conversations.

I really think what's been phenomenal is our clients are such a tapestry of experiences, feelings, who they are as a self, their stories, they're just such gifts. When you're able to create an environment where you don't have all these expectations, you don't have to hurry up, you're not rushed, it really creates meaningful work and you really see the person and you see hope and you see the self-worth and how to help assist in the empowerment of them. I can't explain it. It's like you can see it. I think you see it the minute they walk in the door headed to the dining hall, it's like their shoulders are relaxed.

Sorry about that. Sorry, let me take just a second. Their shoulders are relaxed and they know they're in a safe place and they know we're going to take care of them and we want to be a part of their family because they might not have one or they might have lost it or they might be working through some stuff on their own, but they know they can count on us and we don't feel it as luggage. We don't feel it as constraints. We feel it of value and we want to be there for that. I know that's so wild to say about a lunch event. You're like, "Lady, you're talking about lunch here."

[00:28:49] Colby: It's just lasagna.

[laughter]

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[00:28:52] Casey: You're talking about grandma's meatloaf. I think that's what's so amazing, is it takes food sometimes to get people in the door, but once they're in the door, and maybe that's the hook for everybody out there wanting to create this experience, is use food as your hook, but be prepared for so much more because that's what it is. It's so much more. I think we tend to not remember that. I think also when you are making a quality-of-life income or you're able to afford fast food or afford to eat out, you forget how important food is or how important the experience is. When you lose that for a second or when you see that, it's these little things that we can do for clients in these spaces that mean everything to them and to us.

[00:29:40] Colby: In case anyone couldn't hear it, both Casey and I are wiping tears for it [laughter] because that was-- oh my God. You said so many powerful things in there. First, people just want to be seen for who they are. I think especially in a community that has been so stigmatized for decades and decades, being able to walk into a space where no one really cares what your status is. You're there for lunch, you're there because this is your community and the way that probably just takes such a huge weight off of people. Then to your second point that, yes it's a lunch program but it's not really about the food.

[00:30:25] Casey: [laughs] [crosstalk]

[00:30:26] Colby: Your chef is probably making fantastic food with local ingredients, things that I want to come on over for lunch. It's about more than just the food. It's the connection. It's the being seen for who you are. It's building those personal connections, that's what gets us through life. It's not the money, it's not the items we have or the cars we drive. No one on their deathbed is like, "Man I wish I drove a more expensive car." The things people say on their deathbed is, "I wish I spent more time with my family. I wish I went to see my friends more."

Yes, it's just food but what is food cultivating? It's cultivating relationships and support, and for a community that has been pushed into the dark for so long, that is just so meaningful.

[00:31:13] Casey: It is, and I think what's been really fantastic is the evolving of maybe the client only came by themselves for the first year of Second Cup but now they brought their neighbor, and now they brought their friend. It's so amazing because you start to see they feel safe and they want to bring their other friends and family to this event. That's what we start to see, so it becomes where they've re-identified their family, or re-identified their social network, and who's a part of their table they bring to our table and we all share together. Yes

[00:31:48] Colby: Oh, my heart is melting. My next question I think we answered it but if there's anything you want to add why do people keep coming back?

[00:31:59] Casey: People all come back for some of the same things we've been talking about during this interview, is safety. They want to feel heard and seen, truly seen. People tend to forget that when you're a part of a community where you don't feel

File name: STP Episode 9 Project.wav

safe to be seen you have to worry about little things like bathroom or what you disclose in discussions and all these things, and we want to have none of those barriers. I think just having some safety knowing I'm going to be accepted, there's no shame, no blame, no judgment.

I can come in if I've been using the substance in the parking lot. I can come in if I haven't showered in two days. I can come in, I've had a horrible week with my mental health. I think all of that is really embraced at our facility because that's our why. We want them to feel like they're of value, they're important, they're listened and they're heard. That's a big reason why they keep coming back. Also, the agency does a great job on amplifying the things that work.

The things that we see that we have had, clients' experiences have been extremely positive, they really want more of. We don't just recreate the will of something new, we say how can we amplify that and make that even bigger and better. I love that about our organization. We're always innovative. We're always trying to come up with the next thing. We want clients in Tulsa, Oklahoma, or in the 23 other counties that we serve to have the same experience as they would in Los Angeles at a \$40 million organization.

We want that at our \$3 million organization. We're always encompassing that. Another thing is when they give client feedback I think they can actually see it working. We can't automatically make it happen maybe instantly if they want a red leather sofa, but we're going to try to incorporate it. They wanted Mrs. Dash in the pantry and of course, I bought Mrs. Dash. I'm like you tell me all the seasoning you want and we'll buy it. We tend to forget that.

If we asked the time of clients we say we want to hear your voice. We say we want to hear your feedback but we don't implement any of that, I think that's discouraging to them.

[00:34:02] Colby: Definitely.

[00:34:03] Casey: Making the effort of how can we incorporate what they're telling us and how can we make sure that they're sitting at the table when we make decisions like this. That's really important as well and our agency does a great job on doing that for sure.

[00:34:16] Colby: Oh, that is just amazing. It's really easy to step into a performative role of caring about clients, and saying, "Yes, we're going to do a survey. Thanks for taking the time to fill this out." To be honest, no one loves doing a survey. No one is like, "I'm stoked to give my feedback," but they take the time and it's something that they do give to you. It's a service they're offering.

Then if they don't see any changes come about that, it can make people feel their voice doesn't matter, they are not heard. What they have to say isn't important enough to make changes on. I'm sure when someone said, "We want Mrs. Dash in the pantry," and the next day they walked in and there was the row of Mrs. Dash

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[00:34:56] Casey: Right. [laughs]

[00:34:56] Colby: They were like, "Yes, my opinion matters. My voice matters. I matter here." That is the goal of a trauma-informed approach. Tulsa CARES is just embodying that to the sky. [laughs] The sky's the limit. Y'all are in the sky with a trauma-informed approach. We're now over three years out from our, I think it was what? March 14th, 2020. I think that was the day that lockdown went into effect. Was the lunch program operating before COVID, during COVID, and how did it change after COVID?

[00:35:33] Casey: Great question. Pre-COVID, Second Cup has been around for over 10-plus years. It's evolved as we've grown as an organization and as a community for sure. It's always been a part of what we are about and who we are creating that community, and also realizing how important nutrition is, whether it's with our medical condition, mental health condition, or just quality of life. Pre-COVID, it was every Tuesday. Every single day of the week we offered a lunch for them to be able to access. During COVID, we had to completely stop everything.

We were partnering at that time with other agencies that were doing a drive-through food program, or we were purchasing more gift cards to be able to get more food assistance. We were even at that time doing some of the food boxes where it would be delivered to clients so they get access food during COVID for ones that had transportation barriers. We even did a lot of Walmart pickups where clients would have Walmart. They tell us what they wanted and do that. That's how we addressed it, a weekly lunch type of format because we weren't able to provide it, especially due to our community having way more suppressive immune system than maybe somebody who doesn't have HIV or Hepatitis C.

Then only a couple of months ago is where we wanted to roll back out Second Cup. We were a little nervous about Monkeypox because that had come out. We were a little bit nervous that some of our area had higher rates of COVID. We were going back and forth about, do you have to have the vaccine? Do you not? Is that stigmatizing for some folks and not for others? We rolled it out where we're only offering currently Second Cup two times a month. We offer it one Tuesday and then we take a break. The week we take a break, we offer farmer's market for clients to come get fresh fruits and vegetables, and then the next week we do Second Cup again. Then the week after we do another event of fresh fruits and vegetables for them to enter.

[00:37:23] Colby: Even if you aren't doing second lunch, there's still opportunities for them to engage.

[00:37:28] Casey: Yes. What we ended up rolling out prior to reopening up our lunch event is we had farmer's market and we tied food to that. We had a to-go lunch or to-go food. We did a lot of higher quantity size and that kind of initiative so that way they could maybe use two to three meals out of the food that they got when they picked up their fresh fruits and produce, for sure.

[00:37:53] Colby: It sounds like even when the social aspect of food and connection wasn't available, you still had the other aspects of food to lean into. The healthfulness, probably the beauty of it. You said farmer's market. I love going to the farmer's market. Personally, I don't really like beets, but I love looking at beet.

[laughter]

[00:38:14] Casey: I agree. I have a picture of radishes on my phone right now. I don't necessarily like to eat them but they're just so colorful. That made me smile. I think at that time we knew that it wasn't always about food. We had to get more inventive. We did more groups on Zoom and more opportunities for bingo, interactive bingo, or interactive socialization groups knowing that food was helping do daily living activities and help supplementing if they couldn't go out, but we knew that we needed to figure out a way to help them so they're not so isolated as well. Sure.

[00:38:51] Colby: COVID was very isolating for everyone but I imagine as things started to ease up and people started going out, I imagine folks with suppressed immune systems like those who are living with HIV or Hep C, were probably still quite tentative or hesitant to go back out in public.

[00:39:08] Casey: Yes, completely. You're right. One cough and if you're CD4, viral load, you're not suppressed. That really could be detrimental to you, and it's harder to bounce back, especially when you don't have access to healthy foods or you don't have access to the vitamins and the things that you need to nourish your body. For sure.

[music]

[00:39:41] Colby: My final question to you is, what do you, Casey, stock your pantry with literally or figuratively?

[00:39:51] Casey: I love this question. I think this is what should be asked by everyone because it means so much, and I think it really encompasses us as humans, as how we're always trying to grow and improve and how we want to be seen and heard. I think the biggest part is things that bring me joy. I have to be laughing, I have to feel the hope, I have to feel empowered and I think what's fantastic about that is food can do that for you. I've looked at food as, like you've said, a small vehicle on my big highway and I've asked myself what are all the pieces that it's going to have?

For me, I like food that look awkward and fun and it's hard to say quinoa and kis, kus, kus, kas, kus. I like the stuff that make you smile and laugh when people say them wrong, say them right. I love food that maybe have some hot sauce to it to give you a little bit of that. I like food that's sweet to the touch. Definitely, I think my pantry has all of the things because it's all of the emotions that come with it sometimes.

[00:41:05] Colby: Food does play to our emotions. I absolutely loved when quinoa started to become popular.

[laughter]

[00:41:13] Casey: Sometimes I just didn't even know what someone was talking about and then I would like, they would write it down and I was like, oh, quinoa, oh, that's the word you say.

[00:41:22] Colby: Yes. Then they're like, "Oh, is that how you say it?" And I'm like, "I don't know, that's how I heard it once."

[00:41:28] Casey: See, it's like those are the fun foods that we try to put in our pantry for people to try them one time.

[00:41:33] Colby: Yes.

[00:41:34] Casey: How much fun, like wheat germ, people are like, "Germs? I'm not going to eat germs." And I was like, "No, you have to try it." Now we keep it. It's a staple. I think that's what's been really cool too, is like how do you create conversations around food because sometimes the word food is so emotionally tied, it has so much trauma with it.

It has so much other history that you've got to break down a little bit of that to even have a conversation about. You don't want to start off saying, "Are you healthy eating?" "Whoa. Hold up. Time out. What does the word healthy even mean?" You want us to say, let's just talk about food, the down and dirty, and what we love about it, so, no. I want to say I got a little bit of everything in my pantry and I need it all to be as successful as I am.

[00:42:22] Colby: I love that because that is literally, we need a little bit of everything to make a delicious meal. Figuratively, we need a little bit of everything to be successful in this world. You can't just eat ramen all day every day but a little ramen on a rough night.

[00:42:37] Casey: Oh, yes. Makes the whole deal. I totally agree.

[music]

[00:42:53] Tee: Wow. What a powerful and inspiring interview.

[00:42:58] Colby: I was not joking when I said it was a true pleasure to get to chat with Casey.

[00:43:05] Tee: She and her team put so much time and care into the services they provide and experiences they create as exemplified by this lunch program and she said it isn't actually about the food, although a piece of the pie, but more so the connections and experience but they do make that food sound good, don't they?

[00:43:29] Colby: Yes, they do. That brings us to some of the domains that jumped out to me when she was talking about that food. First, the care that goes into selecting the

menu and making the food beautiful. She explicitly pointed out the importance of incorporating color in the meals they serve. AKA, the aesthetic of the food. Food feels so much more special when it's beautiful.

[00:43:54] Tee: Not only the aesthetic of the food itself but the beauty of the lunchroom. The natural light, tablecloths, the dining setup, so much care has been given to making a safe and comfortable space in which to enjoy a meal and connection.

[00:44:12] Colby: Very true. She also spoke to the moral aspect of food, like sourcing produce from local farmers, building the menu around what's in season, and utilizing sustainable practices to deal with leftover food. From the beginning to the end of the food's life, Tulsa CARES tries to offer food in a way that supports the earth and local farms.

[00:44:35] Tee: One area that I think cannot be overlooked when working with the population living with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C is the health aspect of food. People living with these conditions often are immunocompromised, so receiving and being able to absorb adequate amounts of micro and macronutrients or vitamins and minerals to support immune function is extremely important.

[00:45:00] Colby: They even went as far as to consider what kind of pharmaceuticals their clients might be taking and what foods they might not be able to consume because of the food-drug interactions.

[00:45:12] Tee: Precisely. This one probably seems obvious, but the way they encourage socialization and interaction around the meal, from having lunch with the CEO to the conversation starters, so much of this lunch program encourages social interaction and connection.

[00:45:31] Colby: I just love those conversation starters. It is such an intentional move to start interaction and create community, aka feeding that social domain.

[00:45:44] Tee: Yes, yes. Now, Casey maybe didn't mention the sacred or religious aspects of food specifically, but I feel like what is really sacred in this program is the community, and sacred can take many forms and shapes depending on the person.

[00:46:02] Colby: True, and if someone came to Casey or one of the staff members and let them know that they had a dietary restriction because of their faith, I have no doubt in my mind that the Second Cup Lunch team would make sure that client got the food that they felt good about and comfortable eating.

[00:46:19] Tee: That really speaks to community support. The Tulsa CARES team encourages everyone to show up exactly as they are and be uniquely theirs and to know that they will be welcomed and accepted for everything they are and everything they are not.

[00:46:36] Colby: So much so that people even bring their friends. We don't bring people we care about to places we don't feel comfortable or welcomed in. The fact that the lunch is spreading just by word of mouth in a community that has been shut out from and stigmatized by much of society for such a long time is a true testament to the welcoming community that they are creating at Tulsa CARES.

[00:47:02] Tee: Like Casey said, food is a small vehicle on a big highway. It's not really about the food, it's about bringing people in and together so they can be their best selves.

[00:47:15] Colby: You can't meet people where they are until you can really hug them for who they are. That is another inspiring quote from Casey and really highlights the trauma-informed approach that Tulsa CARES is taking.

[00:47:30] Tee: For more information on Tulsa CARES, you can find them online at tulsacares.org or on Facebook and X, formerly Twitter, [@TulsaCARES](https://twitter.com/TulsaCARES).

[00:47:44] Colby: Did you enjoy today's episode or want to share your thoughts? Did you notice other ways in which the domains showed up in the Second Cup Lunch program? Share your thoughts with us on our peer learning community. The link for that is in our show notes.

[00:47:59] Tee: We would like to extend a huge thank you to Casey Bakhsh for showing her journey with Tulsa CARES and for all of the amazing work they are doing in their community.

[00:48:11] Colby: We'll be back soon with more conversations and insights from local leaders doing great work in their areas. Until then--

[00:48:20] Tee: Ciao. This podcast is a product of Leah's Pantry, made possible by the funding from the United States Department of Agriculture, the USDA, and their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, an equal opportunity provider and employer. Visit calfreshhealthyliving.org for healthy living tips. Thank you so much for hanging with us, and 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.,

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