

Margarida Celestino (00:12):

In last week's episode, I shared a bit about the role of the Boys and Girls Club as a safe space for me, as a place where I could engage in the experiences and where my siblings and I connected with adults who showed that they cared. In today's episode, we have a chance to hear directly from Erin Giwer. Erin, who was one of the first people I met in Portland, is the program director at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine. We'll talk with Erin about how the club has worked to learn more about the unique communities that they serve, how they connect with other community based organizations, and how Erin builds relationship that help support each of the young people that come to the club.

Katherine Plog Martinez (00:49):

Margarida has shared what an impact the Boys and Girls Club had for her when she arrived in Portland, Maine, and in particular how powerful you are as a person who supports young people in the Portland community. So with that in mind, one of the things that Margarida has shared as that your club location in particular is always busy, that there are young people coming and going. And in spite of that, you have become kind of the person for a lot of the young people that participate in the club, that you are their go to person when they need something, that you connect with their families. And so we would love to kind of start hearing and understanding how you're able to build so many of those one on one connections, and what really motivates and inspires you to connect with young people in that deep and meaningful way.

Erin Giwer (01:46):

Yes, the Portland Clubhouse location is always very busy. It's an exciting place with a lot of things going on. One thing I think that is really unique about the club is that we get to know a kid and their family and their siblings across a large span of time. So if you have a favorite teacher, you're with them for the school year and then you move on to the next grade. But we see kids every single day, for example, we could see a kid every single day from kindergarten to fifth grade, or from seventh grade until their senior graduation. And so we're able and I'm able to create a really long lasting and strong relationship that is built on years of trust and support and getting to know each other so that I can best help them, and they can have the best club experience.

Something I say a lot is that I want the club members to come to the club to celebrate on their very best day, when the most exciting thing has happened, but I also want them to come and see me on their very worst day, when they need someone that can talk through a challenge or maybe a mistake they made, and really support them through that. And that's the kind of relationship that I try to build with as many members as I possibly can.

And then what motivates me and inspires me, 100% of course the kids. I'm very fortunate and appreciative that I get to wake up every day and go to a job that I absolutely love, and that's because the kids have allowed me to be part of their story. And they've allowed me to build a relationship and we've been able to share experiences, and they can open up to me. And then also, I think another motivation is my own personal experience. I didn't have a club. I didn't have anything like a club in my community. And so I had a particularly difficult household challenge during my high school year transitioning into college, and then also beyond. And I didn't have any type of club. I didn't have any adult mentor that I could go to. And a club and people like the staff members at the club would've been a game changer for me. And so having an adult mentor outside of school and outside of your home, and having a safe place to go, it's so impactful. I try to be what I could've used back then, what I needed back then.

Katherine Plog Martinez (04:09):

So many really powerful things you said in that statement. I think we heard from Margarida that long-term connection to the club was really powerful. And that's what I heard you talking about, Erin, with all of your young people. But I also heard, we talk a lot about people, places, and possibilities, and that

young people need all three, and that ideally you want to find all three in one place, and that's what I heard in your answer, that club is that safe space that I can come authentically as who I am on the good day or on the bad day. There are going to be people there who I know are there to mentor me and support me. I'd love to hand it off to Margarida.

Margarida Celestino ([04:46](#)):

Yeah. So the Boys and Girls Club, specifically the one in Portland, hosts a lot of new families that just moving to town, most of them do not speak English, and still the club is open to having anybody and everybody as long as their willing to participate. How are you able to include those new kids even with language barriers?

Erin Giwer ([05:05](#)):

Yeah, that is a great question because a lot of our population are kids that are brand new to Maine, possibly brand new to the United States, and maybe don't have any English language skills. And to go back a little bit just to explain how we have become a place where a lot of these kids end up after school, we are right in front of the family shelter in downtown Portland. And the family shelter is oftentimes the first stop for our refugee and asylum seeking families. So if you come in as a family and you have a school aged child, oftentimes the shelter or even other families that are currently there will recommend that you go check out the clubs, so that you are kids have somewhere that they can go.

They're getting a hot meal and snacks every day. We have sports. We can help them with academics. We have a pool. They can meet other kids. I mean, that's huge for kids that are brand new to this country. It can be a stressful journey. It can be a lonely journey. And so being able to come to a safe place where you feel welcomed and make new friends, or at least start to feel out the possibilities of what this new community's going to be like, that's something that we are able to provide.

In addition, we continue to try to educate ourselves and understand the needs of the community and then meet those needs, so I think that's another way that we're able to jump in on projects if there is a large community need around anyone, around specific families or around whole populations. And because we've been around a long time, we have a large network of resources, and so we don't have every single thing for every single person, but what we can do is we can leverage our resources or our networks to find resources for families, for other things they need that we might not be able to provide.

Margarida Celestino ([06:57](#)):

So when people think of the Boys and Girls Club, they think of children just going out there to have fun, staying out of the house, maybe being babysat by organization, and just extracurriculars and things like that. But the Boys and Girls Club is not just limited to that. Erin, you have helped not only me, but a lot of my other friends apply for college. You help with editing. You help them find scholarships. You've helped me with applications and just thinking of things that I can do and just planning out my next steps. How does a club facilitate [inaudible 00:07:34] for every student? Because you've helped students who don't qualify for FAFSA, like me, asylum seekers who have to look for other options when it comes to scholarships. How is the club able to identify every need that a student has, depending on their immigration status, their grades, and everything?

Erin Giwer ([07:51](#)):

Well, yes, I think a lot of times parents think, "Oh, you go to the Boys and Girls Club and you play basketball," and they don't realize the full program that we have. So before I answer about the scholarships and how we do that, just a little bit about our program. We do have four focus areas, and we then separate those programming areas by age group. So we have the arts, leadership, health and wellness, and academics. We do try to create kind of a more holistic experience with a lot of different

types of activities, so that we can engage kids who have interest all across the board, whether it is sports or, Margarida, you did writing with us, so writing workshops, things like that, to music and art.

So that's a little bit about what our program does, but then specifically, how we help kids plan their future, that's a big goal of ours. Our mission in general is to inspire and enable all young people, especially the ones that need us the most, to realize their potential and be responsibility and caring citizens, but the way that a lot of times we do that is to help them find a path to their future and help them come up with that plan, whatever that looks like for them. And so Margarida, what you're talking about is kind of informally, and it kind of just happened based out of need is that I have become a person at the club that helps kids with scholarships and helps kids with applying to college, and helps kids figure out FAFSA and whether they're eligible, and whether they're not. And if they're not, what are their other options?

That, I have kind of figured out over years of experience, but we at the club have several in house scholarships that we offer to our club members simply for them just being club members. We also have bigger partnerships. There's the University of Southern Maine, they have a Promise Scholarship program. It's a wraparound scholarship program that follows them all four years. That program started with two Boys and Girls Club kids. And now it's a huge program. It's open to members of community partners all over Southern Maine. And programs like that, we were able to identify a need and be part of something that now has built an amazing opportunity for so many kids. And then also, I do stay in touch with kids after high school. The need of support and just help navigating that process, it doesn't end when they walk across the stage at graduation and get their diploma. That need is still there.

And navigating your first couple years of college can be really stressful, especially if you might be the first person in your family to be doing so, so you've never actually seen what it looks like to be a college student in your household, to have a job and also be a college student. So I do stay in touch with them. It is informal. It's something that I like to do, but I help tutor kids in college. I help them again figure out financial things when they have questions, help them understand homework and apply for scholarships year after year. I do that informally.

But because of that need, and we realize how big a need it is, we are currently building right now a program that is going to follow our kids, it's a coaching program that's going to follow our kids two years post high school, on whatever plan it is that they have, whether it's trade school, community college, or a four year degree, whatever it is that they want to do. They can get a coach and that coach can help them along the way so that they have someone that is there for them, and it's someone hopefully they've already built a relationship with at the club, they've known for quite some time. And so it's someone that can really dig in deep with them and figure out what it is that they need.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([11:52](#)):

I'd love to dig in on just as you were talking about understanding need, whether it's family need or community need, and wondering how you do that. You talked about being connected and out in the community and having the resources. But what does that look like for you to do it? What does it look like to build your staff team's capacity to know and understand community, family, and young people's needs?

Erin Giwer ([12:19](#)):

Yeah. I think being part of a lot of different networks within the community, different projects, allows us all to kind of come around as a community around a family, around a specific population that has a need. Oftentimes, the family shelter identifies needs for us that we're able to jump in on. Oftentimes, a school social worker or school teachers are able to help us come up with a plan, or we can be a part of their plan to help support a family. So for me, I'm part of after school networks, where we all get on,

anybody that works with youths can get on and we can talk about what we have going on. But we can also talk about potential projects or potential needs.

Community groups like United Way and different neighborhood projects and events, all of that kind of keys us into the community and how the community is changing. And I think it's just being really aware of who we're serving. And a lot of that does happen too with those relationships that we build with the kids and their families. They're the best way for us to understand what the need is. And sometimes that does look different for different kids at different stages, or different families at different stages of becoming an American citizen, so that whole process can look different.

And we have kids in a variety of different stages there. Even as a seasonal part-time staff, you're going to experience what it looks like for us to engage with different people in the community at different levels. And then we're going to train on anything that can identify how we can be better at meeting those needs, or identify a new partner that we're going to start a project with. All of that stuff is communicated to our staff so that we're on the same page and can try to make sure that, like you said, the community needs are met and that we're understanding the people and the places and what we can do, and where we fit in.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([14:08](#)):

One of the things that we asked Margarida at one point was, "Is this just Erin? Is this just Mrs. Blue at the library? Is there something in Portland that is helping make all these connections happen?" And I'm hearing from you that there are some infrastructure elements. There are groups that meet, there are places to connect. Can you talk a little bit more about what those connection opportunities are and who coordinates them, and who participates?

Erin Giwer ([14:37](#)):

So Portland Connect Ed is a network of all of the outside of school youth serving organizations. And they have meetings where we all get on and just share what's going on. It is the community partners that help run that and make sure that there are things that are valuable in those meetings, and that the information that's needed about the community is getting through, so that's a great one to sit on so that I know what's going on. And also, a lot of partner opportunities have come through that as well, so just different relationships. And then we're really involved with the schools. We have a great partnership with the schools and we serve a lot of different schools. So those schools and those relationships are very important for them to let us know kind of what is going on.

At the library, we're right around the corner, we serve the same exact kids. So oftentimes, Kelly Blue and I know the exact same families, the exact same kids. And so they're coming to us for different reasons, or again, at different stages of their life, and so we want to be able to partner. We don't want to be a competition. We want to partner and help uplift these kids in whatever way it is that we need to. And so part of that is individuals in our organization creating those really strong community partnership bonds. And part of that is being present for community events, being present for potential projects, and then sitting on networks to help understand what's going on. And that can happen from the school for summer, that can happen for after school programming, and there's different things like that, so it's kind of a mix.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([16:15](#)):

That's great, that move from competition to collaboration and recognizing it really does take everybody to support the young people is huge.

Margarida Celestino ([16:23](#)):

Earlier, you mentioned how you work with teachers, or social workers, or just schools in general. You collaborate with them to make sure that students are getting the support that they need. But how are

you able to identify the students who are not speaking up, or the students who just don't approach you and tell you what's happening at school?

Erin Giwer ([16:40](#)):

We do have really strong relationships with the schools. And so if we have a concern, we can raise that concern to a school. And that may be something that they are better equipped to handle on their end. And then for kids that we're not really sure what's going on, or like you said, they're not speaking up, unfortunately, it is oftentimes patience, and I do like to have conversations. I mean, you know, Margarida, kids stop in my office all the time. And I love that, and I've tried to create a space that's safe for those conversations and a space that is fun, but also relaxing and a place to come to if you need something, or if you just want to say hello.

So I think part of that is also making sure that they know that we're available. And if they don't want to do that at that point, then we just are patient and we continue to check in, and we continue to try and build that relationship.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([17:37](#)):

Erin, I don't know what your experience has been in the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine, but I know a lot of out of school time programs have really been struggling with staff turnover and hiring staff after the pandemic. And so lots of new people coming in, and it sounds like to me that you guys do a lot of work to hire from the community to keep those connections and diversity. But I'm wondering what it looks like to help support your staff in being able to do what you just talked about, to have that patience, to do things that build trust. I'm wondering kind of what that training looks like for them. But I'm also wondering: What's your staff culture look like? How do you build those relationships on trust with each other to then be able to do the same with the young people that you serve?

Erin Giwer ([18:23](#)):

We definitely want our staff to be reflective of the community that we serve. We want staff on our team that can have shared experiences with our kids in a variety of different ways. So getting a diverse team is very important and it's kind of at the core of everything that we do to provide equitable opportunities for all of the kids in the community. So we want to make sure that we have fun and that we help them understand the impact of what it is that we do. And so good training for sure, we also with our staff, because a lot of them are alumni, so they're previous club members, they kind of get what the club's about. And part of the reason they're there as staff members is because this is like a second home and they want to be a part of it still. Whether it's volunteer or staff, they still want to be there.

And so that for us can help us get over those hurdles because they kind of get it. They know what the club does. They know what it was like when they were there and they genuinely want it to be a similar experience for other club members. So I think we also do that through some of our programming, through some of our leadership programming, where we have the teens become mentors and role models for these young kids.

In addition, we also started a few years back, our young alumni board inclusion program. And so what that is, is bringing on, diversifying our board by bringing on previous club members. And so not only are we helping the board hear new voices, but we're elevating those voices, the voices of our kids who are now adults, and then giving them that experience, the experience of a full board member and what's that like, and making those connections for their future.

Margarida Celestino ([20:20](#)):

Erin, as you mentioned, the club is very diverse in the overall staff and everything. But you guys have staff of all different races, different ages. Has it always been like this? Or did it have to change over time with the new incoming members and things like that?

Erin Giwer ([20:37](#)):

That is a great question. So I have been at the clubs eight years. It looked a little bit different as far as the languages that were being spoken, but yeah, it was definitely a diverse group of kids still, and it was a diverse group of staff and volunteers. I do remember there were other volunteers like me that I interacted with at different areas because I volunteered at two of the clubs, two different ones. And so I interacted with volunteers that some of them could've been parents of kids, or were just people that wanted, like me, to work with kids. And those people also had a lot of I think shared experiences with the kids. And I don't know what that looked like back then, but I imagine that it was probably both sides where the clubs were wanting to bring in people that were diverse and that could help best support our kids, but also that the community members saw something that they wanted to get involved in.

And then I've always felt that diversity has been a top priority in the time that I've been at Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine. So yeah, I think it is something that has evolved, but I also think that it has kind of been woven into how we operate as an organization in the community.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([22:02](#)):

Erin, you said you're eight years in. Right? And we probably have some folks that are much newer to either a Boys and Girls Club somewhere in the country, or to another out of school time partner organization, who are hearing you talking about knowing the community and the kids and the family and connecting with other partner organizations and connecting with school. And they're thinking, "I would love to do that, but those aren't built in my community, or I don't know how." What advice would you have for someone about getting more connected to the broader learning and development ecosystem?

Erin Giwer ([22:34](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. And like you said, I am many years in at this point, and I've been fortunate to create some really good relationships that then have introduced me to other relationships. But I do think that being able to reach out to, even if you only have one community partner that you really are solid with, and reaching out to them and asking who they're involved with, and trying to use that to network your way into opportunities and relationships that might be helpful for you, being really involved with the schools. Oftentimes, the schools will be able to point you in the direction of maybe one of those outside of school or after school networks, or summer learning networks. So I think you really have to be an active participant when you are starting out, when you're really trying to make those relationships and engage with the community.

But I also think you need to be present in your community. Go to the events on the weekends. Sometimes it's just simple conversations that end up kind of becoming a domino effect that really gets you in the door of different networks that are going to help propel you forward. And then I think with families, same thing, if you really want to engage with families, you really want to engage with kids, you got to put in the time. You've got to be able to really be genuine about getting to know them and remember what they told you and check in with them. And just let them know that you're here for them, and really make sure that they understand where you're coming from and what kind of resources you can provide, and then just start to build those relationships. But it does take time and it takes a lot of intention. And sometimes it can feel a little bumpy, and sometimes it can feel a little slow. But I think if you can show up for the kids and you can show up in the community, I think both of those problems kind of work themselves out.

Katherine Plog Martinez ([24:26](#)):

Thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you for doing all you do for the Portland community. We really appreciate your time.

Erin Giwer ([24:35](#)):

Yes, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

Karen Pittman ([24:40](#)):

There are a wide range of community based programs and settings in almost every community. Boys and Girls Clubs and other out of school time programs have long focused on helping you thrive. As Erin described, they offer opportunities for young people to explore interests, build new friendships, master new skills, grow socially, emotionally, and cognitively, and learn teamwork and leadership. In the conversation with Erin, I heard each of the five guiding principles for whole child design. As you reflect on this week's episode, I encourage you to think about the places and spaces in your community that are skilled in creating positive environments. What can you learn from them? How are you aligning practices and systems? What would it look like to help young people connect to more opportunities and experiences to help them thrive?

Katherine Plog Martinez ([25:25](#)):

Join us next week as we dive into the teen library in Portland and talk with Kelly Blue, the teen librarian. Visit us at Changing the Odds Remix to learn more about the guiding principles for whole child design and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine. Follow us on social media to join the conversation about the power of community and learning and development ecosystems.