

Saskia Epstein:

I am Saskia Epstein, senior vice president of PNC Bank in New England, and I'm so excited to be here today with Justin Pasquariello, president and CEO of the East Boston Social Centers alongside Sarah Muncey, co-founder of Neighborhood Villages. Welcome.

Justin Pasquariello:

Thanks so much for having us, Saskia.

Saskia Epstein:

Thank you. I'd love to hear from both of you, but Sarah, can you start, share a little bit more about yourself, the organization that you co-founded, and talk to us a little bit about how Neighborhood Villages and East Boston Social Centers are working together.

Sarah Muncey:

Great. Well thank you so much for having me. My name's Sarah Siegel Muncey and I'm the co-founder along with Lauren Kennedy of Neighborhood Villages. Our mission is a child care system. The way we have a healthcare system and a K-12 system, we want a system. And when we first started this work together, Lauren, coming from healthcare and me from K-12 school operations and education, first we thought we'd start a school and then we met with a few amazing schools.

We started just going to visit schools, and Justin was one of the first people we met with, East Boston Social Centers was one of the first schools that we went through a bunch of their different programs. And we very quickly realized that the schools were not the problem, the world did not need Lauren and Sarah to start the perfect schools. The schools are great. What was missing was infrastructure to wrap around these schools. The way that K-12 schools have, the way that other industries have, there's no infrastructure in child care. It's 7,500 small businesses around the state.

So we set out to change that instead of starting a school very much because of how amazing East Boston Social Centers was. So we say that we take care of people who take care of children. We trust people who take care of children, and we bring them the resources they need. And you'll see that theme in our work with East Boston Social Centers that Justin and I can tell you more about. But we support schools and family child care homes and families went sometimes with teaching and learning, so quality of education and we look for accessibility of early childhood education, whether people can find it, whether they can afford it. So if there's innovation around that, we're always down.

We innovate around workforce pathways. That's a lot of the work we've done together with Justin and Michelle and his amazing team, building careers for teachers. We've worked really deeply on mental health work on thinking about early relational health. We've worked together in emergencies like COVID and this recent migrant influx, which we really had to bear. And then now in the emergency of increased oversight and increased involvement for especially immigrant populations, which Justin's had to deal with a lot.

So we come in almost like a school district and wrap around real schools when we get something right because we do it very messy in real time with his team. And, "What's the problem and how could we fix it? Is this what you meant?" "Nope, that didn't work." "How about this?" It's very iterative and messy. It takes a lot of trust that we've built over time, but was also just inherent in sort of the nature of our partnership.

And then when we get things right, we can take them to scale, so we get them right at places like East Boston Social Centers and then when possible we take that work and make an apprenticeship program

for the state. We take that work and do COVID testing statewide. We take that work and we build it into professional pathways for the Commonwealth or for some other larger body. But you have to get it right. Pretty messy and it has to be in real schools.

Saskia Epstein:

Sarah, I love that Justin and East Boston Social Centers are part of Neighborhood Village's origin story. Justin, this is the perfect segue. Talk to us a little bit about the great school that you lead and so much more. East Boston Social Centers has such a long history. Tell us how you came to be at East Boston Social Centers, a little bit about your background and then talk to us about the work of your great organization.

Justin Pasquariello:

Thanks, Saskia. And this partnership that Sarah was talking about, it has really been a transformative partnership for the social centers that just want to start with saying that. I think when I look at the most effective social change efforts in any space, they have three common elements. I think they're deeply grounded in relationships. They follow the evidence and they do whatever it takes. And Neighborhood Village does an outstanding job of those three things being grounded in relationship with us. Sarah has this amazing attitude of if there's a problem, we're going to do something about it. She does not take no for an answer on that. So it's been really exciting to innovate with them. And then following the evidence, as she said, evaluating and continuing to iterate to get where we need to get to.

I came to my work in the nonprofit sector in social change through my personal experience. I was in the foster care system and spent time in kinship care and was adopted when I was nine and was incredibly fortunate in many ways have a lot of love and support from my birth family. Wonderful adoptive family, was able to go to schools that were good public schools that gave me support and enabled me to do well at things and to get positive reinforcement for that. And so through my experience of having everything work through some challenging times, wanted to figure out how I could bring that to other kids.

So when I graduated from college, I started a mentoring program for foster children where I'm fortunate to still be on the board and see the outstanding work that they do, and then wanted to think about what do we do to prevent the need for people to enter the child welfare system in the first place? How do we help people to thrive? And so did some work in consulting and research and policy, thinking about policies to help particularly low-income young children to thrive by addressing economic hardships. And at the same time loved this community of East Boston where I lived. Found a lot of joy in this place and saw that our early childhood system is the place where we can have the greatest return on social investment of any investment we can make. And yet as a country, I think we do a pretty bad job of making the investments that we should make.

And so it was really interested in being able to have a foot in the ground of doing that direct work in early education and care and early childhood and being able to connect with policy work. And that and our commitment to increasing joy in community brought me here and I've been here for over eight years now. East Boston Social Centers has been here since 1918. To what you were saying, Saskia, we are seeking to catalyze community belonging and joy in East Boston and surrounding communities. We want to increase social well-being. So what we mean by that is helping people to have strong relationships, to have agency and to have connection to purpose in community. And we do that through serving as a backbone, including for our Every Child Shines work to help all kids in East Boston enter kindergarten, joyful, thriving, and ready to learn. And then through direct service with people of all ages.

And our largest programs are our early education and care programs. We're the largest provider of early education in East Boston with 161 children from infancy through preschool. And circling back to my experience in child welfare, about 50 of the children across early ed in school age come to us from the Department of Children and Families, about 90% come to us with a subsidy or voucher. We've been working to strengthen intergenerational connections in our programs like our older adults knitting blankets for new babies in our community and for all of our preschoolers. We recently had a play where our sprouts, preschoolers designed the set and wrote the script with their class and then performed it for staff and for older adults in our building who they often partner with. So that's one thing I would just elevate our intergenerational work.

And then the other is that we have an internship program where our teens are developing leadership skills and then working in our early education and care classrooms. And we've been also exploring, partnering more with Neighborhood Villages on this, on working toward apprenticeship with this. But it's been a really great experience. I think the teens have gained a lot from it and it's really helpful for our classrooms too, which has been something I've been really excited to see. And so we want to do whatever it takes to help those children and families to thrive. And Neighborhood Villages is an outstanding partner to do that.

Saskia Epstein:

Both of you have tremendous expertise in early education, but it strikes me listening to you that you are marrying policy, research, practice and that that work is really driven by your personal experiences. And I'm curious as to how that social entrepreneurship mindset has really shaped your leadership style. What brought you to this work and what continues to find its way woven into your leadership style?

Sarah Muncey:

I came from school operations. You do not have a choice of what projects you're going to take on. If the city of Boston puts out a boil order on water and you have 700 children in your care in that moment, you figure it out. I, as a school operations professional in K-12 have dug a ditch in heels because the art room was flooding and we realized, "Yes, we'll get someone in, but for now, like, ah, we need art class, so I'm going to divert the water." That's sort of your mindset In school operations, you also have to be planning ahead, but whatever comes at you, you do not choose whether or not you deal with it.

That was what felt really shocking to me when I came into the early ed world from the K-12 world was like, why is the principal, the director who we call a principal in another setting... She's a cultural leader and an instructional leader. That's who that person was hired to be. What is she doing digging the ditch, doing enrollment, sitting in the front, putting salt out on the front when people walk into the walkway, washing the nap masks cutting the strawberries.

That's where we started when our partnership with East Boston Social Centers was like, not that that was their fault. Every school looked like that. Every single amazing organization in the city of Boston and beyond, had overtaxed leadership because they didn't have an ops manager like you had in K-12. Right?

Saskia Epstein:

What compelled you, looking at those problems to want to try and solve them?

Sarah Muncey:

Because they're totally solvable. Like today, if it's a nice day, a bunch of very rich people today will go to space for fun, and your listeners know some of them, they will go on a trip to space for fun. We center

that in our work. We're like, No, no, no. Of course you can do COVID testing." You know how we figured out how COVID testing? From a huge company, a huge for-profit company that has warehouses. And I said, "What are you doing to keep your warehouses open?" And they said, "There's this thing called pool testing."

And then we brought that fancy thing that was only being given to for-profit, to, "Let's sell as much furniture and as much home goods and as much stuff." People were selling so much stuff in COVID, right? Those warehouses were open. So you look at what people think is important and you say, "How do you do that?" Because any of this is doable. We do diaper distribution, we made the biggest registered apprenticeship in this state. We do whatever because Justin's team and the folks at other schools we work with knew just what they needed.

So none of this is that hard. And when people say it's so hard, healthcare is hard. K-12, hard. Bridges, super hard. We do hard things all the time. AI, it's been hard. But because they're lucrative, people are willing to lean into them. So we bring that mindset to everything, "This is doable. Don't tell us it's not. Let's put that part of the conversation behind us." Whatever infrastructure is missing such that if Build Back Better had passed or some other piece of windfall legislation comes in the future and there's the \$4 billion a year that we need to have a functional child care system, "What does that look like? What's the distribution system? Who are the jobs? How does it work? What are their qualifications? How much do they make? How much do this actually cost?"

That's what drives our policy work. It drives our program work. But we figure it all with people with centers like East Boston Social Centers and family child care providers and grandparents and aunties and families so that we're making stuff they actually need and it actually works. We do want the system we create in Massachusetts to be better than even healthcare or K-12. We want it to be the best. So I would say that we bring this idea that all of this is doable and that teachers and existing centers and caregivers already know what they need, into our work. And that is a good sense of urgency. It means, "Oh, no, no, no, no. We kind of know what they're talking about. Let's try it this way. Let's try it this way. It only costs this much. These are the results. Okay, let's do it large scale." We don't need to wait on windfall legislation. We can keep working towards this system right now.

Saskia Epstein:

I've heard of a lot of entrepreneurs speak with the sense of urgency that you're bringing to this conversation and that you bring to your work. What's maybe distinctive and really interesting is really starting with the belief that you will be successful and that it can be done. And that is such a simple but powerful statement and no one would argue that the child care or early ed field is simple. So it's a very powerful idea and I think we're all benefiting from that mindset. Justin, talk to us about how you lead East Boston Social Centers both as an entrepreneur and as an organizational leader, and how do you ensure that your programs are successful while you are trying to do system reform work at the same time?

Justin Pasquariello:

Yeah, I'm thinking about a few things, I'm thinking about, as you talked about how this might be relevant for those business leaders listening to this conversation. So I think one really important thing, and one of the things that's really fun about the job is listening to the people who we're doing this work on behalf of, and working with them to co-design solutions just in the way that Sarah talked about doing with us. I'm really proud that we have the social centers and others get to be part of developing what's happening in the neighborhood that we got to partner with them and our teachers inform the

development of curriculum that is now being deployed internationally and being deployed at the social centers.

And similarly in our Every Child Shines work in particular, we bring people together from across the community. We bring together parents who speak English and Spanish and Portuguese and French and Arabic and people who work across sectors in government, in nonprofits, across our community and ask what they need most to help all kids enter kindergarten, joyful, thriving, and ready to learn. And then we use that to guide our strategy. So we've heard from the community a desire for one place where people can go to meet a variety of needs.

We just conducted more than 460 surveys that confirmed that need, and people both want stronger social connection and they want support in removing the barriers to meeting basic needs and helping their kids thrive. So I think just as it's true for businesses, when you start with what the customer needs most, you can develop better solutions that are more relevant and will have more impact. Something else that I think that's relevant for business is that we're trying to increase joy in community. And so in terms of managing this organization, I think the most effective way to do that is to start with increasing the joy of our staff.

So we just had our third annual staff Joy Day last week, which was a lot of fun. We brought in an exciting speaker who talked with us, her name's Charity Bell, highly recommend her, who talked with our team about finding joy in this moment, that there will always be challenges in the times that we live in. So how do we find joy in and despite that and bring that out. And then we had a kind of Joy Olympics of our team. So we believe that starting there, that making it a great place to work helps us to do better work in our programs and to have more impact in our communities.

And then just something else that this theme is making me think about a little bit and connecting back with what Sarah said is the need for us to imagine really differently and that Boston is a place that has a great history of doing that. And Sarah, when you talk about a healthcare system that is fully funded or a K-12 system that... And when I say fully funded, I'm not saying they're able to do everything they want, but they're reaching the population that they're designed to reach and there's no reason that our early childhood system can't be the same.

It is not written in stone that healthcare will be delivered through insurance and reach people in that way and that early education and care will only reach a select few who have subsidy or voucher or enough family wealth. We can design it totally differently and there is no place better than Boston and Massachusetts to think about how do we change the way that we've done things and actually design the system that children and families and communities need.

Sarah Muncey:

Can I add one thing that I think is really special? I know about both of our teams and so many of the teams at amazing early ed organizations in the state, but I don't know how to do all of this, but I can run an organization that quickly identifies that there's no good toddler curriculum in the whole world and then we're like, "Oh no." Because our curricular expert, she knew. Our teaching and learning team, they know.

We've hired experts and sort of the basis of our work is that the expertise that you see in the classrooms that Justin and his team oversee and have in their schools, that's expertise. What's happening on the floors of his classrooms, where people are down on the ground working directly with children and getting in it, that is competency. And you need to wrap around it and develop it and support people because it's really hard work. But what they're bringing is expertise. What our teaching and learning team has in their coaching capabilities is expertise. When we found someone to run our new mental

health, it's early relational health body of work, I'm not an expert at that, but I was able to be like, "Oh, you guys asked us to look into what's missing here and here's kind of what it is. We could try that." Then we bring in someone awesome and not only are they an expert, but they want to do this kind of systems building work.

We look for someone who's going to be excited by that, who's going to be excited when they're like, "Oh, it turns out we couldn't do it this way. We had to pivot." And you're like, "Great, pivot." You need to find people who want to find the path. And I think that's been really fundamental and I see Justin do it all the time in his leadership. I've learned so much getting to watch him lead over the whole course of Neighborhood Villages time is that you really center and trust the expertise of the people you hire. And that means you do it really carefully, but we've built a team that can throw down. That's how I feel about the Neighborhood Villages team. I'm like, "Look what these folks can do." And I think that's a big part of being able to do things quickly and well and positively, is that attitude.

Justin Pasquariello:

Right back at you, Sarah, you've been a mentor to me and helped me as we've built our team here, so thank you.

Saskia Epstein:

Both of you are so intentional about the ingredients that you need to do this work. And Justin in particular, there are not a lot of chief executives that talk about trying to build a culture of joy and include that in their writing and staff retreats and daily practice. That context and also what Sarah described around talent and expertise and honoring and nurturing it is really focused on social capital in a lot of ways, both building it within a network and also within the culture of your organizations. What are the other things that you are being very intentional about and that you think of as core ingredients for your organizations to be successful?

Sarah Muncey:

We're sort of in an interesting place as we go into sort of our 10th year of existence, kind of ninth year of formality. But we were a startup for a long time and then we were in an emergency, then we were like this big thing that didn't feel like a startup, but it was an emergency, it was COVID and we were doing a lot around that, and now it's not that specific emergency and we're not a startup.

And so we're moving into a new place where we really need to be intentional about how everything's organized and sort of how we organize our team and our communications and everything, how that will shape the work and how we want the work to be shaped. So I think we have a lot of freedom. We take seriously the freedom we have to build this thing exactly as it should be built and keep redesigning it. So that feels really important that we're always sort of learning about the organization and growing with it to get to the best possible outcome for the products we're putting into the world. I think really central to our work, almost the secret sauce of our work is letting the ideas come up through the folks who do the work. So we weren't like, "COVID testing would be fun." It wasn't.

We were listening to five centers that we met with in different groups frequently and everyone was like, "Sorry, I'm in a closet. One teacher coughed. I'm covering nap time and she'll be out for 10 days." Because this is when you coughed. Then you spent five days trying to find a COVID test, you drove to some weird parking lot, you got a COVID test and you waited five days for the test. People couldn't be open. It wasn't like we chose it.

And so if you're really listening and really leaning into the expertise, the content expertise of the people in classrooms, the people staffing classrooms, the people running buildings, then the work you made is actually needed. The final thing I'll say is that Neighborhood Villages thinks of itself as like a Lego brick and on the bumps at the top it has to fit into the funding sources, to the government to what's coming. We need to understand how it's going to work, it has to fit into how it's going to be funded.

But the holes on the bottom have to fit right into schools, and if they don't, your genius idea to get training out or money out or whatever, no one will use it. It's not a usable product. But if you really focus on the bumps at the bottom, "Is it going to plug in? And the holes at the top, are they going to fit in?" Then you have usable solutions. And so it's really important to us that not only are we iterating, not only are we being emergent and thinking about new things, but they're the things that are actually going to persist and work and get us closer to an answer.

Justin Pasquariello:

I think like you said, definitely joy and supporting staff are central to everything that we do. In this moment in particular, we're doing strategic planning as an organization. We're thinking about how we continue to live into our vision and all of it has to be done with a framework of resiliency, which I imagine applies to many people in the audience for this podcast too, that this is a time of a lot of uncertainty and a lot of change.

And so we're really focused on how we continue to support our foundation, how we're ready for scenarios that could come up and how we also continue to build toward a vision of a better future, even in the midst of all of that uncertainty. So the path might be a little bit different than it would've been before, but we want to keep that vision centered and also I think for all of us doing social change work to emphasize to those who are supporting the work, the need to continue to support the foundation so that we can build on that as well.

For us as an organization that's been around for 107 years, it also means an increased openness to change in this moment. And so that's part of the kind of cultural journey that we're all on is change can be difficult, it can be uncomfortable, it can be exciting, and I think it's going to be unavoidable. And so how do we prepare to navigate that really well? And one really specific area that I'm thinking about there is related to AI. So that's something that I've been thinking about as we were doing strategic planning work and thinking about three areas with that.

One is how do we improve our work as an organization administratively, programmatically, how do we increase our impact using this new technology? The second is we work with children and families and older adults here. How do we help them to use this well and use this in the way that they need to and also protect them from certain risks that could come with, like, would it be easier to be scammed in the future and other things like that. So how do we do we support people in those ways?

And then as an organization that supports community thriving, how are things going to need to evolve so that we ensure that in this time of rapid change we're continuing to help people and communities to thrive? So those are some big questions that I'm thinking about related to AI.

Saskia Epstein:

Very interesting. As we look to the future, let's take a look also in the rear-view mirror. Tell us what are some of the things that you're most proud of and some of the programmatic accomplishments that you have celebrated?

Sarah Muncey:

The thing that I'm the most proud of is what Neighborhood Villages has grown into. It has sort of organically grown into this organization that meets a lot of needs and fills a lot of holes, but still thinks big and strategically and is looking at the system's vision. And I'm really proud of that and proud of how much people love working at Neighborhood Villages. Our team over the years, we've really worked really hard to make sure that folks feel like they belong and that their work matters and that they're doing it in a way that makes sense.

That's meant navigating a weird time of remote and in-person and different scenarios that we didn't know we'd had to face, but I think we've done a really good job. I think the work that's emerged has really changed the conversation in a lot of ways around what's possible in early education and care. Our impact has been really, really broad. Our curriculum is in six continents and has been downloaded by over 1,200 times, and our podcast reaches a million listeners. And I hope that one of the biggest things that Neighborhood Villages has done is give everyone from teachers and directors to parents, to grandparents and aunties and business leaders a vocabulary around this issue.

If you say reproductive rights to anyone in America, they are going to give you an impassioned couple minutes, no matter what they think. They have the words, they know what to demand from there. They know why they voted for people around those issues or didn't, and they know about really nuanced things. If you ask someone about guns in America, they can tell you about background checks or the Second Amendment. Folks go deep. In childcare we're like, "I don't know what I can ask for."

Because it's this private thing. You went and got yourself pregnant. We treat prenatal to the age of five in this totally different way, "This is private. This is an in-your-home problem. You decided to have children. You figure out what to do with them." Then they turn five and we're like, "Knock, knock, knock. Make sure you give us your child to go to school every day. We really care about that child. We want to spend well over \$10,000 a year for many, many, many years on this child."

That's so weird and unnatural, but it persists as long as we think it's a private problem, a mostly mom problem. Childcare needs to be guaranteed, it needs to be accessible, it needs to be high quality, it needs to be supportive. We want folks to know what that means, to know what to demand. We want them to call their city counselor and other people and be like, "Hey, I'm having twins and I'm on 17 wait lists and I don't think I'm going to find childcare. What should I do next?" As if your water didn't work.

This is infrastructure. If you can't find childcare and you can't ensure that you're giving your baby the best day for their brain and life and you can't work, that's not working for anyone. I think we've really moved the needle a little bit on, and brought new folks into the conversation and I'm really proud of that. Another thing I'll say is that we also have other amazing leadership at Neighborhood Villages beyond me and Lauren and Binal Patel, we really leaned into the expertise of one of our earliest staff members, and she has come to lead in a really profound way at our organization. So much of what we've done successfully was who'd run schools being like, "It's apprenticeship. I assure you what's needed is apprenticeship and let me show you why." And I figured it out.

And so I almost feel like leaning into what in moments feels like her leadership style and other moments feels like sparks of genius, of like, "Oh my God, that's exactly what it is." And it's not just her, there's a lot of other folks on our team that do that, but she does it in a really profound and centralizing way, and I'm proud to lean into leadership like that and expertise like that, and I think it's probably why we've moved so fast.

Saskia Epstein:

That's wonderful. Justin, talk to us about some of the accomplishments and things that you might say are markers of your time at East Boston Social Centers.

Justin Pasquariello:

Our motto is, when all give, all gain, and this is an organization and community that really embodies that. Our chief program officer talks about having never seen an organization where every person who works here is as passionate as the people are here about the work that they're doing every day. So I'm really proud to work with this team and a team that really embodies that and all support each other.

I'm proud to work with this community. East Boston is an incredibly hardworking and tight-knit community, and we have parent partners and others who will do everything they can to support each other here. So it's a great place to be. And it is a partnership about a family whose child had a really difficult diagnosis when the child was in our infant program and how our team came together and provided a variety of supports because those kinds of diagnoses can cause economic challenges for families.

And so we provided wraparound supports and helped with some workforce support for the mom and support for the child, and that family has done really well. We've had fires in this community where we've been called on to be the fiscal agent to gather funds to distribute, and single triple-deckers where more than 30 people have been displaced, and we've been able to help to distribute that assistance. So I'm proud that our community sees us as an organization that can step up when needs like that arise.

I think a lot that is a testament to our partnership with Neighborhood Villages. So in our Boston Pre-K classroom that we are performing far above average in eight out of nine domains. Our lead teacher in that classroom is a story that I'm proud of that she's been with us for 20 years. She's an outstanding teacher. She led our preschoolers to deliver the Pledge of Allegiance at the State of the Commonwealth address last year, and through the partnership with Boston, Pre-K was able to buy a house for herself and her three children, and that should be the story for all of our educators. So I'm proud of that progress, but also the continued work to get our field the compensation it deserves.

On the policy side that Sarah talked about with the leadership of Neighborhood Villages partnership of places like PNC Bank and the Common Start Coalition, Massachusetts has made some big strides that are in some ways unmatched across the country in terms of continuing a C3 grant program that provides foundational support for us to do our work and other investments, and there's a lot more work to do, but it's been a really exciting time to be part of this field and to see this impact.

Saskia Epstein:

I'm struck by the level of gratitude that you have in your expression of pride for the teams that you work with. And I know that that's something that must be innate in you in some ways, but also that you wake up every day with a set of decisions about your level of optimism and positivity. Tell us, what keeps you going? How do you keep your tank full? When you're facing darker moments, how do you find the resolve to keep tackling these tough issues and leading in the way that you are?

Sarah Muncey:

One thing that's amazing, I think, and I'm so grateful for in my work is that the harder and darker things get, the more I'm like, "Oh, so we need to help in this way, in this way, in this way." And when the social fabric comes undone, when we're faced with new things like a pandemic or climate stuff or wildfires, we're getting smoked, there's all these things happening all the time, and we can help. I don't feel helpless. I can see, "Oh my gosh, if all these schools are struggling with this thing, it seems like probably we could do something."

There are times when it's pretty obvious what people need. Things like diapers. We're going to distribute maybe a million diapers for free this year in the state of Massachusetts because we are the

water between the rocks. We are bringing the free diapers from LA and bringing them here and making all these partnerships and getting them out so that people just won't have to worry. In the brightest times, we can do the most forward-thinking and exciting work. The work's always exciting, but as things get hard, our next steps are often really clear.

I mean, when there are ice raids for instance, and you serve a lot of families for whom that can be scary on all these different levels, you actually at a child care center have to plan for that. You have to make a plan for what happens when mom or dad doesn't come. Who is emergency guardianship? What does that look like? That's happening in childcare centers all over America right now. No one's talking about it. Nobody's giving them technical assistance. No one's doing what they would do if we treated them like real businesses or real schools. No one is doing that.

So organizations like East Boston Social Centers and legal aid organizations and churches, and anyone you trust in your community gets you through those moments. Sometimes it can feel overwhelming. There are moments where I'm like, "Oh my God, what are we doing, this huge thing in this scary moment?" But that's what we signed up for. To say anything is possible. You can help people no matter what they're going through because people go to space for fun, again. So I think I got a lot of hope from that.

Also, my kids, my dogs, my husband, my community, all of this feels worth fighting for, and that's how existential I think the childcare issue is. It is intersectional to everything people care about, to every reason that businesses have a hard time attracting people to this state. They can't find a place to live, they can't get childcare. They don't understand how it works. They definitely can't afford it. It's more expensive than college here.

That's why someone doesn't want to move from Ohio, when you found that amazing candidate, this is real. This is why people become homeless. This is why people lose their jobs. It's why they stop contributing to the tax base when their second kid pushes them over the amount they make so they stay home. This touches everything. It's why we have so much remediation in K-12. It's why we don't have as many AP classes. It's why we have more people in prison. It's why people can't read sometimes at the right ages. Everything you could care about is housed somewhere in this issue.

So to me, it feels like super existential and the next steps feel doable and clear, but we have to do it. Our podcast is called No One is Coming to Save Us. And when we first started making it, we were like, "Oh, that's the working title, but it won't be." And everyone was like, "No, that's how I feel. That's how I feel. That's how I feel." And it really resonated with people. What does that say that our childcare podcast is called No One is Coming to Save Us, and it's the perfect name? Because it just feels like this has been a side issue, a private issue, a quiet issue, and families are really struggling. Teachers are really struggling. We can do this and we should do it fast.

Saskia Epstein:

Justin, you were nodding throughout Sarah's remarks just now. So I know she articulated a lot of perhaps what your experiences and outlook is, what are that are helping you have that clarity around purpose and mission that bring you joy and that are fueling your sense of purpose?

Justin Pasquariello:

The kind of mantra for this time that I keep thinking about is just right now everything is okay or some form of that. I think when things feel overwhelming, it can be a good place to just anchor to this moment. And I say some form of that, recognizing that right now everything is not okay for everyone. So far it's been true for us as an organization and for families we're directly working with, and for others I

think maybe we will get through this. Just my kids smiling brings me so much joy. I make space for exercise, for meditation, some of the pillars of joy for social connection. The things most worth doing are those things that we won't accomplish in our lifetimes and the work will continue, but just to be able to do our part to kind of push the ball forward and hopefully make it a little bit better for the next generation.

Saskia Epstein:

This has been a terrific conversation. And is there anything that you would want to highlight for our listeners about the early education and childcare landscape that is really fundamental to the work that you're doing and that you would want to lift up?

Sarah Muncey:

I think one thing that I'll say is that we're going to have to coalesce as a business community, as a politicians and citizens in general around this issue at some point, the pandemic assured that everybody knows this is a real issue. And so I think we should think about how we coalesce around the issue, what we want this system to be like. Make sure that everyone's taking into account the true cost of care, which is actually a really big deal.

We did a study, you can see it on our website, about how much this would actually cost to do really well and it's worth it, but that number's really important, that we look at this real education and that we invest in it that way. And also that this issue, I think right now is having such a moment because childcare is so hard for so many families, but that's really affecting a lot of grandparents, aunts and uncles.

It's affecting the whole social fabric. It's affecting business leaders. It's affecting shift leaders who can't fill daily schedules. And we can really do this. We can really solve this. We modeled the Affordable Care Act here. That's kind of what we need to do is say, "What would this system look like? How much would it cost? When would you get to play in the marketplace so that you get reimbursed at the true cost of care? When would you be like a private school or some other concierge medicine that's outside?" It literally is just that idea.

There's a public good built on a private market. Well, we've dealt with that before. And so we need to think strategically, architecturally about this issue, and then we can find a solution. And one day we will talk about this just like we talked about the ACA starting in Massachusetts, and people barely even remembered that happened, but it did. We tried it here first. And so I think that's where we should be headed. And I just want to reassure anyone listening that it can be done, folks know how to do all the pieces of it. Don't worry about that. We just need to build some architecture, some infrastructure.

Justin Pasquariello:

I love that. I would lift up the early relational health work the Neighborhood Villages is leading, that we are partnering with, that we and everyone I talk with have experienced a really significant increase in behavioral, developmental, and mental health needs among our youngest learners. And I think many of us saw it as being a direct result of family impacts of COVID.

What I'm hearing from people is that we're not necessarily seeing those things decrease as quickly as we might expect given that. So I think there's a need for us, in our programs and with partners like Neighborhood Villages to continue to support kids as early as possible with those challenges so that we can help them to be as ready as possible, to be joyful and thriving and learning by the time they enter kindergarten.

And also, we need to continue to try to understand what's driving some of these challenges if it is beyond COVID, and what do we need to do as a society to address that? I think, yeah, we're facing a societal crisis of disconnection and loneliness. And so I certainly think the social relationships are really important for this. And we do hear from parents in our community that one of the biggest things they want is more connection with each other.

So I think there's a lot of importance in our identifying how we can help people's strengthen those social networks of support, particularly in a time when some of the other supports that people have relied on might not be as available as they've been. How do we help strengthen that resilience in communities?

Saskia Epstein:

Well, thank you so much. This has been such a pleasure. You two are extraordinary leaders, and I feel very lucky to be watching the field and state benefit from your leadership. So thank you so much for joining me on PNC C-Speak.

Justin Pasquariello:

Thank you, Saskia. It's been a lot of fun.

Saskia Epstein:

That wraps up another episode. I'm Saskia Epstein, senior vice president of PNC Bank in New England, and this is PNC C-Speak. Until next time.