

The Power of WOW – Episode 2: Lives Touched, Lives Impacted, Lives Changed

Transcript

[Shelley Sylva] I'm a lawyer by training. I began my career as a litigator in a mid-sized firm in Philadelphia. And then I had a classmate call me and she said, "The Philadelphia Housing Authority is hiring for Litigation Counsel. Are you interested?"

I worked at the Housing Authority for almost a decade and I started off having a busy job of doing all of the evictions from affordable housing.

Litigators — especially at the Housing Authority — have a tough job. They're tasked with enforcing laws and regulations, and their decisions make a lasting impact in the lives of citizens.

[Sylva] And then I remember I went to one of my eviction hearings, and it was he was a grandpop, he had his grandkids and he had a drinking problem. And they wanted to evict him from the housing that he had because he hadn't paid rent and he wasn't following the rules of the housing authority.

It would have been easy for any lawyer to follow the letter of the law and evict that tenant. It took a litigator with empathy to realize there was more at stake.

Like at the end of the day, we are business, we need to get the money, we need to figure out how he can pay his rent, we need him to follow the rules, but we didn't need to destroy that whole family unit by kicking them out, making them start over, to get what we needed. And I remember that day I had a choice.

But this is more than the story of a lawyer having empathy for fellow Philadelphians who are struggling. This is the story about a woman who has followed a moral compass throughout her life and ascended the executive ranks to be able to make a measurable and lasting impact in communities that matter:

I'm Shelley Sylva, and I am the Head of Social Impact at TD Bank.

How does someone go from overseeing Housing Authority evictions to heading a bank's social impact program? We'll explore Shelley's journey — one that spans from a family tragedy to community

service and touches on the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 is having on the African American community. It's a journey that captures the Power of WOW!

[INTRO]

Shelley Sylva's story begins like many others:

[SS] I'm a Philadelphian through and through. I attended Philadelphia High School For Girls, which is, I believe it's either one of two or the only, all public girls high schools in the United States. My mother attended Philadelphia High School For Girls. My aunt attended Philadelphia High School For Girls. I love Philadelphia.

As a child growing up in this city, I felt like I had every opportunity that a child growing up in the suburbs or growing up in a smaller city or more affluent city had. Nothing was out of reach being here in Philadelphia. I felt like if I put my mind to it, and no doubt I had amazingly supportive parents, I was able to do anything and everything within the city. And so I feel like I owe a lot to the city, and so I'm committed to making it work for others.

And so although I came from a strong two-parent home, no doubt like that created and built in me the things that I needed to progress and develop. There were other people around me, it takes a village, people joke, but I could name 25 other people besides my parents or a family member that took that time and said, "Shelley, you're smart." I think about Mrs. Rosen from first grade at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School. I always had my hand raised, and she said, "You're just going to be a leader." And it rings true to me, like words have power and we all have a responsibility to fill those gaps when other people may not be getting it from the adults around them.

Not everyone has those opportunities or that kind of support network. Gaps do exist. And Shelley, previously at the Housing Authority, found that TD Bank created a new role to address it.

When I heard that we were creating this role where we would bring our philanthropy, our business, and our employees together, and it was called social impact and it was all about using what we have to support the community in a meaningful and impactful way, I said, "That job was made for me. I have to do whatever I can to go get that job." Because I know culturally, TD has... I thought it was fake when I got there. People were so generally nice and everybody was encouraged to give to the community. It was encouraged to do volunteer opportunities.

I've recognized like we understood as an organization the responsibility we have to support the communities in which we operate, in a real, meaningful, impactful way. And we as an organization have said, "\$1 billion in giving by 2030." We've invested millions of dollars in better health outcomes. And so as an organization, we are committed to our community. And for me to be the leader of that, for the

bank, it's a lot of responsibility, but I relish it every day and I encourage my colleagues always to challenge me to make us do more.

For Shelley, this drive toward getting involved with community health isn't just a corporate goal. It goes much deeper for her, beginning with some courses in college and a profound family tragedy:

When I went to college, I started taking all of these like philosophy, sociology, and then religious studies classes. Really religious studies around ethics. And then I fell in love with biomedical ethics.

And I think it was because, at the time, I experienced a familial loss. My cousin who was young and vibrant and a fireman, died waiting for a kidney transplant. And I remember talking to my mom about the sadness of that. And it was her first cousin, so he was old enough to be like an uncle to me, but he was young enough not to be an uncle. And I just remember talking to her about transplants and why people donate and why people don't and then how people on the list get pulled. And she being a nurse, like her experience with that.

And so, I wrote my senior thesis all around African Americans and organ donation. And why not? Like why not be an organ donor? And then I was able to research like the history of African Americans in the medical profession and where that distrust lies and Tuskegee experiment and... Talking to my mom, I remember it was interesting because I said, "Well, I'm going to be an organ donor." And my mom's a nurse, she works in the critical care, she's been in the profession a long time. She said, "Why would you do that?"

Like even her who sees it up close, which I guess she sees it up close. Like her fear for me was signing that I was going to be an organ donor, could mean that if I was in a critical situation, people may not save me, because they would need my organs. That whole medical and experience of being an African American, really shaped what I was going to do going forward.

And it eventually did shape where Shelley's career is today. The African American community has been unfairly impacted across the spectrum of life in the United States. Most recently, we've seen protests in cities across the country bringing attention to their mistreatment. But a more insidious element has been playing out amid the coronavirus pandemic.

[Sylva]: The concept that 60% of the deaths at least last week from COVID, were of African Americans, who make up a small, small portion of, I think it's 13% in the United States that were in the population, and 60% of the deaths, tells us that something is going on.

I asked Shelley what kind of a role there is for the TD Charitable Foundation to address such community health issues.

[Sylva]: I think we've already started making investments that will address those kinds of issues. Like we could have given to a major hospital, we could have given to an organization that may have been searching for a vaccine, which are all important and noble things. But when we did our first investment, it was to go to those community health centers, those places where we know people in the community trust, they go to them. And when we talk about communities, we talk about urban community health centers. And we know in our urban centers, they are primarily black and brown.

And so, we were intentional about that investment. You have to go where you are needed, where the need is the greatest. And so, to go give money to... And again, I went to a university. I love universities, I love these big medical centers, we go there all the time. But to give money there in the midst of a crisis that is attacking a community, would have simply been not as wise as an investment for impact.

The fact that we went to a community health center as our first thing that we invested in is what we need to continue to do and which we have been doing. We invested in a frontline fund for people to get childcare. Because we're saying people are frontline and essential, but then what do they do with their kids? And so, obviously there's lots of organizations that are in need, nonprofits are being impacted significantly by COVID. And so, we've made investments though that are going to those in greatest need, which aligns to what we were already doing anyway. Like Jefferson's not a new partner for us. Supporting the Airstream isn't... The CoLab wasn't something that's new to us, it was already there.

CoLab is a mobile medical unit that the TD Charitable Foundation has sponsored for three years in connection with Jefferson Health Design Lab. It's a modified 1960s Airstream trailer that's designed to offer services that meet community needs in a flexible and responsive way.

[Sylva]: We often talk about meeting people where they are, to address their needs. And that's what this CoLab Airstream really cool looking van that Jefferson Hospital has created is. And so what they did was they did an assessment of the community, some of our poorest neighborhoods in Philadelphia. And we understand that your health is driven by a lot of things, but one of the largest factors that we'll talk about how you're fairing healthwise is your zip code. Those are which we can see the largest disparities, your zip codes, your race. And what Jefferson did was take that base on by doing an assessment in Kensington, which is one of our poorest neighborhoods in the city, one of the highest unemployment rates, and said, "What does this community need to get healthier? And how can we bring it to them?"

I think sometimes people say, "You build it and they will come." That is not true. People aren't going to go where they're not comfortable. People aren't going to go where they haven't been heard. And so the whole CoLab Airstream mechanism is about doing an assessment in a neighborhood, understanding those needs, and then building programs around addressing those, and having that flexibility and fluidity to change as the needs change.

And so when COVID came to the forefront, the idea that Jefferson was able to switch the CoLab to become an onsite COVID testing place, and I think one of the first in the city of Philadelphia, made us even more proud of the investment that we had made in the organization.

One of the most important parts of TD's investment was listening and building trust within the community. That doesn't come from throwing money at an issue or telling the community what to do.

Medical care is extremely personal, and people, I think black people, Latino people, there's a base level of mistrust for many, many reasons. And the idea that this organization was already there addressing the community concerns, talk to the community about their needs. TD invest in organizations... We're no longer making investments in organizations that are like, "We know what's best for you. This is what you need." If you don't have that two-way dialogue in philanthropic investments and communities, they're going to fail.

You can't build something and say, "This is what you need." You need to get feedback from the community, you need to develop trust in the community, you need to be visible in the community. And then that's when you start breaking down barriers.

When we put all of this together — CoLab and COVID testing, communities with gaps in opportunities, and interested and motivated people who want to help — measuring success goes beyond the numbers.

[Sylva]: I love that I can talk confidently and feel good about the work that we get to do. Like I think the organization has really let the data, the need, we've heard a lot of people say data lately, but let the data and the community needs drive our investments. And I don't think we could do much more.

[Scott Monty]: Yeah. And it's interesting because when you talk about data, when you hear people talk about data, it can sound very cold and unfeeling. And the numbers are the numbers, they're neither good nor bad. They just are.

[Sylva]: Correct.

[Monty]: But what you're able to do because of those numbers, the lives you're able to touch, the world that you're able to improve, that's where the empathy and the compassion really comes out, was taking that data and putting it into action.

[Sylva]: Absolutely. Lives touched, lives impacted, lives changed. That's how we measure our work.

[Monty]: I love that. Lives touched, lives impacted, lives changed. It sounds like you have the best job at TD Bank.

[Sylva]: Everybody says it and I don't disagree.

As she reflects on the empathetic leaders and colleagues at TD Bank, Shelley realizes that it's a team that is looking out for the greater good, even amid startling levels of uncertainty.

But I feel very blessed to work at an organization with people that have the emotional capacity to deal with this beyond ourselves. And we recognize our leaders made a commitment for no job loss as a result of COVID in 2020, to give our employees a sense of security.

Because that's what people are looking for. Like everything is out of everybody's control. You don't know what's happening next. But I think that just allows us as an organization to really be committed to the communities in which we operate and give that same focus and commitment to helping the organizations that need us the most.

And what about that grandfather with a drinking problem that was about to be evicted? Remember Shelley had a choice to make. And as a lawyer, her job was to protect the Housing Authority from risk, but she feared ruining the man's life.

Brene Brown said, "It's hard to hate up close."

And so I remember he and I sat and talked, and I know he's like, "Why is this lady in my business?" But we talked probably for an hour. And I said, "Well, how can I help you?" And he says, "Well, I want to get help." And so he says, "I want to be sober. I don't want to lose my housing. If I go to AA meetings and I bring you my forms, will you make an agreement with me?" And so he and I made an agreement off the books, and he came in every 30 days to like 90 days and brought me his forms, and he's so proud he did that. And it wasn't to make me feel good. Like at the end of the day, he wanted to do it because I think he believed in it, but then I recognized like, you can do the right thing and it doesn't have to be black and white.

And to me that's when I developed that sense of, things happen to people beyond their control. We don't know what they are. And so we can either be somebody that's going to help people get through it or we can make it worse on them. And I didn't want to be part of the group that made it worse on people.

Shelley Sylva, Head of Social Impact for TD Bank has lived her life understanding the power of empathy, compassion, and results — perhaps learned through her medical ethics classes, from her mother's guidance as a caregiver, and simply by listening.

The city of Philadelphia, TD Bank and the communities it serves are the beneficiaries of those results. Lives touched, lives impacted, lives changed.

And THAT'S...the Power of WOW!