A New Angle
MTPR Episode 17
Brenda Solorzano

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey, folks, welcome back. I'm excited today to be joined by Brenda Solorzano. Brenda is the CEO of the Headwaters Foundation, an organization dedicated to a Montana in which all people, especially those most vulnerable, are healthy and thriving.

Brenda Solorzano People are people people want the best for their children. Solutions may vary, but at the end of the day, that's really what we're all working towards.

Justin Angle Headwaters is a relatively young foundation, and Brenda is relatively new Montanan. But in a short time, Headwaters has made incredible impact not only through funding many organizations in need, but also doing so through new paradigms, including a deep commitment to trust based philanthropy. Brenda, thanks for coming on the show today.

Brenda Solorzano Thanks for having me. Excited to be here. Yeah.

Justin Angle So tell us where you're from. Where did you grow up?

Brenda Solorzano I actually grew up in San Francisco. I was born in Guatemala. And when I was six months old, my parents decided to move to the United States and San Francisco became our home.

Justin Angle And what prompted that move to the States?

Brenda Solorzano My dad had been in the Guatemalan military and had gotten a little bit of a really up front seat to what was happening in terms of civil war in Central America and knew that it probably was not a good place to raise a family and decided that coming to the US would give us a different opportunity. And I think myself and my siblings are examples of living the American dream.

Justin Angle For sure. And so Headwater is a conversion foundation, and some of our listeners might not know what that is. Can you explain what that conversion foundation is?

Brenda Solorzano Yeah, absolutely. A health conversion foundation comes when there is a not for profit entity that is in existence and is going to be sold and turned into a for profit. And what society says is for many years, those entities have received a tax benefit from being a not for profit. And the resources that have been grown to this point really

belong to the community as a nonprofit. And when it's sold to the for profit, they don't want that for profit company to benefit from it. So they transition those resources into foundations like Headwaters. In the healthcare industry, historically, there were a lot of nonprofit providers. And as medicine has become more businesslike, there are more for profit entities that are buying up these nonprofit providers. Over the last 20, 30 years in the health industry, there's a tremendous number of nonprofits that have converted and therefore have created hundreds of nonprofit health conversion foundations like Headwaters.

Justin Angle OK, and so this was associated with the sale of Community Health Center in 2015, I believe that was?

Brenda Solorzano Correct.

Justin Angle OK, and so what attracted you about this opportunity? I know you were in philanthropy and in the healthcare space in San Francisco for a long time, but. But why make the change in this change in particular?

Brenda Solorzano Well, it's really kind an of interesting story, Justin. I started out getting a call from a headhunter who was looking to fill this position. At the same time, it had an opportunity to really begin to question whether or not philanthropy was the right career choice for me. And I was thinking of leaving philanthropy. Then I went into a leadership

program and part of that leadership program was to come up with a life plan of what I personally wanted to do personally and professionally with the remainder of my career. And I started developing a different approach to philanthropy where we should we would shift from being gatekeepers to really partners, true partnership with nonprofits, eliminating or trying to reduce the power dynamic that exists between foundations and nonprofits. I didn't think that this would ever be possible. It was sort of this pie in the sky idea and that happened to coincide right at the same time that this headhunter had called me. So I thought, well, let me go to this interview and meet these people and pitch this idea. And I remember walking away from that meeting going, I don't think this board is going to hire this girl from California to implement this crazy idea. But they did. And it became this opportunity to really turn philanthropy on its head and create a new foundation from the ground up that does things differently.

Justin Angle And so coming here. So, first of all, is attractive because you kind of needed a change. But two, it's a brand new entity, right. So you can build out this team. I mean, that must have been an interesting moment for you to sort of have the the courage to just come in to a job interview, swinging for the fences, so to speak.

Brenda Solorzano Yeah, I pretty much describe it as I showed up and they gave me keys to an office and a box of business cards and said, build us a foundation.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Brenda Solorzano Scary. Especially because I did not know a single soul in Montana prior to coming here. So challenging on a number of different levels, but exciting because it was blank space to create, to be innovative, to not have to say, well, this is the way we always do it. And so that's the way we're going to do it.

Justin Angle Sure. So talk about how you've kind of operationalize this philosophy. I mean, you had this this sense of the way you wanted things to get done. How how do they get done and how did you make that happen?

Brenda Solorzano Yeah, there's a couple of different things that we did from the very beginning. And that was the decision to really put community in the center of everything that we do at Headwaters. I often said to the board and to my staff, this money that was generated by the sell of the community hospital does not belong to me, does not belong to the board, does not belong to the staff. It really belongs to the people of western Montana. So we should not be the ones that determine what it is we're going to fund. We should let the communities determine that.

The first three months that I was here, I spent a lot of time traveling western Montana, talking to anybody who would be willing to talk to me about what should be the issues and populations that we should prioritize. And that, in essence, drove our focus on upstream systems change, addressing social determinants of health and focusing on children and families in particular. The second thing we did is we thought about how do

we simplify the application process for nonprofits. Sure. So we decided what if we didn't have a traditional application process? What if we got rid of, you know, requests for proposals and letter of interest in the back end —

Justin Angle all of the vocabulary and jargon and jargon.

Brenda Solorzano Exactly. What if we got rid of all of that and instead we just sat down with people and had conversations about what they thought they needed money to do, the work that was mission aligned, and then we just did that. It's it's so simple, right? Common sense. And yet that's not how philanthropy operates. And so the opportunity to actually do it that way, I think, has been transformational to the relationships that we've built with organizations in western Montana.

Justin Angle And so as you're kind of bringing that operational culture to life, what do you what signals are you getting from the community as to, you know, who are the vulnerable populations that you want to serve and connect with? How are you kind of getting the signal from the community?

Brenda Solorzano So clearly from the very beginning, we heard that Montanans wanted us to focus on children and children that come from underprivileged families. Children that have to deal with hunger, families that have to deal with a lot of different challenges that just don't create an opportunity for those families and their kids to have a bright,

healthy future. We also heard a lot about the health disparities that exist among certain communities and in Montana, specifically about the health disparities within the American Indian community.

Justin Angle OK.

Brenda Solorzano So that also became another focus for us. We also heard that it would not be good if this foundation focused on just filling holes and gaps and just providing direct service resources. That if we were going to make a difference in the long term, that we needed to focus on those upstream issues to really bring communities together to identify what are the solutions to the many challenges that keep Western Montanans from being healthy and thriving.

Justin Angle Is that what you mean when you say upstream solutions like more systematic change?

Brenda Solorzano Yes. So, you know, you can that say that you can give someone a fish, right? They're full for the night. But if you teach them how to fish, that changes their whole life trajectory. Same concept here. We could provide car seats, for example, for every child in Montana or provide food boxes. But if we don't fundamentally address the systems that are creating these inequities among families in western Montana, nothing's going to change. And we would run out of money. Yeah, and so clearly people in western

Montana believe this because that's what they said to us, is focus on that kind of work instead of just filling the gaps.

Justin Angle And so this kind of approach that you're talking about, you know, you've heard you and others describe it as trust based philanthropy. How do you how do you kind of develop that trust? And not only because you've got a broad probably working multiple sides, like you're trying to establish a relationship, a trust based relationship with the potential benefactor. But it's also at the same time your board has to entrust you to to make the right choices and to build the right relationships.

Brenda Solorzano Yeah, and this is why we call it trust based philanthropy, because trust is at the center of how we do our work. Oftentimes, trust based philanthropy is described as a way to do grant making, and it's much more than that. It is really a values driven approach with a belief that if you actually have trusting, authentic relationships with those people that you work with, then you can actually operate at a very different level and hopefully have a greater impact.

Justin Angle Yeah, can we maybe tell some stories or get specific with some examples, Brenda, because I'm just thinking about it like having never been to Montanans new foundation, new approach. You're a woman of color coming to this new state. Like, how have you been able to build trust and really, like how did you navigate that and bring that sort of leadership vision to life in a way that people were willing to buy in and trust you?

Brenda Solorzano I think it comes from granting trust before getting trust.

Justin Angle OK.

Brenda Solorzano So I'll give you a couple of different specific examples of this. The first is a program that we call Go Grants instead of having a traditional approach, what we did was we said if you are an organization in western Montana and you're doing mission online work to address the health and well-being of children and families in the state we should be giving you money. It's pretty simple, right? So how do we make that as seamless as quickly as possible? Right. We created an online application process that allows an organization, if you're mission aligned, to apply. After they've created an organization profile in our system, takes them about 10 minutes to apply.

Justin Angle Wow.

Brenda Solorzano We can approve it in 24 hours and get a check out to the organization within two weeks.

Justin Angle Let's just pause for a second. For anybody who's ever applied for a grant like that's it sounds like the process that any sort of normal organization would use. But that's lightning speed in the grant world.

Brenda Solorzano Absolutely.

Justin Angle Can you tell us some of these stories, like whatever a couple of the organizations you feel have really taken advantage of this go grant program in a transformational way?

Brenda Solorzano Yeah, there's a school in Frenchtown that was able to receive one of these grants, and it was a teacher that was a science teacher that was working with the kids, had built an aquaponic garden and wanted to expand it so that they could do a couple of different things. They were doing science lessons, obviously, with the garden. They were bringing in the parents to teach them about how it works. Food was being produced out of these gardens that was then being incorporated into the school cafeteria. And parents were being given lessons on how to prepare some of these food product that they might not be familiar with. So, cooking lessons, and then that allowed the kids to also interact with the parents in a very healthy environment. That's an example of where all of these different people in this community were benefiting from this grant. If you'd asked me, Brenda, are you going to fund an aquaponic garden in Montana? I don't think I could have come up with that idea. But the fact that this community did and that they have used this money to grow that garden and do that kind of work where they're working with the kids, working with the students, really impacting not only educational

issues, but also health and well-being via changing the paradigm of what is food and what is healthy food. And how do you prepare that within a family context?

Justin Angle We'll be back to my conversation with Brenda Solorzano after this short break.

Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Brenda Solorzano of the Headwaters Foundation about trust-based philanthropy.

Justin Angle I can't help but thinking of this sort of polarized media and information landscape where we're all kind of trying to navigate. I mean, you coming to a new environment, meeting new people in a new community, trying to engage with communities and understanding their needs. How do you kind of navigate that world where, you know, people are viewing the world through totally different lenses, yet they probably have some common things they can rally around?

Brenda Solorzano I think one of the things I realized is that I was working in probably arguably one of the most liberal areas of the country. And now I am working in a very different environment here in Montana. But what I have learned from having been in both of those different environments is that people are people. People want the best for their children. Solutions may vary, but at the end of the day, that's really what we're all working towards. And if we get an opportunity to have connection and relationship with

people, you learn that we're not that different and that all these different powers that be have started to try to create kind of us them mentality. And so we've bought into it, I think is a culture across the country. And the reality is that I've experienced is that it doesn't have to be that way. As a woman of color coming into Montana, I could have come in and, you know, imagine that I it's me against all these people. And I have found it to be quite the opposite. I have been welcomed into this community. I have built relationships across the region. I have wonderful partnerships with a number of organizations because they've gotten to know me. Yeah. And I have gotten to know them. Our relationship, again, is rooted in a trusting relationship. And so we can have conversations, even if we disagree on things, we can still have conversations about how do we make western Montana a better place for children and families? And that's where we have our common ground. And having been in these two different places, I sometimes sit and watch what's happening across the country. And I'm really saddened by it because I think the people that I worked with in California would get along and work really well with the people that I've gotten to know in Montana. And we have more similarities than you would imagine.

Justin Angle Yeah. And that the focus on children just is such a wonderful way to anchor connection. Where does kind of like outcomes and data kind of come into the mix here? I mean, I assume at some point there's a report out, an exchange of outcomes and results and conversation about those topics.

Brenda Solorzano Yeah, I'm glad you're asking this question, Justin, because it's something that we often get when we're talking about trust based philanthropy, right. What? You just trust? What? General operating support? How are you making sure that these resources are really resulting in something positive for the communities that are supposed to benefit from them? It's a complicated answer. And what I'll say to you is that there are a number of different things that we thought about. Number one, redefining how you define success. So many of us have been Western trained. Data, hard numbers, IOI, these are the things that we have come to believe are the ways that we should demonstrate success. And one of the things that I have been trying to push my staff, the board in the communities we serve is that there are lots of different ways to think about success, and it doesn't always look the way that you would expect in a pie chart or a graph chart or numbers. That you can agree to what it is that you're trying to achieve and then be able to collect data, which for me is stories about how this is making a difference. So the story about the aquaponic garden is an example. There is no hard data, but if I tell you that story, don't you feel good about we're making a difference in how to respond? Yeah, it's a different way to define what impact is. We also work very closely with all of our grantees for them to tell us how are you going to define success for what you do? So it's not us telling them, but they telling us. And then we do have conversations instead of requiring our grantees to submit reports, which is sort of another traditional practice of philanthropy, which, by the way, over my 20 year career, I've received thousands of grant reports. And if I'm being honest, I've skimmed them maybe at most and they just go filed away. So instead of requiring a lengthy report that probably takes hours and hours for

someone to complete, we sit down over coffee. We have a conversation. We capture what had been the success. And then our staff goes back and we enter that information into our system. What does that mean? That means that the grantee can focus on mission critical work and not on submitting information. We get to put the stories in and the data and that we know we care about. And then we get an opportunity to share that back out with our grantees, with our trustees.

The other thing that I want to say about this particular issue is that foundations alone don't result in impact. One organization alone isn't necessarily going to change the systems. And I think that's another paradigm shift that we need to have, that if it were up to money, we would have solved all these problems a long time ago. But you need a right kind of environment, a political environment, a policy environment, a funding environment, the right collaboration, the right players at the table. All these things have to align in order for there to be some kind of change that positively benefits a community. Money alone is not going to fix that. And so we have to really be cognizant of that and think about how we define success very differently.

Justin Angle Yeah. So you've mentioned a few of your priorities, our priority areas, health, health, children, vulnerable communities, tribal communities in particular. Talk to me about what you've learned about Montana, both in terms of the quality work being done here through the organizations you're working with, but also what are some of the barriers to improvement at a systemic level that you've learned about?

Brenda Solorzano So let me start with the positives first and then I'll talk a little bit about the challenges that I see. Small community, everybody knows each other, so everybody who needs to be at the table can be brought to the table very quickly. If you think about a big state like New York or California trying to get like the key people in a room, almost impossible. Montana, you can actually make that happen. A deep caring for your neighbor. So people aren't coming to this work because, you know, there's a movement or an effort or, you know, a media campaign. It's because they genuinely care about their neighbor. And that's powerful, the ability for people to care for each other. Which is another thing that I think is missing in this country but I still see here. I think the ability to be in a resource constrained environment and you kind of make it happen anyway. The amount of volunteerism that exists in the state, the desire of people to work together to create better community for themselves, their family, their children. All of those are strengths I see in Montana and a very rich nonprofit community.

Justin Angle Absolutely.

Brenda Solorzano Especially here in Missoula. I think some of the challenges that I've seen is that it's related to the strengths. Usually it's the way it works. Nonprofits in this community and communities across western Montana live in a resource starved situation. And when you approach problem solving from a limitation of resources, you think smaller, right? Because you don't have the ability to dream and to think about what could be possibility. And so that requires some ability to have time, have resources to reimagine

and problem solve in creative, innovative ways. I'm hoping that Headwaters can create some of those spaces because that I think limits the ability to achieve the kind of change that people want to see in western Montana.

Another thing that I think is a challenge for this region is, you know, just not having access to information and other kinds of resources, not dollar resources, that you might have in a bigger community. California is the capital of innovation. And you're learning about things almost daily about how people are transforming everything from, you know, the car industry to philanthropy. In Montana, where we're a little bit slower to catch up to that because we're not exposed to it as much. And that's one of the things and I'm hoping we can do is not bring in like what other people do, because that's the other thing I learned about Montanans— Montanans like to be led by Montanans. But to learn about other things. To expose the thinking to other ways and other approaches. So that we can take what works, what could work in Montana and implement it and leave whatever doesn't you know, to the side. So that's really about a resource thing more than anything as well. We're a little bit of help because we're new resources that are available to communities. And my hope is that some of the work that we're funding catches the attention of other funders at the local, at the state, regional and national level and maybe begins to leverage some resources into the state.

Justin Angle Yeah, I think beyond you know, when we hear the word resources, we we think about money mostly, and you're getting money flowing faster. But also the resource of time that you've your model has been able to free up for. These organizations are not

spent constructing these elaborate reports in a very precise format to please their funders. They're having a conversation with you so that they can clearly communicate and do the work.

Brenda Solorzano Yes. So on average, it takes about 40 hours for an organization to complete an application. What if you took thirty nine of those hours and put them to mission critical work and not chasing money? Right. I often describe philanthropy prior to my experience at Headwaters where we would basically ask nonprofits to turn into pretzels in order to get the money, when in reality what they needed was general operating support to do the mission critical work that they were doing. Why don't we do that?

Justin Angle Yeah, and then if facts change on the ground, you're going to go through this elaborate revision process and you just. Yeah, the amount of just friction in the system. And that's probably it seems like it's explicitly by design to sort of, you know, probably not necessarily to avoid the necessity for a relationship, but at the expense of a relationship, I guess, or as an alternative to investing that way.

Brenda Solorzano Exactly. And I think that that inherently has then created the the power dynamics that exist between foundations and non-profits. And I don't think that was necessarily the intent, but that's just the way it sure has come to be. And, you know, this work is hard. It's much harder to break up with somebody when you have a

relationship with them than if you've been in a power dynamic and you just tell them, sorry.

Justin Angle Cut loose.

Brenda Solorzano Yeah. And and it requires more time on our staff's time. But that's that's the value of our staff right there, not just sitting there doing due diligence and reviewing things and making decisions. They're actually on the ground being partners with all of our grantees across the state. And I'd much rather have them be doing that than the gatekeeping functions that my teams have done at other foundations.
And then your resource question or your research comment raises for me, the notion that we've thought about Headwaters not just as a grant making institution, but as a partner partnering community to try to affect the change that Montanans want to see in our state. So we have a lot of different things that we've thought about. How do we play a role in convening folks in the state? How do we bring information? Right. So some of that opening up of different ideas and innovation that exists in other parts of the country and the world. And more recently, we've been thinking about the space that we're going to be creating here in Missoula. We're remodeling, a building in downtown Missoula. The ground floor is going to be a community space. And the idea there is it will become a resource for the community where our programming will be offered, where convenience will be held, where trainings will happen. And that's another way, another resource that we're going to be offering hopefully to people in western Montana.

Justin Angle And another way to build trust with the community.

Brenda Solorzano Exactly.

Justin Angle So, Brenda, as we close here, what are you most excited about? Like, what's your next challenge? What are you most proud of? How do you reflect on these three years you've spent at Headwaters and what's next?

Brenda Solorzano Yeah, I think we have shifted from being a start up foundation to what I call a performance foundation. And that's really what I'm excited about. And what I mean by a performance foundation is that we've now done enough grant making and enough relationship building and enough connections that we have a story to tell about how this is working. And how it's working for Montanans, how it's working for our grantees, and how trust based philanthropy is making a difference in terms of the relationship we have with the organizations that we fund.

And this is exciting to me because it's the reasons why you do work. You want to see something happen as a result of what you're doing, no matter what field you're in. And I think we're just entering that field or that phase of our organization. And the opportunity to share that with the broader community is very exciting.

Justin Angle Brenda, folks want to learn more about Headwaters in the wonderful work you and your colleagues do. Where where would you direct them?

Brenda Solorzano A couple of different places. Number one, our website at Headwaters MTG is a great place. And the second, it's also on the website, which is my contact info. Part of what I do is build relationships and so if any of your listeners are interested in learning more, my contact info is there, please give me a call.

Justin Angle I'm sure many will. Brenda, thank you.

Brenda Solorzano Thank you.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. We're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift of, um, alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors and Drum Coffee. Aj Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Ament, and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. See you next time.