

Alya Michelson - SullivanSays

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Alya Michelson, Jerry Sullivan

Jerry Sullivan 00:01

This is Jerry Sullivan for 'Making an Impact with Michelson Philanthropies.' This edition has been recorded remotely in observance of social distancing, please excuse any inconsistencies in the audio. Welcome. We're here today with Alya Michelson of the FirstGen Initiative. She is also the co-chair of Michelson Philanthropies. Welcome, Alya.

Alya Michelson 00:27

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Jerry Sullivan 00:28

Could you talk to us about your background and how that's informed your approach to the FirstGen Initiative? What is the FirstGen Initiative? What does it aim to accomplish and why do you see that as vitally important?

Alya Michelson 00:39

I was born in the Soviet Union in a beautiful province town, Oryol. It's not so far from Moscow. It's home to a lot of very prominent Russian writers, such as, for example, Ivan Bunin, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. From there, after finishing my high school, I moved to the Russian capital, Moscow, to enter Moscow State University to study journalism. And after working for more than a decade on TV, radio, news agencies, papers, and a spokesperson for some prominent Russian politicians, I moved to the States. I have an additional degree in world economics and a music degree. And I feel it's necessary to talk about my education while introducing myself, which brings me to your question about the importance of the FirstGen Initiative. It honestly started as something very personal, when I was trying to figure out why I couldn't get traction and was often not taken seriously as a female professional, regardless of my skills and experience. It's grown into a beautiful program with a multifaceted approach, as we always do at Michelson Philanthropies. I'm speaking out about the danger of a single story. I believe that most of us are still trapped by the outdated definition of migration, and it has to change. Because for me, home is more than where we were born, or even where we were raised. It's about opportunity, community, experience, and your dream.

Jerry Sullivan 02:18

And so when we talk about FirstGen Initiative, we're talking about first generation immigrants, new to the United States. And under that umbrella, that notion, let's talk more specifically about the Career Skills program and Upwardly Global, partner of First Gen. How do the two organizations work together? What exactly is their goal? And how do they bring complimentary capabilities to the task?

Alya Michelson 02:46

Well, it's interesting that female empowerment and immigration is a very crowded space. There are more than 15,000 different organizations that are supposedly helping women and serving women, but only 300 of them really support immigrants across the United States. And there are very few organizations that serve immigrant women, particularly when we talk about through the storytelling and community lens. For example, when we approached Upwardly Global that you just mentioned with the idea of collaboration, they did not even focus on the female aspect in their work and were not present in the Los Angeles area. This is where I live and it's also a very dangerous area in terms of immigration. So what we did is we filled this gap. We formed the first all-female cohort in Los Angeles. They receive personal coaching, training and certification opportunities. They receive connection to top employees, industry experts and professionals. Just put a little pin here, as many as 2 million immigrants and refugees are currently unemployed and underemployed in the United States. It's a missed opportunity both for the immigrants and the country. And our little program is just a start. A lot of work needs to be done here.

Jerry Sullivan 04:07

And you mentioned that certification, help with certification. I'm guessing a lot of immigrants bring skills from their background, their home country. For instance, a lawyer couldn't necessarily just practice law here, a nurse couldn't necessarily just go get a job at a hospital. Is that one of the things you aim at, to sort of help people introduce those skills or get them set for the new environment?

Alya Michelson 04:29

Yeah, this is one of the little aspects that Upwardly Global is focusing on. And it's not just about the lawyers, there's a lot of professions, probably like 80% of them, including a lot of professionals in the medical field, that you cannot really confirm in the United States because of the law of bureaucracy hiccups. Even with the my diploma in journalism, when I was immigrating to the United States, I had to do a lot of underground work to make sure that my degrees--and I had a perfect degrees I was straight A student--I had to do a lot of work to confirm that I actually have my degree, that my degree will be accepted. And a lot of people when they decide to immigrate, and sometimes it's very sudden and an urgent decision, they're just not aware about it. And they come to the country and they suddenly realize that even if you have a PhD, you have to go and work as the housekeeper or try to just make ends meet.

Jerry Sullivan 05:20

You mentioned a couple things earlier, you mentioned the danger of the single story, and the power of storytelling. I was looking at some of your other writing and you mentioned Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and she's a Nigerian author, a wonderful writer who has written fiction and nonfiction, and she did a

TED talk about the danger of the single story that I found to be enormously powerful. How does that inform what you're doing? Is that one of the great challenges, the perceptions that perhaps immigrants find challenging when they arrive here?

Alya Michelson 05:52

Yes, the story that you mentioned, this TED Talk in particular also resonated with me a lot. And I firsthand experienced the negative impact of wrong stereotypes towards Russians. And even when I lived in Russia, I myself perceived migrants through the lens of media, without even bothering to question it, why I'm doing this. But the truth is that talent is distributed equally, but opportunities are not. And thanks to the internet, we can see it in all colors, when someone posts an incredible story about a gifted, brilliant individual somewhere in the land far away, and people are so shocked. And it is shocking to realize probably that the earth is not lying on the top of giant turtle, but jokes aside, every one of us can contribute towards making life a little less unfair, at least by educating ourselves. The problem of tired stereotypes does exist and it has to be somehow addressed.

Jerry Sullivan 06:47

As I recall, one of the lines of that TED Talk was, she mentioned that the problem with stereotypes isn't necessarily that they're entirely untrue, it's that they're incomplete. And that to round out the picture and give people a multi-dimensional view of things is complete. And it puts me in mind of the Michelson Philanthropies goal of making life more fair. Would you agree with that?

Alya Michelson 07:08

Absolutely. As I mentioned earlier, the outdated stereotypes thrive on uneducated grounds. And you do not have to give money away, you don't have to do philanthropy in a traditional way to make life a little bit less unfair. The best thing you can do is just even educate yourself, especially when it comes to this initiative, especially when we're talking about the immigration. The education is the key to a lot of things.

Jerry Sullivan 07:35

And the initiative covers a wide range of participants. It squarely addresses migrant women, and oftentimes migrant women who come to the U.S. with a high level of education and skills. And again, they still have to make transitions. I think sometimes we think that someone who comes to the U.S. with the college degree or perhaps even some wealth, there is no transition to be made. Can you shed a little light on that and the range of the circumstances of the women who are helped through this program?

Alya Michelson 08:05

First of all, I would like to point out just talking about that there is an issue with female migration that exists, it's already a step forward. Because there is a difference between male and female immigration and the challenges they face even starting from the ground up, from how their refugee camp is set up. It usually has no safe place for a female to change clothes, or stay with children, for example, and people recognize a gender gap in the United States but data shows that Americans do not see that there is a gap for immigrants. For example, it's less likely to get a well paid job if your name sounds

foreign, to where you have an accent, regardless of the color of your skin. And challenges are the same having your degrees or not, educated or not. I mean, it helps if you know the language and your language skills are okay. But at the end of the day, it's not about the immigration, it's about the society that welcomes you or not. So the main purpose of the initiative is to show immigrants as humans through the storytelling. Try to highlight the human aspects because there's nothing the immigrants can do better. They are already doing the best they can. But the ways they are seen by Americans, by citizens of any other countries where migrants arise, can change, can be better.

Jerry Sullivan 09:26

Yes, and I'm sure with a more complete story and filling in the gaps that are left with that single story. The program also aims, I found this very interesting, one of the aspects is to connect migrant women to one another, which I guess can lead to networks and those sorts of support systems. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Alya Michelson 09:45

One of the challenges that I had while adjusting to this country was the disconnect from any circle and lack of communication and reaching out. It partially comes from my Russian heritage when we keep medicines out of sight and not complain about much, but for mental health you need to talk and connect, you need something to believe in, you need not to give up your dream. And success stories about people like you provide this cushion, they give you a sense of community, it is a virtual one for now. And in the future, I hope to create a physical space where a woman can come over, you know, just feel safe, hang out and have a cup of coffee, because it's crucially important. And the other interesting thing that I found out and I only realized when I started working on the initiative very seriously, even though migrants and immigrants or how they like to call themselves, foreign born or global citizens, even they've been so disconnected from the society, they do not realize that they actually are part of the bigger group. They usually concentrate within their national groups, like Chinese communities, or Russian communities or any other communities. But they do not really realize that they all belong to the bigger community of immigrants. And this is another idea that I'm trying to lead through the FirstGen Initiative and through the Beautiful Journey series that I have.

Jerry Sullivan 11:05

It's also a much more practical point that you raised in some of your writing. And it's about the notion of being time poor and pressed for time, like so many of us, but certainly migrant and especially migrant women are no exception to that general condition. Does the networking help with that, a babysitter or a trusted person who, maybe there's a network that you plug into? Tell us a little bit about time poor, and do these networks help with that?

Alya Michelson 11:31

Obviously, networking is always helping, especially when you don't have enough resources, when you don't have enough connections, even as you mentioned, very elementary help that you can get like babysitting, and just agree today you help and me tomorrow I will help. But even not talking about the help, just being able to connect to someone and check in and just have somebody to listen to you,

that's worth a lot. I think this brings way more than the actual health, just the feeling and the thought that somebody is there for you. That's crucially important.

Jerry Sullivan 12:04

You mentioned in another piece of writing about your child's school, sort of watching on the playground, and you overheard a fellow parent talk about you and talking about your 'typical Russian face.' And it was said with apparently a great deal of contempt. That sounds like a very telltale sign of the single story. I'm just wondering, was that an opportunity to maybe show your child or at least give an example of how that can be dealt with?

Alya Michelson 12:29

Well, I didn't do well in that situation because, what do you do when someone says you know, 'I hate you.' I'm sorry for that woman and I hope she had something better in life than judging others. That case, I just pretended I didn't hear what she said and smiled back. But if I would have a chance to meet her again, I would ask her what a typical Russian face is, because Russians look so different from the Baltic seas to the Far East. But you know, it brings us back to these harmful stereotypes and the lack of elementary education. It feeds by very often unfair and untrue representations of foreign citizens in the media. And it brings us to another subject like why it is happening. Very often it is happening because I truly believe that when you spotlight the topic of the journalist about someone from a foreign country, 100% there is somebody probably walking maybe on the very low paid job, there is somebody from this country who knows all the new answers, knows how to pronounce things correctly, and these people should be given the job to represent their nations, their countries. I think if it will be even during this little step, even taking in consideration these little moments, little by little, step by step, we will present maybe a little bit more fair the picture of what immigration looks like in the United States. You know, it's not just a problem of this country. As a journalist, I traveled to lot. I probably went to every part of the world. And everywhere, this is the same thing. It's actually, even historically, when someone looks different, when someone speaks different, it's like a threat. It is a biological threat to you. And instead of looking at someone who's different with open eyes and an open mind, we automatically put on some kind of security glasses to try to separate us from these people. While not even realizing that this is a human just like you.

Jerry Sullivan 14:24

Now, the FirstGen Initiative, of course, it comes under the umbrella of Michelson Philanthropies, which has a number of programs and does a lot of work. You're also the co-chair of Michelson Philanthropy. So I was wondering if we could just end by taking a moment, could you give us a broader overview of the organization and how everything fits or complements or works independently of one another?

Alya Michelson 14:47

Yeah, I'm very proud to serve as a co-chair of Michelson Philanthropies. And I think that the philanthropical approach that my husband Gary Michelson and I have is in some cases unique because what we do, when we try to introduce what we do to other people, they are usually very surprised and sometimes even shocked because they don't understand how we can address such diverse issues. Under the Michelson Philanthropies umbrella, we have support for medical research, we have support

for affordable education, we have animal advocacy, and right now I have this program FirstGen, which is immigration. People don't understand. They ask, 'Why so diverse? Wouldn't it be better just to focus on one little thing?' The thing that unites everything, and that was the key approach that my husband had when he decided to give his time and effort to philanthropy, was to go to the areas where no one wants to go, to give voice to voiceless, like all these areas, these people and animals, that wouldn't have a chance to speak up for themselves. This is where we go. Unfortunately, these days, a lot of people actually have, I think, a negative perception of philanthropy. Because what it turned into. A lot of people do philanthropy because it's fancy, it sounds fancy. A lot of people think that philanthropy is done to clear up your name, but has nothing to do with what we do. Dr. Michelson and I in Michelson Philanthropies, we go to the areas that are dirty, smelly, and we make changes. We have the Found Animals Foundation and Adopt & Shop that works in Michelson Philanthropies, they go to shelters, they take dogs and cat that would be killed otherwise. Nobody wanted to adopt them because they were sick, because they didn't look good, because they were violent. Whatever reason it is. They take this animal, they bring them to the shop, they groom them, they educate them, and they treat them. Every single pet was adopted. This is what we do, I think it's very vivid illustration to the whole philanthropy approach that we have. We take the topic that doesn't look fancy at all, and we groom it, we treat it, we address it the way people understand it, and we make real changes. Every single thing that we touched, Dr. Michelson from the very early stage really came to the fruition. When Dr. Michelson started his free textbooks initiative, nobody wanted to talk with him about it. Nobody believed in the idea. And today, everybody talks about that. Everybody understands that this is the future. I'm very proud of it. I think this is a great way to go to make life a little bit more fair. And you know, when I was younger, I paid my way through college myself. I worked really hard. From the first day I entered university, it was extremely hard. I didn't have people who helped me, but it doesn't mean that I shouldn't. I feel so grateful that I have this opportunity to help someone. It gives me so much back, it is so rewarding. And you can do the same thing.

Jerry Sullivan 17:59

Thank you very much for your time today and for telling us a bit more about Michelson Philanthropies. I hope you and your colleagues keep doing the tough stuff that you're doing and getting the results that you're getting. Thank you very much.

Alya Michelson 18:10

Thank you.

Jerry Sullivan 18:11

This has been 'Making an Impact with Michelson Philanthropies. For more information, visit michelsonphilanthropies.org. That's Michelson spelled M I C H E L S O N.