

Welcome to right here in Mass. We're a weekly podcast that features individuals throughout the Bay State who are on our radar and should be on yours from the Berkshires to Boston, Cape Codding, the Islands. Tune in to learn about who you should know right here in mass.

Welcome back to right here in Mass. Today's guest is Suzanne Parker, who has been the executive director of Girls Inca the Valley since 2006. Suzanne works closely with the community, the staff, and the board of directors to inspire all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. Under Ms. Parker's Leadership, girls Inc.

Of the Valley has expanded its geographic region to serving up to 1000 youth in Springfield, Holyoke, Chicopee, and the surrounding towns. Oh, native of Western Mass. Ms. Parker earned a bachelor's degree in music education from UMass Amherst and a Juris doctorate degree from Western U New England University School of Law.

Ms. Parker has served nationally on Girls Inc. Board of Directors, and locally on the Holyoke Community College Board of Trustees. Ms. Parker is married and has a 17 year old daughter. Thank you so much for coming on the show, Suzanne. Oh, thank you Ashley. I'd love to share or have you share more with our audience about you and what you do at Girls Inc.

Yeah, was, uh, you, you just announced? I'm, uh, Susan Suzanne Parker. I'm the Executive director at Girls Inc in the Valley. And I guess I do a lot of things. I wear a lot of different hats, but really it's such a privilege to be able to work with a great team of people from our staff and our board of directors to lead an organization that is a youth serving organization.

Um, our mission is to inspire all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. And as you said, we have a wide geographic reach in the greater Springfield area and we're really excited about that. Wonderful. And you've been, um, the executive director for almost 20 years, so about 17 ish years. I'd love to hear, um, since you've been involved in the organization, how things have really changed under your leadership and really improved over time.

Um, You know, I used to Ajo saying I was the new executive director, but I guess technically after 16 years, I just can't do that anymore. So, you know, it's really been an amazing journey. Uh, when I first started, uh, as the executive director, the organization was going through, I would say, a little bit of a, a rocky.

Uh, a rocky road there. Um, there were some real challenges. There were some, uh, large funding opportunities that were sort of getting ready to wrap up. Um, they, they really needed a, a transition around what the financial model for the organization was. Um, and I do believe that everybody, every leader was there at a good time, at a good place, and they're there for a reason.

And it just happened at. You know, I, I think I'm a really good problem solver. So we had some big challenges the first couple of months that we were there. You know, we, we couldn't make payroll,

you know, so it was, uh, we had to do a, a quick financial turnaround. Uh, everybody came together. We had some, uh, specific strategies that we worked on.

And, uh, so we really got through that. And I'd say the first. Several years of the organization was really rebuilding the foundation of the organization. You know, making sure we had good systems in place, making sure that we had a solid financial plan, making sure that we had a really great staff and number one, most importantly, meeting the needs of the youth that we're working with in the community.

So, um, you know, we've then morphed and changed and, and, Uh, probably about, well, at 10 years ago, we launched an exciting new program called Eureka, which is a STEM program for our teens and our older youth in our programs. And that really, that really changed a lot. It was a bold vision that we had. Um, and then the most recent, uh, strategic plan, we, we kind of put our stake in the ground and said, you know what?

We keep getting asked, you know, when are you gonna come to Springfield? Why don't you come to get to Springfield? Because we were girls in Go Holyoke. Um, and although we were serving, um, some of the surrounding communities, uh, people were asking, uh, for us to expand our geographic region. And we really listened.

And so we were very intentional. We changed our name. Uh, we came, uh, to be, uh, we became, uh, girls Go the Valley. And as you, uh, read, you know, now our goal is really we're serving. Springfield, Chicopee and Holyoke and reaching a thousand girls throughout the valley, and we're really proud of that. I love that, and especially because it shows the importance of listening to what your community is looking for and what they need, and then finding ways to provide that solution for them.

In this case, expanding to Springfield. Exactly. I mean, I think we would have events. And, you know, we, we had a broad reach of supporters, our donors and, and even families in our programs. And after every event, people, oh, when are you, you know, when are you coming to Springfield? When are you coming to Springfield?

And so, um, and we also were already serving a large number of youth in Chicopee. And so when they said, you know, girls that go Holyoke, they, they didn't see in the name is, it was inclusive of where they lived. And so we really struggled with, you know, we didn't wanna, um, We wouldn't wanna make a change that would, uh, alienate our home community.

Like Holyoke is where we're founded, right? Like that's our headquarters. Yeah. And so we didn't want, you know, people in Holyoke to say, oh, you know, they've changed, they're moving away from us, but we're not doing that at all. I mean, our tagline right now, I've got in my, uh, my, my signature and email is, you know, headquartered in Holyoke.

Cuz it's so important that that's where we're founded and that's our home base. But we wanted to make sure we were inclusive of the surrounding community. So that's where, um, we intentionally changed our name. To girls in Go the Valley and expanded that geographic reach. Um, we expanded, you know, board members trying to make sure we have board members that are living or working in the communities, uh, that's, uh, that we're covering.

Mm, absolutely. And did you find that once you expanded to Chicopee and Springfield that you were able to then pursue new opportunities because of the fact that you're now, uh, working with individuals within those locations? Absolutely. Our number. One strategy for expanding the number of kids that we could reach was through partnerships.

And so by, uh, opening up that, uh, our name to Girls in the Valley, intentionally expanding the geographic reach, we reached out to the schools in the those communities. So in Springfield. Um, we, our first, the first year we did that, I think our goal was to reach four elementary schools and we had so many schools reaching out to us, Ashley, we had to like, sort of say no because we wanted to slowly pilot this new sort of partnership model, uh, at, with elementary schools actually.

So, um, people just. Uh, and the schools welcomed us with open arms. They really saw the value that a girls experience brings to the kids and the youth and their schools. So, um, that's been a model for us. We don't wanna go and build buildings in, you know, Springfield and in Chicopee, but we wanna be able to have our staff, uh, work in partnership with schools or with other community centers, um, to deliver the girls' experience to the youth where they are.

And it actually is, makes a little bit more financial sense too, right? So it's. You know, it's expensive to do transportation to and from a center. Um, we do that where it's where we need to, but to go where the youth are in the settings where they are, it just makes a lot of sense for us. And schools have been really great.

The schools that we've been partnering with, um, sometimes it's during the school day where there's an enrichment block or a health block. Sometimes it's afterschool programming that we do. And then also we do have a wonderful program center that we're working on renovating in Holyoke. Where we have kids that will come from Chicopee and Springfield to be able to benefit from that beautiful space, uh, that we're renovating right now.

Um, and we'll be opening, hopefully in the next year. Oh, that's really exciting. Do you think that there might be any plans to potentially expand the communities that you serve and the future, or right now kind of focusing on those three? Well, I think right now our focus is really doing the best and meeting the needs and the interests and providing opportunities primarily for Holyoke Chick.

Be in Springfield, right? Mm-hmm. So, and our biggest project, right, right in front of us is, um, getting our new headquarters and our program home fully renovated. And we're getting close, we're almost finishing phase A and I think once, once the dust settles on that, I don't know if that's

the right terminology to use, but once we get that, Project, um, you know, sort of completed and we see the organization is sustainable.

We've got strong partners throughout Holyoke Chicopee, and Springfield. We certainly don't wanna, you know, find ways to not expand our programming. But I think really making sure we're meeting the needs. And again, it's all, it's all about opportunities. Like what are those opportunities that families, kids are really wanting?

And Chicopee and Springfield and Holyoke, and let's make sure we're doing that really, really well. Absolutely. And would you say that that's why you had launched the program about 10 years ago, Eureka, the STEM program, is that what you were hearing from your community? Absolutely. And there's, there's lots of things we were hearing.

I mean, obviously we're looking at the external environment and if you're thinking about. Economic opportunity and life-changing opportunities. We think about careers in science, technology, engineering, and math. And again, that's not to say the arts aren't important, the humanities aren't important. Um, it's all important, right?

But we wanted to make sure kids, In Holyoke and Chicopee Springfield, particularly girls, particularly girls of color and other gender expansive youth, to have opportunities in those transformational careers. We, we also know there's a huge gap, right? I mean, we hear every day about the gender gap in science, technology, engineering, and math.

So, um, girls Inc. At the national level head. They had this program, it was like a little sleeper program called Eureka, and there were only four affiliates in the country doing it. And one happened to be in Massachusetts. Uh, girls in of Lynn. I'm like, you know what team, I think we should go, we should go check this out.

We should go see what this girls in gov, um, Lynn Eureka program is. And we went and saw how amazing it was. We also knew the outcomes. So kids that were in Eureka were more likely to take those harder math classes. They're more likely to graduate from high school and to go on to a, a career path or a college pathway in a STEM career.

And even if, um, a Eureka scholar doesn't pursue a STEM career, we know that taking those math classes and taking those harder classes around, um, preparing themselves for a STEM career, they're gonna be more likely to, to be able to go into college and persist. So, And, and Eureka is not, it's not just about stem.

And I, you know, I want people to know it really is a holistic, comprehensive program. Mm-hmm. Um, and Girls Inc. Is about, you know, strong, smart, and bold. So certainly with SMART, we have the, you know, that STEM focus, so, But when it comes to bold, we are really focusing on leadership

skills. And the kids and the scholars in the program are doing public speaking, learning presentation skills.

They're getting job skills. So really those are skills that are, you know, whatever career and whatever college pathway you take are so valuable to, to every, to all of us. So we focus on those bold skills. And also health, health and wellness, right? Mm-hmm. You, we know that, uh, particularly right now, um, there's uh, just a staggering level of.

Anxiety and stress and depression with our youth. And so those that care for mental health and health needs is so important right now. So a major component of their ECA program is around health and wellness, so, yeah. Yeah. So they're engaged in, um, you know, physical health as well as, uh, mental health opportunities and, um, so it's a whole program.

It's a whole program. And that year of program really does work. We've got scholars that are pursuing, um, STEM careers. On to college or onto those career pathways, and it's really exciting to see because we know those careers will be careers that can support a family. And make a change in a community.

Absolutely. This episode of Right Here in Mass is brought to you by Melissa j Pond, LLC. Is your mission driven organization struggling to secure funding or communicate your strategy effectively? I. Meet Melissa j Pond, LLC, an expert in grant writing, strategic planning, and visual storytelling. With over 15 years of experience in the nonprofit and government sectors recognize with multiple professional awards, Melissa can help create lasting change and improve the lives of those who serve.

Connect with her today@melissajpond.com to see how she can add value to your organization. That's melissa j pond.com. And I think one of the things that's really admirable, or one of the many things that's really admirable about Girls Inc. Is the fact that exactly what you mentioned through the strong, smart, and bold, that it really encompasses everything of a girl's from personal development to physical and mental health to focusing on the things that really helped to build them what to.

But they are with their education as well. And so I think it's important to not look at those things individually as silos, but understand that they're all tied together. So I think that's wonderful that you find all these different ways to bring them in. That's great. And it really is about, you know, the, the, what we call the Girls Inc experience, right?

Mm-hmm. It's not, it's really hands-on minds on engaging learning that helps, uh, youth really, you know, feel good about what they're doing. And you know, what's, what's wonderful about being, we're part of a national network, so there's Girls Inc. National, they do a lot around evaluating the outcomes and so, We know for sure we can say hands down, that a girl, our youth and our Girls Inc.

Program is more likely to take on those leadership skills and those leadership roles and make a difference in their community. We know that we can see that through evaluation and outcomes, and that's exciting to be able to say, cuz we need leaders, right? We need people to use their voices. We need leaders to, uh, Be confident about making changes in their communities.

Uh, cuz we have a, we have, uh, exciting opportunities ahead for us and it's the youth that are gonna lead the way. Absolutely. And one thing I've always wondered is that with the Girls Inc uh, chapters or locations that are available all across the country, would you say, I imagine that's probably different depending on the location and area, but would you say that they're pretty close in what they offer?

Are there things that make Girls Inc. Of the Valley different from other Girls Inc. Locations? Well, one thing we share with Girls Inc. Is that wonderful mission, right? We share that mission across the country. Girls Inc. National provides wonderful supports around research and training and evaluation and the Amazing Girls Inc.

Programming. We all share that. We have branding, you know, the Girls Inc. Red that we wear, um, and our logos. Um, but we do have the ability to. Find out what are the specific needs, opportunities, um, interests of our local community. Mm-hmm. So you do see, you know, you'll hear sometimes, um, you know, one programming that we're offering here doesn't necessarily make sense in a program that's, you know, in Colorado.

Um, we also, at the national level, they're doing a lot around public policy and advocacy, knowing that. Direct programming will only serve so many youth, right? We only have so many resources. But one way that we can affect and impact larger numbers of youth in our communities is through advocacy and policy changes.

And so that definitely will look different depending on the state and the community that you're in. Uh, for us, we're in Massachusetts so we feel well supported in our advocacy policy statements and um, we're excited to be able to lift up the voices of the youth cuz those policies are directly impacting their lives.

Absolutely. Could you share some examples of what that advocacy might entail? Or the policy statements? Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, um, when they first launched the advocacy statements, they reached out to youth, um, and our staff and community members across the country. Like what are the, what are the key issues that are so important to you?

What are the things that are impacting your lives? No surprise. Access to mental health services and resources was number one, and I wanna say, Ashley, this was before the pandemic. Wow. So it has only been exacerbated. So when you see the new recent, um, centers for Disease Control reports coming out of the staggering rates of violence and suicide, um, ideology and, um, with youth, particularly with girls, um, we're not surprised, right?

So it was a number one issue for Girls Inc. Nashville. So really looking at, um, what are those policies? What are those, uh, what are those federal funding opportunities? What are those changes that need to be made to make. Health, uh, mental health, uh, supports more accessible. And also to address the stigma around it.

In many communities, in many families, um, you know, there's a stigma, you know, you know, just, you know, pull up your boots and just, you know, kind of get through it. Um, so we're really trying to normalize that. No, it's, you know, counseling supports and mental health supports are important for all of us. Um, so that was a number one issue.

The other one, Was around educational access. So again, no surprise there. Um, we know that education can often be the key to unlocking the door to economic opportunity. So making sure you remove barriers to, um, achieving a high quality. Um, uh, education. So that might look like making sure that discipline policies in schools aren't, you know, more negatively affecting girls and particularly girls of color.

You know, things like looking at dress codes, you know, sometimes they're used in a way that might make, uh, education unaccessible, um, you know, what are those policies in schools are, you know, are, are some kids getting disciplined more than others? You know, what's that environment? Is the school tackling issues of bullying?

Uh, because we want. To make sure, you know, girls and gender expansive youth have welcoming environments in their school, so there's educational access. That's where STEM comes in as well, you know, focusing on. Um, you know, funding for STEM programming, so that was huge. Access to comprehensive sexuality education, uh, was also a number one issue for you across the country.

And so, you know, what does that look like? We are so proud of the fact, it's probably one of the things that really distinguishes us from all of the other youth serving learner organizations and definitely the girls serving organizations, is that we have incredible comprehensive, healthy sexuality programming for kids.

We truly believe they have the right for information and knowing how to take care of their bodies, communication skills, healthy relationship skills, we focus a lot on that and that's what the youth were telling us with that they needed. So advocacy issues around that as well. Yeah, and I love that you've taken all of these aspects that a girl might need support with or guidance with, and finding ways to deliver that solution.

I think it's really amazing. Great. Thank you. Absolutely. And what would you say is your favorite part of your role at Girls Inc. Oh, hands down. You know, it's like working with all the people. When I say people, it's like the youth, right? The girls, um, the, the kids, you know, they're gonna just tell

you like it is, and, and they're gonna, you know, we say that teens vote with their feet, you know, if things aren't working or the programming isn't meeting their needs or.

We're not providing the opportunities that they really, you know, will value, they're gonna vote with their feet. So, um, but lifting up their voices, you know, I think sometimes there's, we talk a lot about generational, generational differences and, you know, stereotypes. But, you know, listening to the youth today, they have, think about all the things that they've been through in the past several years, right?

They're so, they, they really. Lifting up their voices and you know, they'll show us the way if we just kinda listen. They're really gonna listen. If you, we, our board, we talk a lot about, you know, we're not saving kids, right? Like, we're preparing girls for the, the world, uh, and we're preparing the world.

For our girls. And I took that from, there's a former executive director in Girls at of Omaha and I, that was her line and I was like, oh my gosh. That's exactly right. Like we're giving girls opportunities for growth, learning new experiences, learning new skills. So we're preparing them for the world. Like, gosh darn it, the world needs to be prepared for them as well.

So I love that perspective. Yeah. Yeah, and you're exactly right. This generation is very, has lot of tenacity. Um, and has gone through a lot of adversity. And so being able to overcome that and support them and advocate for them in so many different ways is so crucial for what we do. That's right.

Absolutely. And so what you've been doing, um, with the Pioneer Valley, what's been really great about working within that or within that location specifically and having Girls Inc. Serve Springfield's, Chicopee and Holyoke? You know, I think that, uh, I've worked in Holyoke priority even, uh, working at Girls Inc.

I was working for Ho Chicopee Springfield Headstart. There must be just a fondness and a love that I have for, you know, western Mass and this whole valley. Um, and just I think that the, the, the need for resources and opportunity is just really, really great there. Mm-hmm. Um, I think sometimes, you know, People will say, oh, you know, there's lots of challenges.

Uh, we know that there's been historical, um, under-resourced policies and things that affected those communities in a way that didn't affect some of the surrounding communities. So, Like, you know, you hear a lot around, you know, institutional racism. I know we shouldn't be saying those things, but I'm gonna say it, we should be saying those things.

Right. But some of those things over the years really affected some of the communities in, definitely in Holyoke and, and Springfield, and also in Chicopee, that provided a lack of resources.

There might be, you know, more challenges, whether it's in their, um, educational opportunities or whether it's. You know, um, just, just being in a healthier environment.

Um, you know, I care a lot about equity and making sure people have what they need to, to thrive, and I think focusing on Holyoke and Chicopee and really providing opportunities for incredible engaging youth development is amazing. I mean, I, I can provide that for my daughter. Um, and I know what those stump camps cost.

I know what those amazing youth development experience costs. It's not, it's not inexpensive, right? When we all want our kids to thrive. So we check out the afterschool programs and we check out, uh, the different clubs that might be offered at your school district. And we have, um, you know, the summer camps and the different, uh, Vacation camps, you know, not only families have the resources to provide that at Girls Inc.

We make it our mission to provide those type of incredible opportunities for the youth, specifically in, uh, Springfield and Holyoke Chicopee that might not be able to have that access to that. Um, otherwise. Absolutely, and, and it goes to back to the point of, uh, part of the mission of Girls Inc. Is to just focus on that accessibility and equity for all.

Exactly. And so with, in addition to the exciting things that are going on with the renovation of the facility, can you talk about anything else that Girls Inc. Of the Valley is currently working on that's exciting? Um, I don't know if, if other people might find it exciting, but I find it really super exciting.

We're working on our strategic plan right now, so we're wrapping up our last strategic plan, which was to, you know, we knew we were gonna have to tackle a facility. So we're kind of working on that. We're getting close to, you know, I'd like to say we're getting close to completion on that. We had our name change, we had our geographic expansion.

Uh, we set our goal to, you know, serve a thousand kids. So now, We need to make the best use of that building, and we need to make sure we're heading in the right direction to best meet. So I find it so exciting to be strategic planning. We have an incredible, uh, strategic planning committee made up of our board members, our staff, as well as a family, uh, parent of one of our, uh, uh, some of our participants.

So, uh, we're right in kind of the beginning stages of it, but what we loved about the group that we're working with, Sparrow. Is that they really focus on stakeholder input. So they're gonna be, we're getting lots of opportunities to hear from the youth, what opportunities, what are we missing, you know, what are, what we thought about, what are some of the things they wanna be focusing on, or things that they wanna be doing that we haven't thought of.

Stakeholder input from families, from community leaders, uh, from our board members and our staff. So, and I loved what they said, it's like if we don't see a direct line from what we heard from

your youth to what you're gonna focus on the next few years, so we haven't done our job. So I'm so excited about that.

Strategic planning. I know a lot of organizations and like they kind of gather dust, but we, we don't, we, we need to be intentional, right? We really need to be intentional and making sure. We're getting the impact that, uh, we're hoping to get from our programs. Absolutely. And it sounds like that it helps to bring a purpose to what you're doing by following through with that strategic plan and that it also helps to have all of these different voices contributing to it, because I imagine that being so close into the day-to-day aspect of it, Sometimes it's hard to think outside and take a step back.

So getting that different perspective and experiences is huge. It's really important. I have, you know, I have my own lived experiences, so we're, what am I not thinking about or what, you know, so having a broad group of people with different experiences, different backgrounds be part of that planning process is so important and we're really committed to that.

And so that's why I'm super excited about it. But, um, What's, I think more exciting about the planning process itself is what it's gonna lead to, which is incredible outcomes for youth and community if we do it right. Absolutely. And for anyone who would like to get involved with Girls Inc of the Valley, whether it's a youth who would like to become a participant or someone who would like to support the organization monetarily or non monetarily, could you talk more about how they can get involved in that aspect?

Absolutely go to [girls inc valley.org](http://girlsincvalley.org). We have a website there, and there's a place where certainly if you wanna support us financially, that is absolutely important. Know that your investment will be used very, very wisely. There's donate spots there. Um, but there's also places to sign up to get our newsletter to stay informed.

We have lots, we have events coming up. People can get involved in that. As a youth or a family member, there's information on our programs. They can kind of scroll down, they can see the programs We are enrolling right now. For some of our middle and high school programs, we're gonna be gearing up to enroll for our Eureka program.

So there's lots of information. If a website sounds a little bit old school, I know there's a lot of people out there that are with social media. Again, [girls inc valley.org](http://girlsincvalley.org). Um, we have on Twitter, we're on LinkedIn, uh, Facebook, Instagram, so people can follow us there as well. And we do a great job posting it, like what's coming up, if there's opportunities for youth or volunteers.

Uh, we have a new program called Girls. Go-getters. Ooh. And it's, yeah. Yeah. So it's, uh, people can sign up to be a Girls Inc. Go-getter. They will get some nice, wonderful training and, uh, then if there's opportunities to be involved, whether it's youth or helping, um, at an event, uh, then they can, we can reach out to them and they can help us out.

That's awesome. Is that kind of like an ambassador program? I think you could say it's like that. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Absolutely. There'll be opportunities for, you know, if they have an outreach event or exhibitors table, we might reach out to the go-getters. But also perhaps we have a big event with the girls and the youth that we need some extra hands.

Um, we have college mentor opportunities, for example. Those go-getters would be, uh, folks that we would reach out to. Wonderful. And I'd love to shift gears a little bit to focus on you specifically and all that you've done throughout your career. So I'd love to hear what you actually did before Girls Inc.

Of the Valley, and then what inspired you to join the organization back in 2006? Well, I had a very curvy path, but I guess maybe some curves and then some long stretches and another curve. So before I was at Girls Inc. I was with another, uh, great, uh, local nonprofit organization, headstart, uh, Hollyoke, Chicopee, Springfield Headstart.

It's a wonderful program. And I kind of, I used to say, well, I grew up from, you know, serving infants and toddlers and preschoolers, which is what Head Start focuses on. It's a federal program that provides wonderful experiences for infant toddlers and preschoolers. I grew up to school age in Teeds, uh, with Girls Inc.

So for there, I, I, I worked really all my way up the ladder. I started off as a think a substitute assistant teacher at a preschool room, and then became a family advocate and then a director of program. And all through that, I, I kept, um, Having to look at my educational background, which was a, a bachelor's in music education.

Mm. And so that didn't necessarily equate to the work that I was doing. So I took a lot of, you know, Spanish language classes, knowing the community that we were working in and, and, uh, psychology of women and adolescent psych and social work classes. But at some point I'm like, oh. I think I'm gonna need a, maybe a degree that's different than bachelor's in music education.

So that's when I pursued a law degree. And I think people find that unusual that, you know, well, why don't you become a lawyer? Well, I actually, uh, the law educators legal education was so valuable to me as a nonprofit executive leader. Mm-hmm. Um, there's so many things you learn in law school. And so it was a wonderful experience and after that it was kind of ready for me to spread my wings, and that's when the opportunity to become the executive director for Girls Inc.

Uh, came up. And, uh, they took, I guess, a gamble on me and it's been a, a really fantastic journey, uh, since. And you've had some remarkable achievements throughout, so kudos to you. Well, thank you. And for anyone who might be in a position where they're just joining a nonprofit as an executive director, do you have any advice for them through what you've learned throughout the past 16 years?

I think the, the most, uh, important thing is to really. Realize you cannot do it alone. Like I think there's sometimes I see execs, um, like at conferences and it's not just at Girls Inc. And they're like constantly on their phone with their people back, you know, back at, back at their, you know, organization and they're constantly like putting out the fires or you know, like they're the ones doing everything.

As a leader, you really got to, um, trust and show trust in all of the people around you. Whether it's your volunteer board members, they're, they've said yes because they wanna help. I think some of the, we're afraid to ask our volunteers to do things cause maybe they're busy, but they really wanna help and they wanna make a difference.

So allowing, uh, the. To people and our staff are so brilliant and they are so incredible. You know, giving staff opportunities to also take leadership roles and to take initiative and make decisions. And also really valuing the contributions that our community has, you know, so I think the number one thing I can say is trust in other people.

I. Don't try to do it alone, you know, uh, involve people in decisions and sometimes it takes time. We take a lot of time to make decisions at girls think of the valley, but that's okay cuz that means we were including people in that process. I love that. I know that a lot of professionals in the nonprofit industry or nonprofit sector struggle with asking people.

Cause I know what you mentioned. It's great to be able to lean on people when you need to and accept that help. But sometimes that initial ask can be a little bit difficult, uh, whether it's for monetary help or whether it's, uh, personnel help, such as volunteering and whatnot. Do you have advice for how people can go about that in a way that feels good to them?

You know, I love that you asked that question cuz it certainly has been a transformation or over time is something that I've had to learn. And I used to refer to fundraising as the F word. Like you know like, cause I mean I was that brownie or girl scout that I did not wanna sell the cookies. So we have to get past that.

I didn't grow up with a lot of money. You didn't talk about money outside of the kitchen table. You know, we just didn't talk about it. So I had to overcome that fear of asking people for money. Um, but I think that when you love the mission of the organization and you know that you're doing good work, You don't think about it as asking, you're actually giving, you're giving folks the opportunity to feel joy, and I don't know that there's been any donor who's supported girls saying, who hasn't felt joy in that gift.

So if you switch it, you know you're not asking for money, you are actually giving joy by giving them the opportunity to make a difference and make an impact. Um, it really is, I think, a

transformational, and same thing with time, if you're asking volunteers. To, uh, to volunteer their time. They said yes when they agreed to be your volunteer or their board member.

So you should not be afraid. They wanna be connected. They wanna be connected to your mission. They do wanna make an impact. They wanna make a difference in a positive way. And so allowing them by saying, Hey, you know, I need you to do these things. Um, and it's gonna really, and show them how it connects to your mission.

Uh, you just gotta get rid of that fear, you know? We have to get rid of that fear and people will really, uh, be appreciative of that. Absolutely. And speaking of board members, um, just from organizations I've been involved in, I feel like being a board member for some organizations, it feels a little bit more laid back and casual.

While with others you're, there's a lot more involvement. And so what would you recommend for a nonprofit on how they can really leverage the members of their board and be able to tap into their expertise and connections? You know, I've heard in my long history of nonprofits, I've heard that some, you know, execs or CEOs or they just, oh, the board, you know, they find it as this extra, I love.

Working with a board of directors, first of all, they're my boss, right? And I'm not saying this because they're my boss, but, um, it is amazing to think that there's this group of people that care so much about their communities that they really wanna value and make an impact, um, by giving their time and their resources too.

Right? And often since they're your biggest, uh, most supportive financial donors as well, but also, Um, you know, working in partnership with them, it's just, it's just so important in how to move the direct, the organization forward. So, yeah, I think I, I think I went around it and forgot what the question was.

Ashley. I'm so sorry. That is Okay. How you can leverage your board and take advantage, I don't wanna say take advantage of, but be able to leverage their connections and expertise. Yeah. Well, I have to say, I think we do such an incredible job on thinking about who is on our board and the makeup of our board, right?

Mm-hmm. If you have all the people on your board that have the same lived experiences, kind of lived in the same neighborhood, grew up in the same way, looking the same way, talking the same languages, having the same education, you're gonna have an issue. You're not gonna actually be doing the work that you need to be doing to make positive change in the community.

So I think. You know how you can make an impact with a board of directors and how board members can make an impact is if you are on a board or you're leading a board or you're exec

working with a board, make sure you are really being intentional around the diversity of that board and not just diversity, like, you know, you're checking off boxes, but clear.

Inclusion and we've been now working a lot about thinking about belonging. And so having a board where, and again, not just checking off boxes, but that that board members are valued, all their voices are heard, um, there's actually healthy conflict in conversation. I think sometimes you get these boards or everybody's just, we're all nice all the time and sometimes that happens to us at girls and we're like, are we all just being nice all the time?

Like, how do we have those harder? More difficult conversations cuz our community needs us to have those conversations. If we're not working through those hard challenging problems, we're not doing the right work. Yeah. And I think that's really important is to really think about ways you can be innovative and lean on the board who can help to pro, to provide different uh, aspects or insights into how you can make that happen.

Absolutely. Yeah. Our board is amazing. I can't say enough about our board of directors. I love that, and I can imagine that working with so many different partners in the community that you likely have a long list of local businesses that you love to support. What would you say are your favorites? Oh gosh.

You know, I think if I, I have to think about it and categorize and I think first and foremost, right? It's like nourishing ourselves and our food. So we're based in Holyoke. Our home is Hallmark. And I would say within a, you know, half a mile of Radius, I think of three amazing women-owned businesses that we love to go eat at.

Crave is number one. Uh, at High Street. They're fantastic. They're just this woman owned. You know, just wonderful business, uh, comfort Bagels and Open Square Way. Oh my gosh. They make the best bagels. And then right across the street right now from where we are is Blue Door Gathering. Um, so definitely those are some of my favorite, like eating places right now in Houk that we go to.

But again, there's so many local businesses that support us that I always here are our favorites. You know, people's Bank, oh my gosh, they've been a long time supporters of ours. And they just, they volunteer and give so much time and expertise in so many different ways have been great. So yeah, it's hard to name just any, you know, small group of favorite businesses.

That's wonderful. I know that you shared this information earlier when I asked how people can get involved, whether through, uh, participating in a program or, uh, being a volunteer or donor. But could you share again, ways that people can get in touch with you or girls in Go the Valley in case you'd like to learn more?

People can go to our website at www.girlsincvalley.org. They can also check out our social media challenges at Girls Inc. Valley. Again, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram. They can also call our main office number. Somebody likes the old traditional phone call, which is four 13. 5 3 2 6, 2 4 7. And if you don't get an answer that you, you know, get in touch with somebody that you're wanting to reach, just keep calling.

I think on the website they can even send an email that'll come to my attention. I'm always happy to respond to those, uh, requests for information or ways to get involved. Wonderful, and I will link to those in the show notes so that way our listeners can click through and connect with you from there.

But Suzanne, this has been a wonderful episode and I really appreciate you coming on the show and sharing all of the wonderful things that Girls Inc of the Valley has been doing. Well, thank you so much, Ashley. It's when you help us lift up our voices and share with the world what we're doing, it really helps us.

So thank you so much. My pleasure.

Thank you for tuning into this episode of Right here in Mass. We hope you enjoyed listening to it as much as we enjoyed recording it. Be sure to subscribe, leave a review, follow us on social media and share our podcast with your network. See you next week.