>> Lauren Hajjar: You're listening to Voices of Public Leaders, Episode 1. [Background Music] Welcome to Voices of Public Leaders, a podcast where you will hear a range of perspectives, learnings, and best practices from those doing critical work in the public sector. We'll learn how public leaders are responding to our nation's most critical issues and how it's transforming the work of government and nonprofit organizations. We'll hear from leaders at all levels, including those in formal management roles, as well as those who display leadership in their daily work. I'm your host, Dr. Lauren Hajjar, Assistant Professor of Public Management at Suffolk University in Boston. Along with every episode will post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode as well as full transcripts. Check out our website at sites.suffolk.edu/voicesofpublicleaders to learn more. On this two-part episode, I'm joined by Dr. Kassy Alia Ray, the Chief Executive Officer of Serve & Connect, a 501c3 nonprofit organization based in Columbia, South Carolina. Kassy founded Serve & Connect in memory of her late husband, Officer Gregory Alia, who was killed in the line of duty in 2015. Under her leadership Serve & Connect has grown from a hashtag to a movement for change, touching countless lives and receiving national attention for its impact. Kassy's received several awards in recognition of her service to community, including Central Carolina Community Foundation's Individual Philanthropists of the Year, the City of Columbia Police Department's Outstanding Citizen and Columbia Business Monthly's Top 35 under 35, among others. In Part 1 of the episode, Kassy shares her story and talks about how her work with Serve & Connect began, what services are offered and some specific strategies they're implementing in response to COVID-19. In Part 2, Kassy reflects in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd on the role of racism and policing and how it's impacting the work to end divisiveness and build stronger police community relationships. Kassy, thank you so much for joining me today. It's really great to see you even though we're over the computer here. You and I have had many conversations over the last few years about the work that you're doing. And certainly in light of COVID-19, your work to build police community relationships is even more critical. Before we hear about how you're responding to the pandemic, however, can you share a little bit about Serve & Connect and the mission and how you became involved?

>> Kassy Alia: Yeah, absolutely. Lauren, thank you so much for having me on. I'm excited to be able to see you and to be able to share in this with you. So, a little bit about Serve & Connect. We are a 501c3 nonprofit organization with the mission of igniting positive change through police and community partnerships. This is an organization that I founded began back in 2015. My husband was a police officer who was killed in the line of duty on September 30 of 2015. If you think back it was following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson and with that a follow up of many officer involved shootings of unarmed black men followed by police officers being shot, riots happening. And with that came some pretty strong polarized opinions. Now a very much recognize and even more so today than ever, how long standing the tensions between police and communities they serve, especially communities of color have been, it's been around really since the birth of our country. But if you think back to that time in 2015, it was very highly publicized, a very prevalent societal issue and discussion. And with those polarizing messages at the time, it felt like to me that you could either be for police or for community and if you're for community that you were inherently against the police and it didn't seem like you could be both. And even before Greg, my husband was killed. That message was really difficult for me. My husband was an amazing man. He was a great police officer, a great father, a great friend. I loved him very dearly, and I'm very proud of him. And also, I love community. I am trained as a clinical community psychologist. My work prior to my husband's death and continuing to this day has really been focused on community health transformation, addressing the inequities that exist in our communities, bringing people together, belief in the power of people and connections and. So I just really struggled with why there had to be such a continued divide. And when Greg was killed, I felt called to do something to speak out to try to make a difference. Now, early on, what that looked like was primarily focusing on raising awareness of the positive things happening everyday between police and communities and raising support for law enforcement. So what that looked like was initially talking about Greg and sharing our story, humanizing him. I think far too often we forget that they're real people. And the stories that we hear in the news, not just with police, but in general, we forget that there are people behind the stories and I wanted to remind people that, yes, Greg was a police officer, but he was a person and here's who he was, and here's why I loved him so much. Another motivation I had was to try to do what I could to change the narrative. And at three in the morning, the night after Greg was killed. I shared a Facebook post asking for two things. One, I asked that people share stories about Greg so that Sal, our son who turned six months old that day, could learn about the man his father was and two, I said that Greg was a hero and many other cops are too. And I proposed using the #heroesinblue as a way to raise awareness of these positive stories that so often go and told. Now, Heroes in Blue was just a hashtag. It was a gut reaction that I had three in the morning when Greg was killed. As I shared, now doing work that I loved, before Greg died, you know, I was finishing my PhD. I had been doing some really awesome work that I'm so proud of that really changed my life, I think when it comes to building bridges and communities and trying to promote health. So moving forward in the direction of this kind of movement, and certainly, starting a nonprofit was not even in my realm of possibility of thought, this wasn't a predetermined action that I had. But as time went on, I just felt continually called to do something more. And over time, what that evolved into was the work we're doing the Serve & Connect. There's a lot more to that story that led us to why Serve & Connect. But I'll pause there for a second.

>> Laura Hajjar: You know I've heard you share your story before Kassy. And each time I'm so impressed with how you're able to be on the balcony, and really situate your own experience of loss and suffering into the context of a much larger social problem that's impacting communities across the country. And so thank you, you've responded with such empathy and courage. Can you say a little bit more about Serve & Connect as a 501c3 and some of what you're doing right now in North Colombia?

>> Kassy Alia: So one, filled to look back and then to look forward. As I shared we're initially started as Heroes in Blue, so that's how we began. Heroes in Blue was incorporated as a nonprofit in the state of South Carolina on March 18th, 2016. I was sitting in the Secretary State's Office when I heard word that an officer had been shot and killed in the Upstate, leaving behind his pregnant wife and two sons. And within hours, our team rallied and set up a GoFundMe campaign that raised over $193,000 for his family. That tragedy response remains a part of what we do today was one of our first initiatives. And since Greg's death, we have raised over half a million dollars 100% of which goes back to the families of fallen officers, and we also extended it to officers who are critically injured in the line of duty. Another initiative that we started and this was actually the very first thing that we did was I learned that December 14th our wedding anniversary was going to be named Greg Alia Day in the city of Forest Acres where Greg worked in Richland County and I wanted to use that day as a way to say thanks to police. So we started a campaign where people could go to local restaurants donate $1, $2, and at the end of the two weeks, we would add up the amount of money that was raised and bring lunches to police as a way to say thank you. Our goal that first year was to raise enough money to bring lunches to the Forest Acres Police Department. So that would have been about 25 people working that day, so a relatively small department. And we were so successful that we brought lunches to 310 officers across 13 different police stations, I believe, and over $3,500 in gift cards, and that next year, we more than doubled that and every year since we've been able to bring lunches to about 600 officers all pretty much all police departments throughout what we call like the Midlands of South Carolina so that, in this campaign is really defined as Richland and Lexington counties and a few other surrounding counties, we extended to in this year, and on average about 8 to 9,000 in gift cards. So these efforts like our "Feed an Officer" campaign, our tragedy response, our -- continue to be a part of our work but they were really at the heart of the Heroes in Blue mission. And we continue to recognize the importance of celebrating our officers, supporting them. As Greg said there's so many positive things that are happening every day. So to be able to give back is important, and it is an -- it's important, it's meaningful. And at the same time, I recognized early on that that would only go so far towards really addressing what I wanted to get into this in the first place, which is bringing people together. Which is a hard thing, I mean, well, as we've talked about the beginning, this has been around for the tension between police and communities of color have been arguably always there to say that we're rebuilding trust I've had many people tell me and I agree is kind of false, because that trust may not have even existed in the first place. So we're building a trust, trying to engage in something that arguably has never been there for many people. So to understand where that's coming from, and how to make a difference was a really long journey. I would encourage them happy to go into it at any point if you want Lauren, but if some of the listeners are interested, I do have a TED Talk on our website serveandconnect.net that really goes into this whole journey and process. In a nutshell, what it came to, largely inspired by the process of finding peace in my heart for the man who killed Greg was recognizing that at the end of the day, what we all want is more the same than it is different, that potentially we all want our communities to be safe. We all want our families to be protected and we all want our children to thrive. And I saw that as an opportunity for police and communities that are distrustful of police to come together, recognizing that most of the time what contributes to issues and community's safety are noncriminal actions. They are the same things that are linked to the health disparities that I was addressing, even before Greg was killed. It's poverty, it's trauma, it's hunger, inequities in our social and physical environments that exist too often from impoverished communities. And those things, police can't nor arguably, should they be involved in addressing alone, like they can help be agents for change. They can help. And they do often try to help people in need, but there are so many great resources that exist, including the very people who live in those communities who can address those issues. And so that's really what we focus on, is how do we better build those bridges between police, community organizations, service organizations, government entities, and the residents that resident empowerment is very important for us. I would encourage people to read our articles, that was a new direction that you are the lead author on that really talks about our COMPASS work and the integration of readiness and relationships that helps understand a lot of the theoretical underpinnings behind this work and talk about the COMPASS movement. But that is really I would say that a big piece of our work now is that approach to community transformation really moving policing community together from a trust building process through sustained action to improve quality of life.

>> Laura Hajjar: Kassy, these are really important points you're making, you're talking about the social determinants of health, and these key factors that impact the health and well-being of a community, which involves multiple stakeholders, the police being one of them. So thank you for making those points. Now, Serve & Connect has multiple initiatives that align with its mission. You've got Greg's Groceries for instance, and the youth empowerment initiative. Can you talk more specifically about some of this work and what you're doing to bring stakeholders together to meet the needs of the community?

>> Kassy Alia: So I mentioned our COMPASS work. So COMPASS is this approach to bringing police and community together to drive action. And the -- that really started through our work in an area in Columbia, South Carolina, it's Columbia's 29203 zipcode, which is often called North Columbia. So this is an area that historically has experienced significant disparities and health and socioeconomic outcomes. I have yet to find this in like a research form. But what I continually hear is that it has the highest rate as per capita of diabetic amputees in the whole country. And 1/3 of all families, I believe, live below the poverty line. The rate of adverse childhood experiences is through the roof and also with a hotspot for crime. So 44% of all the shootings in the city of Columbia occur in this one zipcode, which is standard, you see those things overlap. So we started our work out there in August 2017, with as you mentioned, Greg's Groceries. So that is one of our initiative store Compassionate Acts Program, which provides resources to police to help people in need. Greg's Groceries in particular, provides boxes of non-perishable food to police. Each box is enough to feed a family of four for a week. And what it does is if a police officer comes across someone on a call or while out in the community and realizes that they're in need, they can provide this box of food to help that person immediately. And what we found is that 88% of recipients indicate that it does help build trust with police. Since the launch of Greg's Groceries, there have been nearly 40,000 meals have been distributed by 21 police departments throughout South Carolina and all 100% agree that it is helping me to build their ability to give back and to connect with others and engage in the positive community policing. So Compassionate Act Program is an example of how we began in Colombia to build that foundation of trust to understand how we could bring partners together. Through that work, what we learned is this common ground around youth safety, that there is a big concern because of the crime and violence, the risk that that places on youth outcomes, and also youth risk for being recruited into criminal activity. There are comments around kids as young as 10 being recruited into gangs, statements around, you know, mothers being scared of where the next bullet may be coming from and shooting their children. So this is a very significant in this common ground need between both police and community. In light of that, in November of 2018, we launched what is called the North Columbia Youth Empowerment Initiative. And so this is under the COMPASS umbrella now, but it was called -- and we call the NCYEI. And I'm so excited, you know, it started off like with a lot of hope, a lot of crickets too. You know, I think there were a lot of distress some of our early meetings. There would maybe be like four or five people there and slowly but surely it started growing, it started growing. We heard people commenting on, you know, I wasn't sure if I could trust you, wasn't sure if you keep coming back this comment about here today gone tomorrow that so often this community has been promised a lot and been let down. But slowly but surely, we started to build trust. And if you think back, it's been now our year anniversary since the community visioning day and it was such an exciting day for getting people to really think about the connections that exists in their communities how people may or may not be working positively together and starting engaging in this open dialogue. Over the last year, to see the growth and progress has been really amazing. So as of I believe it was November, we had engaged in our formal meetings over 200 individuals from, I think it was like 78 organizations had been engaged in the work. We estimate that about 2,500 furthermore, individuals have been reached through the community events that have been touched. We've learned a lot in terms of progress towards building the capacity of partners to work together as well as advancements in trust. At the same time, we also see that outside of those partnerships, that trust and empowerment and hope remains pretty low, and they are continually an aspect of what we want to work on. And data we collected this summer I think was only 15% would rated, North Columbia high on hope.

>> Laura Hajjar: Yeah.

>> Kassy Alia: So it's pretty heartbreaking. And so what we're excited about is the power of people and now that we have this network to be able to drive change, and we're really seeing that in response to COVID right now. We have been able to engage neighborhood leaders that each of what we're calling these bureaus within North Columbia, these high crime hotspot areas, who are helping to serve as a gateway for resources to be distributed within to let people know that they're cared for that they're not alone, that people stand with them. And what that does is open doors for conversations, and hope and trust building. So for instance, that includes the distribution of senior resources, senior meals to homebound seniors throughout the neighborhood, through an organization called Senior Resources. This will be our second week and of this pipeline happening and tomorrow 590 meals will be going out through our partners, which is really exciting. So there's a lot of work left to be done. But I'm really proud. And so I think the North Columbia work, really gives a clear example and more than I'm happy to share. We'll be releasing it later this month, digitally, and it'll be on our website. But if you want to link, there's a great move -- a little five-minute video that really describes COMPASS very clearly now and showcases the North Columbia works.

>> Laura Hajjar: It sounds like you're really listening to the various stakeholders in the community, including residents and those who may not have had a voice historically. And it also sounds like the consistent presence of Serve & Connects' people and programs matter here in the trust building process and that it's taking time to do this. So I think there's a lot to be learned about the process for stakeholder engagement, right, and the type of commitment that's required to ensure that all stakeholders are involved and around the table and that they have a voice as part of the readiness building process for change. And I also think there's a lot to be said here about the role of relationships in the process at both individual and organizational levels. So thank you for sharing this with us. I do want to shift gears to the organization's COVID-19 response. You briefly talked about this, but how are you making sense of this as a leader of a nonprofit organization? And what are the biggest organizational challenges you're facing right now?

>> Kassy Alia: So I think there are two primary areas that we're focusing on during the coronavirus pandemic. One is, first and foremost, ensuring that we are providing our communities, our partners with resources and support to help build community in a time of social distancing. I mean, now more than ever, that is so critical. We talk about this consistency, to talk about the here today, gone tomorrow mentality that's playing a big role right now and the communities that are in greatest need, because what they're seeing is, first of all, we're not out there physically needs to be out there for meetings all the time. We'd be out there, they see us. They don't. It's hard to have that right now. Police presence, police are pulling back in terms of more proactive outreach because they're trying to protect themselves as well. So when the community tends to see police that is often in a space of either enforcing social distancing rules or because of crime that's happening, so that's tough. And then just fear, I mean, it's very well-known at this point that coronavirus is negatively impacting communities of color more than it is white communities. And I think that's scary for a lot of people. And so there are a lot of layers to that. I could keep going on, but I think it -- what it highlights is more important than ever to really show that we are a community that people are here and that we stand together and try to build those connections in the time of social distancing. And that's been really tough, ways that we've been doing that is by, first of all through our Compassionate Acts Program providing police with emergency food kits, hygiene items like toilet paper and cleaning supplies, things like that to be able to help people who may be in need. Police are still out there as first responders. We did develop support kits and stuff, so manuals to help encourage the safe distribution of those resources to ensure that communities are cared for but also police are protected. Secondly, we have been continuing to meet weekly with our North Columbia partners and created this like umbrella hub, this task force some sort, that can help proactively distribute resources but address needs. Just last week, there was an officer involved shooting where the individual was killed. And that call that was following the deputy chief of police came on the call to talk about it and address it. So we're having these very real open conversations even in the midst of this kind of crazy time. And I think the third thing is not losing hope. How can we continue to think proactively about how we build the capacity, the empowerment and keep moving towards our goals? So those are some examples of how we are responding immediately. We are also trying to think ahead, and it seems fairly evident that we are at least moving into a recession. That's scary for everyone in our country, not just nonprofit. But when you think about our revenue stream, so we are not a type of nonprofit that has like, we don't depend on like income generally, you know, we're not like the zoo, that is having people come in and they're seeing a direct impact right now. What we are preparing for is the fact that we're going to have less, probably individual contributions coming up less -- next year foundations are going to be hurting. So there's a need to also think proactively about how do we use this time to pivot, and think about how we prepare ourselves for the future. Now, that's to be said, where we go from here. This is all new to me, an unchartered territory, but we're doing our best to try to think creatively, while also first and foremost, ensuring that we're serving our partners.

>> Lauran Hajjar: What do you see as opportunities for change during this time Kassy? You mentioned you're pivoting and focusing on a few different things. Do you see opportunities to connect remotely with your partners or other community constituents over some period of time as well as opportunities for funding?

>> Kassy Alia: Well, I think certainly more than ever, I feel more confident about the critical importance of our work and seeing how it played out. I had and we see it in other communities that we're working in that have are like a year, year and a half behind where we are in North Colombia and those relationships have been established it, we're much more nimble in North Colombia to be able to bring people together and what that does to be able to try to help prevent crime, I think it's really important. So, I can be able to communicate that impact. In terms of opportunities for funding, I mean, there are emergency dollars that are out there, we have put in for grants, we haven't found out about that yet to help cover some of the work that we are doing to serve others. But more than that, I think looking ahead, three strategies and really thinking about is one, how do we use this time to really love on the people who have supported us so far? How do we reach out to them, connect with them, build those relationships, we're exploring, like virtual cups of coffee. Explore, like writing handwritten thank you notes to people, just letting them know that we're here that we care, trying to boost and restructure our digital communications to keep people up to date on where we are. And also rethinking some of our social media structure. So using this as a time for reflection and getting the word out more in connecting with people, so strengthening our support base, whether that'd be donors or volunteers. Secondly, thinking outside the box, when it comes to grants and foundations, trying to outreach to some different avenues, I'm thankful that I think our programs have become really strong right now. And we're continuing to demonstrate impact that's important. So, working hard to put ourselves out there as much as we can. And third, thinking creatively about how we can build our reach into new areas. So it may be time to start exploring other ways that we can provide support that's consistent with our mission. One of the things I'm interested in is the growth of our Compassionate Act Program, how do we help better extend that network to provide support for effective community policing practices and offer that to a broader network? So those are some things that we're exploring right now.

>> Laura Hajjar: That's really sound advice for nonprofit leaders. I do think that the difference between organizations that survive this and those that do not might be around an ability to be flexible and to think more creatively and innovatively about how to carry out the mission. So one final question, Kassy, what do you think is most important for nonprofit leaders to be thinking about right now?

>> Kassy Alia: Most important thing for nonprofit leaders to be thinking about during coronavirus? How can you continue to strengthen your mission in the face of this time? I think it's important not to -- I think it can be very easy to mission creep to, you know, there are these emergency grants that are out there. There are different opportunities. There may be a desire to shift the work to be able to stay afloat. But I think that will only weaken the impact. I think partnerships are more critical than ever, building networks and relationships with other organizations is more important than ever to really strengthen that base. And not to lose hope, you know, we have to stay the course. I think that it was actually a meeting just before everything shut down here in South Carolina. And there was a woman, she's one of our residents who is a member of the North Colombia Youth Empowerment Initiative. And she shared how the first meeting she was invited to that day before she was invited was the day that she was planning to take her life. And how being a part of this work has given her hope, has shown her that something different is possible, how she sees the inspiration and the hope, and the children that live in her neighborhood. And through tears, she said, this work can't go away. It can't stop. And I think that's the case for many organizations. We have to focus more than ever on our impact on touching lives, on making a difference, that's what nonprofits are supposed to do. And we have to ground ourselves in that. It gives us a laser focus. All the frivolous stuff doesn't matter. You need to make an impact, and we need to survive to be able to serve others and I think that's perhaps the most important thing.

>> Lauren Hajjar: [Background Music] During Part 2 of the interview, Kassy reflects in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man who was killed by a white police officer on May 25th, 2020. She discusses racism in policing, the work of her organization to build police community relationships, and offer some thoughts on the future of policing. Kassy, thank you so much for coming back on the show with me this morning. Today we're here to talk in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. And I know this incident and larger issue hits home in a major way for you both personally and professionally. So first and foremost, how are you doing?

>> Kassy Alia: Thank you Lauren so much for having me back on. And it certainly is such a difficult time for all of us, for our country. And yes, I think it hits home with each and every one of us in a different way. There's been so many emotions that I felt, you know, sadness, anger, fear. Right now, what I'm really focused on is how can we be a part of facilitating and supporting effective action. In many ways the work of Serve & Connect, is you know, we have been in this work now for several years. And we'll continue to be it's not a drop in the bucket. It's about consistent and sustained action, the issues that bring us to this place, namely, at the heart of it all is a deep rooted history of racism in our country and the systems and the infrastructure that is a part of our country. And those issues have been around for generations, and they're not going to change overnight. And it's going to require us all, standing together in a consistent way. And so that's really where I'm at right now is just trying to stay focused on both the plans that we already put in place, and also, what more we can do to support the process of healing in action as we move forward from this space.

>> Laura Hajjar: During our last conversation about a month ago, you talked about the work of Serve & Connect, and you reference the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, and Greg's death back in 2015, a time when, as you said, people were either for police or for community. And if you were for the police, you were against community. And if you were for community, you were against the police, impressing upon us this real divisiveness between the police and the community. Are we there again? I mean, did it get better and it got worse? Or has it just been getting worse this whole time? Can you say a bit about that?

>> Kassy Alia: You know, it's -- there have been moments in the past year or two in particular, where I almost feel like I was living in a twilight zone, you know, we have this super intense and heated moment in our country and it had almost become eerily quiet in the last year or two. So much so that when I would mention the work that we do, it didn't light off the same light bulbs for people and it just made me feel like am I, frankly, am I the crazy one, you know, I thought these issues didn't call like daisies, and I don't feel like they went away. So it just was confusing to me. And I think what we're seeing right now is that the issues certainly haven't gone away. That if anything, in some places people may feel more polarized than ever. That being said, I also believe that there are pieces of hope within that. I think that we're seeing a lot of demonstrations of empowerment and strength, especially among black and brown communities and non-people of like white people standing alongside people of color in solidarity. And that's to a level of degree that I don't think we saw before. I think we see increasingly more people understand why this call is so important. You know, what does it mean to say black lives matter? Where does that sentiment come from? And I think increasingly we see awareness of what that means among the more diverse people. I also, we never recall -- we never saw the level of condemnation from law enforcement leadership that we're seeing right now. And also the solidarity across the country, and we're seeing examples of officers taking a knee, joining in prayer, really rich dialogue. And so even in this space of deep pain, I don't want us to lose hope of the potential for real transformative action as we move forward from here if we can remember and see that at the heart of it, we are working towards the same goal, and we may on either side not have the right answers, but it's really in that synergy of coming together where the leverage points are for change. And so I'm hopeful that even in this place where we are, there may be a launching point for really addressing the systemic factors that brought us here.

>> Laura Hajjar: Tell us a little bit about how the community of North Columbia has responded to these events.

>> Kassy Alia: So I think there are two different descriptions, there's -- so Columbia is our state capitol in South Carolina. North Columbia is in particular, the work we are in is a just one zipcode in the city of Columbia. And in Richland County, that's only about say maybe a mile -- probably about two miles or so from downtown, maybe slightly more, but it's extremely close. You could walk there in not so long of time from the state capitol down to North Columbia. So it's very much a part of our state capitol in our city, but it is important to recognize the context in which Columbia exists. So within our city as a state capitol it has been the source of continued protests. We have had protests today is Friday, and there have been ongoing protests in Saturday in our city. On Saturday in particular, some of those protests did turn violent. There were rocks thrown at police, police cars burned, two separate instances of officers being shot at, windows being broken, looting happening, and also bystanders being injured. So -- and that's not to say there actually have been some really beautiful and peaceful protests as well, enrich dialogue that have happened both between our police leadership, our city leadership, and the protesters who are on site. So it's not all bleak, but it is as a state capitol, a big vocal point for our state on this issue. That being said, you know, we've continued even throughout coronavirus to meet with our North Columbia partners at least weekly. And during our weekly call this past Monday, it was a real and raw conversation. It was just with community partners because the police were out working at the protests. But I think that was beautiful in the space to have that open dialogue, we have a number of our partners to share how much they appreciated the safe space to know that they could be heard that I had a few comments on how the group that we've built is like a family and even in the midst of different reactions and sadness and anger to what was happening, just to hope that what we've built can be a real foundation for change in our community. So I think it highlights how important those proactive relationships are. And if we can continue to spread them in other areas and invite more people in. I think, you know, at the core of this all Lauren, I really believe is empathy. You know, if you have deep empathy, and so empathy, it's not perhaps that you may have it, like I'm a white woman, I'm never going to exactly 100% understand how someone of color would feel in this situation. However, by having empathy, you can see, you can put yourself in the shoes of another and more deeply understand how they might feel. And when you feel that way, there's no way that you can accept racism. There's no way that you can accept violence towards another human. And it really helps us and seeing our neighbor as part of our same world family coming from that place of mutual respect and dignity. And in conversations that can propel us forward even though we may have different perspectives. It's all in the joining of those perspectives that really all the puzzle pieces fit together.

>> Lauren Hajjar: Kassy, so discussing these issues around race, class and culture with diverse groups is not new to you, you and your colleagues and partners at Serve & Connect have been facilitating these difficult yet incredibly important conversations around race in your community for the past several years. Can you share more specifically how these conversations began? Were they comfortable, uncomfortable and how have they evolved over the years?

>> Kassy Alia: Thank you, Lauren. You know, it is definitely embedded in the work that we do because I don't think you can authentically tackle police community relationships without understanding how race plays a role. There are different experiences in general for white people versus people of color when it comes to the trust and perceived legitimacy in police and that's backed up by research. Before I dive into what Serve & Connect does, I think it may be helpful context to understand that getting to this place of increased comfort. I don't know if that's the right word, but ability to talk about these really difficult topics is a journey for me. So I have my doctorate in clinical community psychology, at the heart of community psychology is a real value system embedded within the ideals of social justice of diversity and equity and inclusion. And those are factors that have been embedded in now for quite a few years. And prior to my husband's death, my work focused on community health disparities. But, you know, Lauren, for all the statistics that I knew, you know, I wrote academic papers focused on the topic. I could tell you the differences and obesity and mortality rates and cardiovascular disease for white versus black Americans. But I don't think it was until I really dove into this work and really sought to understand where there are opportunities for real solutions that I saw and I was missing the depth of understanding from a human perspective of what this issue means. And getting to this point has been a really hard road. And I, this is not something you stop learning about. Race isn't something that is like, oh, I got it now. It's going to be a lifelong journey for me. But I guess to our listeners, what I want to say is that it takes a real personal commitment to diving into this issue and it's very uncomfortable for everyone. And I want to encourage people not to be afraid of that. And also not to be shy, you know, if people were all at different levels of understanding, some people may have grown up. And this has been a part of their daily life and conversation forever. There may be others who haven't even dip their toe into these conversations. And so we all have a way to move forward. In terms of what that looks like for Serve & Connect, as we really started understanding more what that means, and how critical it was. We realized we can't shy away from those conversations that we have to create a space that is open and respectful and in some ways, call it out. And just yesterday, I was in a conversation. One of the communities that we work with it is really quaint, beautiful, you know, this kind of southern charm type of town with this beautiful little Main Street. But what we've heard and observed from a number of different partners is that there's almost like two towns for people like one, that's more for the white members of this community. And other another one where black and brown communities and people non-English speaking community members don't really feel like it's their town. And when we met with them, it was the two young organizers of the protests. And they had other elders really, that were supporting them with the chief and the sheriff in that community. And at the beginning of the conversation, I started off by really calling out some of the main issues that lead us to this space. And not that I'm not trying to tell me in that space, but I think I only say that to say that I think when we can start off from the foot of naming what the real issue is, we can come from a place of, OK, we can really talk about this. We can leave it all on the open. We're not putting anything under the rug and maybe really, really hard for a little while, maybe for a long while. But when we can really see each other as united on this front, we can move forward.

>> Lauren Hajjar: I've had the privilege to visit with you and your team, Kassy, who are, by the way, incredibly hospitable last April, and one of the events that we attended together was the Community Visioning Day event. And I really got to watch you in action that day, so to speak, in response to one conversation, for example, that was escalating between a black community member and a white police officer, you very gracefully, maybe in under a minute, we're able to ground the two as well as the many others in the room who were part of the conversation in their common purpose for being there. The significant amount of pain and grief that you had individually experienced, and brought to the table around racism and violence, and how it had impacted you all, collectively. And it really was powerful and people definitely respected and vocalized that you had created this psychologically safe space to have these difficult yet really important conversations. So, you know, has it always been the case that you've been able to connect this deeply with your community and have these conversations, you know, earlier you mentioned, learning about race is a journey. So, could you say a little bit more about that?

>> Kassy Alia: Well, I'm really humbled by your words Lauren and by your question. And as I think back to my journey, before Greg died, I had the honor of being the project director for a family-based weight loss group that was focused on families -- African-American families would take up adolescence. And, you know, I think back to who I was in that space. I had a number of families, you could tell for the first like week or two, maybe even a long, little longer for some, they weren't quite sure how to take me or what to make of me. But I, you know, common theme I heard over time was people say I see your heart. And that message has continued throughout and even just yesterday, one of my teammates who actually his first time being a part of our work was at the Community Visioning Day that you mentioned. And he has been such a pillar in the work ever since. And so over time, actually, we've elevated and he worked for us full time now. And I just really trust him and value his perspective and I'm so thankful to have him as a friend and a teammate, but I was asking him as we left just to reflect on, you know, if he had any constructive feedback for me on how I could be better in those spaces. And he again reiterated that, you know, it's -- people are pretty intuitive in general and can see where someone's intention is. And that just kind of reaffirming that he's always seen and respected the intention that I have in my heart for this work, which is really kind of him to say, it makes me thankful. I do think that over time, it's about taking that intention. I think a lot of us are very well-intentioned, that our hearts are in the right place, that, you know, we want what's best for others. Sometimes we may be a little bit more focused on just ourselves and our families. But there are a lot of people who really care when you stop and think about it, about the world around them. I think to get to a deeper level of turning that intention into bridge building takes again an intentionality and practice. Practice of being in different spaces, make start as simple as like look around at your circle, your tribe, as people are saying, like feel such an elderly, like this young people, same tribe. But to look around and, you know, does your friend group goal kind of the same? And if so, what can you do to change it up? What types of -- if you have kids, what types of books do you have? You know, do they incorporate people of different colors and races and religions? If not, maybe you should get a few. You know, what is your bookshelf look like? Is it all, you know, love fiction books just as much as the next person, but there is a lot we can learn from hard stories. You know, when I read "Just Mercy" I cried on every single page. And it was a very important book for me to be able to read. So I think we can take that intentionality and with practice, turn it into something that can really help us more effectively use that intention to show up for our community.

>> Lauren Hajjar: Thank you, Kassy. I know that you and your colleagues at Serve & Connect are heavily involved in what's going on right now and on the streets with protests and other related events. How do you anticipate that these events happening across the country will impact the work that you're doing, both at the local level and at the state level?

>> Kassy Alia: Yes, we spend a lot of time as an organization, thinking about what that looks like. After reviewing the programs, we already have in place and the goals that we had set for the year ahead, as an organization, and that's both our core team and our board, really outstanding board of directors. I think we all agree that this work is more important than ever, that the roadmap we've been shaping is on the right track. However, we have to elevate our standards and raise the bar higher than ever before. So our commitment to rigorous, both design of the work that we're shaping and the evaluation of it is more important than ever, and accelerating our timeline. So, you know, the work we've done in North Colombia has really been a learning lab for us and understanding how this may take place. We are expanding in three other communities that all have their own personality and characteristics and challenges and opportunities. So that provides that next layer of mapping out the framework. But as we move forward from here, it's going to take a lot more than that if we want to create something that's scalable for other communities, and that can really say there is another way and it works. So that's one of the big focus areas for us. Some of these specific actions that we're taking, we are in the next year going to be expanding our Compassionate Acts Program, and in particular, Greg's Groceries, which provides boxes of non-perishable food to police to help people in need, expanding that statewide. And that's important because it's kind of that first step towards a positive relationship and 88% of recipients of the Compassionate Acts Resources say that it does help support trust between police and communities. We are also developing what we're calling the Law Enforcement Community Connections Program that would help us kind of take it to the next level with departments that we're working with, to assess where they are at when it comes to their readiness for community policing initiatives and help them shape, more tailored outreach efforts, and provide the training and support to be able to do that well. We're also going to expand our use of the welcome table which is an Evidence-Based Program for race and reconciliation. That will include doing it with the three different series with youth in North Columbia, youth and police and trying to really build up that youth leadership voice. And another action that we are accelerating timelines on for this year as we know how important it is to invest in community driven public safety initiatives. Community knows what's needed for their community. They know what the challenges are, they know what the needs are, the opportunities, but they may not have the tools or the resources to make it happen. And we want to make that possible. We're also in conversation with other partners, like how can we be a better bridge between some of our more macro community partners like those that represent the disability community, those that represent non-English speaking community, really hear what they're saying and be able to translate back. Because a lot of times, you know, I'm blessed like I think South Carolina, I can't speak for many other states at this time, but South Carolina law enforcement leadership is really committed, they have already been evaluating what things can improve, and they're open to doing that even more. And sometimes I think there may be a lack of awareness of what's already going well. And I think we need to have an open space that says, all right, what are the things that you think our state needs? What's already happening and what are like the immediate actions we can take together, and what's going to take a more sustained effort for us to work towards. So, hopefully being helping to be that bridge on a more statewide level will be helpful.

>> Lauren Hajjar: I love what you said about the community knowing what the community needs. I think this sort of gets at the essence of what Serve & Connect is doing, this bottom up change with community voice at the center guiding it. To me, it feels a lot like we need to clone Serve & Connect and serve the organization in every city in this country. I'd like to transition now into the future role of police. So as you're talking, I'm thinking, OK, so Greg's Groceries, for example, you're effectively equipping police with resources needed to address public health issues. So it begs questions such as, you know, what is the scope of policing? What are our expectations of police? And I've been in some conversations this week where people are talking about the future of policing, looking very differently than it does now. So if we're thinking about crime as a public health issue, then how might we structure supports around that and what does that mean in terms of the role of the police?

>> Kassy Alia: It's an excellent question. And I do agree that crime is a public health issue. So I think when you look at the definition of community policing, you know, a lot of people think that's like handing out stickers and just walking down the neighborhood but it's not. At the very core of the definition is actually police engaging in community partnerships that help address root causes of crime. So I think inherently community policing is designed to be a public health approach. There's the thing we have in community psychology that if we do our jobs, right, that we work ourselves out of a job. And in some ways, I think that the heart of policing should really be back too, right? That if we can all work together to address crime from a public health lens. Hopefully, you know, the source of law and order and enforcement may reduce over time. Unfortunately, I don't think, I don't know if we'll ever get to a place where it's gone completely. But we may be able the more we work together on these shared issues, we may be able to reimagine what that policing role looks like. You know, it's -- think about North Columbia. So, North Columbia, in addition to being the place where 44% of all shootings in the city of Columbia take place in just one little area. It's also in that same area that has the highest rates of socioeconomic disparities. It's the lowest income in the city, the highest rate of health disparities. So you see just, so clearly, the crime as a public health issue that's layered on top of many other disparities that exist. Where we stand right now in that area, you know, a 7-year-old boy was just killed a few weeks ago, where he was in his home and someone pulled up and shot at their house and they still haven't been able to solve that crime. There was also other cases of there's one, where there are 40 shots happening between these two different groups in one neighborhood, so crime is real there. And there is a part of policing, a traditional model of that enforcement and reaction to crime that needs to take place. But if we can be better working together, solve those crimes in the first place, and also work together on the back end, in the case of where the 7-year-old was killed. The police, I think have gotten one tip. Someone knows what happened. And no one's speaking because the trust isn't there. And there's a culture of don't speak to police. And so until we can get to a point where we're able to address crime from a public health approach is going to take us all being willing to break down those barriers and work together. And I think from there, we'll be able to better reimagine what policing looks like.

>> Laura Hajjar: During our first interview just a few weeks ago, in light of the public health crisis, you encouraged leaders to not lose hope. Is this the same advice you would give to leaders today in response to the recent acts of racism?

>> Kassy Alia: Absolutely, Lauren, more than ever. It can be easy to think especially with the barrage through the media and social media to think of the world is crashing down around us. And there are a lot of really hard things that are happening right now. But if you pay attention, there are also a lot of beautiful things. There are instances -- I just shared a picture this morning of our local police chief kneeling with the community at the protest. And do you see that happening across our country? Yes, we see some bad things happening too. But that doesn't take away from the very core, how much good that there is. And that inherently if we believe that most people want the same thing for their families and their communities, then the hope resides in our deep belief in one another. And that's why I think the relationships matter so much, and one of the greatest things that we can do to tackle this pain and this polarization is to get to know one another better. And that sounds so maybe try it, you know, like, we need real systemic change, and we need to address it now. And people are sick of talking and I understand that, but until you can really have a deep relationship with someone, which allows you I mean, this is embedded in the work you do Lauren, until you can really have mutual respect for someone else. Until you can really see that shared dignity, it's hard to move into the difficult sustained change. And that's one of our, I think our biggest assets and the thing that we have to kind of hang our hat on to not lose hope on as one another.

>> Lauren Hajjar: Kassy, thank you so much for meeting with me today, and for all of the work that you have continued to do, to build stronger communities. That's really incredible. We'll be sure to post the links to the resources that you mentioned in the show notes. And I wish you and your family and Serve & Connect all the best in the weeks that lie ahead. And I look forward to connecting with you soon. So thank you again for your time and for being on the show this morning.

>> Kassy Alia: Thank you so much, Lauren. I really appreciate it and just sending you and our listeners so much love.

>> Lauren Hajjar: [Background Music] Thanks for listening. To learn more about Voices of Public Leaders or to be featured on the podcast, please visit our website at sites.suffolk.edu/voicesofpublicleaders.

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