

For The 1 Podcast by Freedom2: Episode 2

Host: Mel Manning

Guest: Denise Bentley

Mel Manning 0:03

I'm Mel Manning, welcome to the 'For the One' podcast. This week's guest is Denise Bentley from first love foundation

Denise Bentley 0:11

It started from a very, very austere beginnings as a charity. We knew that there were problems out there, but we didn't have big ones. But to get this feedback in the time and everyone was really panicking about Covid, and you just think about the one, the one person that you're able to help.

Mel Manning 0:30

This is season 1 of our 'For the One' podcast and I'm Mel Manning the founder of the charity freedom 2. We are early intervention service helping teenage girls to know their worth and significance so they can reach their potential and empower others.

Why for the one? because we can all make a difference and reach out to help at least one person, it doesn't require you to be qualified and you don't need to be an expert. This podcast celebrates the stories of individuals and organisations that have seen a need and reached out. By helping the one they had been instrumental in making changes in their communities and beyond. Join us as we journey through their stories.

Mel Manning 1:14

Living out her faith has always been important to Denise never was it more challenge and ignited when an accident at work occurred. After a career in the city that spanned the banking business consultancy sectors, she suffered a near fatal brain haemorrhage, but miraculously survived. Join the healing process she realised her life had been saved for a purpose and decided to dedicate herself to helping people.

In 2010, Denise and her husband Harold establish first love foundation with a mission to deliver projects that tackle social injustice, the causes of poverty and deprivation, the first of which was Tower Hamlets Food Bank, not wanting to just address the crisis, the vision for the advice and support project was born and through it, they've seen the transformational effect it has had on people's lives. Denise is a passionate advocate and accomplished speaker has featured in a number of media outlets and considered a respected governmental advisor. There is a warning that comes with today's podcast, as there's talk about suicide. Please look after yourself.

Hi, Denise. Welcome to the podcast. How are you today? I am good. I'm good. Thank you for having me. Nice. He very welcome. And so it's been quite an interesting year, hasn't it? COVID has hit. And we've had many ups and downs. And some people have lost lots of people, which has been devastating. I just wondered though, how you've sort of survived through the pandemic? And also what have been your moments of joy?

Denise Bentley 2:39

Oh, this about a year ago now, isn't it? It's been an amazing, unprecedented time. Last year, this time, lack of safety before we're a small charity of six that Ben and I either I kept watching the news, I saw that slowly. But surely this this pandemic was coming towards us and somehow looking to government to say what are they going to do? Are they going to act quickly? Because it will hit us? And what does it mean for us in terms of our work tackling a crisis. And so before locked down copied actually entered our space, one of our workers went down with it from a face to face session. So we basically changed our model overnight, we scaled up went online, off with this kind of week round service, what I found was the numbers started rising. And so we had to when everyone else has been asked to stay at home, we have been asked to go to the front line, and without BB with just about enough food. And we started serving people.

So you know, I think when I look back at the time, there are two things that come to mind. My team, I love them. They're amazing people, you know, sometimes it's really difficult to introduce organisational change, we are moving from the traditional feedback model of meeting people face to face and having one to one interviews and giving them food rather than volunteers to this virtual service where it had to be able to film and we had to change the way that related to people to get more out of them in a short period of time. And they didn't they did it they adopted the new model overnight and it's it's so successful, it is the way forward. So my team I love them. They're amazing. They've very very gifted and talented and so I owe this new phase of first law foundation to them and we wouldn't have got here they haven't been really creative and created this new system overnight. But you know first of all foundation believes that no one should have to go through crisis on their own.

I remember you know, closing down our operations everyone working from home that first week and I decided to make phone calls and I didn't know you know you must know the slide you by sometimes away from the front line, you've got the team of volunteers or staff that are beating people in crisis. And you sometimes sort of, you know, are quite distant. And I stopped taking phone calls I happen, you know, all kinds of people. But I've got this one phone call from a lady that I must have met some time ago when I was setting up Professor foundation. She said, Oh, hi to be disliked by Who are you? Because I'm it's so so and she told me her name. She's an NHS worker. And she said, Look, I'm just really not to say thank you. And I'm thinking Really? Well, because you save someone's life. I said, What do you mean, she goes, I've got this client. I've worked with him for quite some time, but they never ever explained how much prices they were in. They never had any food in their cupboards, I'd go along, meet with them ask if they're okay. They say yes, and stiff upper lip and everything. But the last time I went to see them just when coffee was, you know, being announced, and people were aware that it was coming. And they just burst into tears, because they had no food, I

went to their carpets. And it was empty, that it had been that way for quite some time. And I said to them, You know what, I noticed local charity and better HTTP some foods that this person said, I'm in crisis is disinvest that you can do? Yeah, right. But they don't do anything. And she referred them to us and took it to my colleague. And this was kind of like, the very next day the fee turned up. And when this person saw that the food turned up, he was for that they needed to toiletries, as well as the food and everything. And he just burst into tears, he called him up and just said, I was literally just about to commit suicide, I could not see a way out, and you made a call, and the very next day, they think we food. I'm completely amazed. I'm completely grateful. Thank you so much, because I was just about to give up. Thank you so much. And tell them that I said bent up course, I'm humbled. I really am because he started from very, very austere, you know, beginnings as a charity, we knew that there were problems out there.

But we didn't know how big once. But to get this feedback in the time, and everyone was really panicking about coffee, and you just think about the one the one person that you're able to help. And of course, you know, my team, they're very far, it was never just about the food. And we found that you hadn't had income for such a long time you reinstated the income, that person has moved on, and moved on to the next. But it taught me that even in the midst of crisis, please don't forget the one. That's that's that's really what we're about. So when I look back at that time, that that's that the me brings a smile to my face, because I know that he's fun.

Mel Manning 7:57

Wow, that's absolutely amazing to think. And probably, there's more than one, you know, there's probably other stories that you might never hear about that you know, that you have transformed their lives by, you know, and it's not just food, it's the support and advice as well.

Denise Bentley 8:12

There are 1000s of stories, and it just humbles me, it seems a bit of work I have been invited to to give a couple of talks. And the more I we could just kind of go back and think about where we've come from the people that we've helped, the ones that come back and say thank you.

It's very humbling, is very, very, very humbling. Because I'm sure you can relate the idea for your charity, the idea for my, when we first came up with it, people probably say but why said the I've got a lot of pushback. And I'm a I'm a person of faith. And God just kept saying to me, it's more so I've asked you to do so do it. So I'm going to send people to help you. They're not gonna always understand you've got the vision, you've got the big picture, just go for it. And, and so today, some 1011 years later, and 10s of 1000s of people's lives have been transformed. And literally millions of pounds that we've helped put back in people's pockets. It's humbling, because it started from just that one vision.

Mel Manning 9:17

Yeah, absolutely. I actually heard at first law foundation It was a few years ago. And I came and volunteered a couple of times. And I was amazed because I actually had thought it was just I want to say just it's not just but you know that you only gave out food. And when I realised that it was all this support and advice that people could access. I was like, wow, this is an amazing service. So you know, it's just fantastic. And on your website it talks about your Manifesto, and it says we believe everyone deserves to be loved. We don't turn our heads away, we don't close our eyes. Can you expand a little bit on that and why that's part of your Manifesto.

Denise Bentley 9:56

I'm really good question that asset very often. If I say to you that there is not a person I've met with this journey that's come to us broken, but feeling loved. They walk in, they have no self esteem. They're standing outside of our crisis centre or Food Bank as far as they're concerned. And to say, How did I get here? I've had people stand that slide. I don't know, to free for hours, just kind of saying, I can't really, I can't go in, I know that I'm hungry. I know that I've got no money to pay bills, I just can't go eat, and so with people's lives falling into crisis, that downward spiral, walking around with the burdens. And if you can imagine kind of like being in that space, and you're on the street, and you're, you're inside, you're saying, help me and people just rushing past doing their own thing. And you're just being ignored.

So for someone to walk through our doors, have no expectation that think they're going to get donations of food, and then be sent away. And for us to say, actually, can you come free, we'd love to talk to you. And say, what, and the feedback that we've had over the years from people is that I felt so alone. And I think, once you once you have that insight into people's lives, and you realise that they are in touch with the respirations, they don't want to earn as much as someone that lives in Canary Wharf or works in Canary Wharf in a lot very much. They just want to live a normal life that you and I, but I have heard the most horrific stories. And a thing that just comes through time and time and time again, is how loved they felt. And how they felt abandoned, not listened to the thought of different places for help. And for me, the most important thing is that that I asked my team to do and that I do is put myself in the shoes of someone go through that kind of process. If I had hit rock bottom, if I've gone through domestic violence, if I've been trafficked, because we didn't see that as well. What was that? What kind of help would I want? And so for us it was we need to show or we need to make the statement to the world that says this is who we are.

Funnily enough, the story behind it is that one of our corporate partners gifted us the websites, and they were saying, but you're a food bank. And he covered telehealth to say no or more than that, and I shared story after story. And this copywriter sat in the corner just listening to me, as you went away, and just wrote this Manifesto, and came back and just read it was in tears. And he says, I listened to all that he said to me, this is who you are, this is the statement that you need to make to the world. This is what First off is. And even though the years have passed, and we've tied to a vision and a mission and tied into all that, but one thing that has remained constant, others first because it speaks to exactly

the best updates, we don't want anyone to go through quests alone. And we love everyone that walks through our doors, even if they think we're a cult before, because I think you'd wind up nicely. But with the canopy, we just want the best looking. And what people want is just to be respected, to be treasured, to be on it, and we find that when you show that kind of love, it's person on to make the changes in their lives that they always wanted to. And it cancels out all those negative words that have been said over them, like, you know, you'll never be any better than your father, he's rocker, you're going to be in rocker as well, or whatever it is. And we'll say you're worth more than that. So it comes from who we are. And we've evolved over the years. Yeah, well, I've

Mel Manning 13:44

I got goosebumps from that, because just hearing the fact that that copywriter listened to your words, and then was able to put that down on paper and actually is, you know, stands for everything that you do is fantastic. And I think also, you know, like you're you're saying about people, you know, standing outside and not wanting to come in. So to finally be able to make it in and then to be greeted with love, and compassion and all those things. That must be you know, that must be such an amazing experience for them.

Denise Bentley 14:12

Yes, yes, it is. It is. And they tell me such No, this is not something that theoretical. People have told us about the impact it's had on their lives. And it just, it just confirms that we're doing the right thing, even though, you know, I've been told in the past or you can't get too involved in people's lives. When actually, if you really want to see sustainable change, you need to but you need to earn the right to do that. You can't just kind of blunder in. You've got to build trust. It's all about relationships. If you don't have that it will not work.

Mel Manning 14:48

So going back to sort of the very beginnings. You've touched on it slightly but why did you decide to start First Love Foundation and why Tower Hamlets?

Denise Bentley 14:58

Wow. So it goes back quite some time. And written the introduction that I was previously a banker. And I left banking to become a consultant. And whilst working as a consultant, I had a freak accident at work. And it was through that accident that God accidents that are discovered I had an aneurysm, which is what my mother died of many years before. So I knew how serious it was. And I had done so many things through that my career, the banking and the consultancy, but just found that there was almost this wall. I was trying to work my way up. I've got young children and newly married, I'm just trying to break through this glass wall. I'm not sure. I don't know, but couldn't get me there. And then I fell ill. And there's not to the head, rented me long term sick, chronic illness, chronic nerve pain. And I'm thinking, What's the point? You know, I'm in my

mid 30s, my career has stopped. But it was God saying to me, I've exposed you to those things for a reason. But I'll come back to it. But what I want you to do now I'm going to show you poverty, I'm going to show you brokenness.

Believe it or not, for reasons that I don't understand. I ended up making the mental health system in a school for children that had been through a really difficult time. And they've been schooled outside of the school system. And then I saw homelessness and food poverty. And it was kind of cool to say, hey, what are the issues in society? I'm now going to show you who I am. And I literally the last of those episodes, was doing a crisis at Christmas, where I met people that were homeless, and I spoke to one particular lady. She was sitting in one of their sort of care centres, and she had to carry it back on their head.

I was thinking, when did it get so bad?

You put your long beautiful hair in a carrier bed. And she just went as a hat. And she told me how she's been homeless for seven years. Because the family doesn't like thinking, come on, really. She says my parents passed away. And it was love her support network had been fractured. And parents passed away. As siblings didn't like it. They've of her mind. She ended up on the streets and she's been there for seven years. And I saw offer examples of what I would deem hurt brokenness and injustice. Seriously. And I came out of that thinking, oh, gosh, I've got to do something about this as well.

I'm trying to work this all out. I have this haemorrhage. Literally the first half of December 2016. I have free haemorrhages nearly died. And I remember getting to the end of January around the time of my birthday. And I'm in my hospital room in Romford in Queens hospital newly opened at the time. I'm thinking, but why am I still here? Just as I'm talking to you right now. Why am I still here called What if you saved my life. And he spoke to me. He said to me, because the best report because he gave me a list of other things. And now he was saying now, though less the poor. And I'm thinking what does that mean? I've got haven't read a book brain damage, I can't move. And he was saying, just go to it. And within about three or four months, I was heading up outreaching to hospitals. I learned some more about the types of crisis that people face why they flee what ends up homeless. And I just kept learning more and more than work defendant we helped to inspire people that were living on the streets. You know, some of them were artists, they were writers, they came from a range of backgrounds. But the one thing they had in common was that crisis happened and there was no one to help them up from where they were.

A couple of years later, I find myself shaking Prince Charles's hand at Karen's house and him saying thank you for all that you're doing in Tower Hamlets. And tell him it's by the way just happen to be well worshipped. I'm from North West London lived in Redbridge in East London on the borders of Essex.

And I'm thinking gosh what's happened, why am I here? And at the same time the Trussell trust hears about this really crazy lady that's been around telehandlers doing some really amazing work. And they invited me along to start the food bank in Tower Hamlets. At the time, having worked in hospitals have very clear in my mind that I was only really seeing people that were single and vulnerable. What about families and so food that was an answer to that, because the one thing that we all have in common, apart from the fact that our notice read is that we all need food. And food is going to be the way I was elected was going to be the way that I would learn about the underlying issues that people face that crossing into poverty. And that food poverty is not caused by a lack of feed. It's a lack of income, and your basic human rights. And so the work is evolved over the years, we've started off as a food bank, that was our first project. And as we learned more about people's stories and the issues, we've been different projects to respond to those biases and issues. I actually many things over the years.

So one thing that taught me that you didn't make a mistake in doing this, even when people didn't believe what you're doing. Because there's a there's a crisis, it still exists. But it's it's for every person that we we meet along the way we help to transform their lives by making them believe in themselves, we enable and we empower, because at the end, we don't want to exist. And it means that if we're going to achieve that we've got to ensure that people that come to us with the skills and the abilities that they need to go on to have a successful life. Tower Hamlets just happens to be a place they're called certainly, it happens to be one of the most deprived areas in the UK has the highest levels of child poverty. And I have seen it and it is very humbling. It is very shocking. And it's those kinds of things that helps us kind of stay rooted and grounded in where we are in Tower Hamlets. Because we are able to transform lives. And we want to sort of take that beyond Tower Hamlets utilisation.

Mel Manning 22:00

So do you want to expand a little bit about the different services that you do offer? Because that's one of the things I mentioned earlier, that I was surprised that it wasn't just about giving out food, that actually there was more services that you do offer,

Denise Bentley 22:11

I would say that the bread and butter of our work, the majority of cases we see are caused by how benefits are administered. They're administered wrongly, mistakes are made. Time does not permit me to tell you everything that I see. But if I said to you that one of the most shocking cases I saw, there's two one is a man that lived on bread butter in the water for a year, because they just forgot about it was still a mother of I think his two teenage boys who'd have no income for 12 years, because they forgot to pay her. And so these people live in perpetual crisis mode. And rather than being able to get the help, that they need to reinstate income, they go from food project, to feed projects, I'll do three months of Red Cross, I'll do free months at that local church, I'll do free months somewhere else then I'll go to the food bank. And when they come to us, we say hi, how are you? My name is Denise, what's yours? We're here to help you tell me a little bit, I can only help you a bit. But if you open up a little bit more, I'll see what I can do. That often opens up the conversation into what's really going on.

We unpick every single case that comes to our table with the view of reinstating income. So you provide Welfare Rights advice, and the first time we ever did so we did so in partnership with the child poverty Action Group, that great charity that's been around for 6070 years that was that came out with the whole coffee come home movement. They came along to one of my sessions and walked away completely gobsmacked as to how bad things were. And they said we want to crop with you. So they've been with us for the past five years in total. And we've just now achieved accreditation to be advice workers ourselves. So we give advice and because that seems to be the driving issue in Tower Hamlets. And I think we've probably helped to reclaim somewhere in the region of six, 7 million pounds now over the past few years. And money that people are entitled to work for us advice we provide, or we deliver holiday hunger programmes but with a difference. We don't just give food. We work with the whole family, we invite parents and oldest children as well as children. Sometimes you find that even between the parent and child dynamic there is the founder of a breakdown. And what we do is that we provide opportunities for them to bond for them to bond to build relationships, again to do things together.

And we've had parents say to us, thank you, so Watch, this is the best quality time I've had with my daughter for the past 10 years, I'm thinking, but it's just you and her at home. But sometimes, you know, by coming away and creating that kind of environment that they can just kind of exhale and be we find it works because then chocolates back to school, you know, confidence lifted, but parents now say he, they told me about work and work. And so we've helped them back into work. And we provide befriending befriending came out of COVID. I mean, we've always been relational. But we saw a huge unmet need from March but by we got by the time we got to may be launched this service and was oversubscribed, and people are lonely over it's a young as in under the age of 16. Or, you know, those that are kind of 16 to 2116 to 25, or just finish uni, what happens now I'm panicking, and just having that person on the end of the phone they can talk to, and then roughly to the elderly, we were serving, you know, the LTV part of the population, which we don't really see a lot because normally from a financial event that are well catered for, but we were seeing or reaching elderly people that hadn't seen anyone or had any human contact for 50 days, you know, really, really difficult time. So we provide that befriending service. That's the neatest thing. But the other aspects that we do is provide employability support, and it's holistic, it starts on the tearing building competence working partners, corporate partners who provide sort of employability skills, I will help people even into working in Canary Wharf, you know, earning insane amounts of money.

26:58

And that's because we know, for us, we've always been unashamedly. This is a journey that we want to take people on. And the success for them means before the tearing the cost of doing nothing as a way to work for those that are new to work, and get the help that they need to have doors open for them. This is what we do.

So it's it's the whole life journey from learning new skills, digital inclusion, financial inclusion, restoring income, healing your family, into the workplace, so that they don't need to come back to us ever at all other than to say, Hi, this doing and I help you. So it's it's it's all come out of what we've learned over the years. And one of the things about running your own organisation is that you have the autonomy to just make the changes. So we spoke with the projects that that are actually needed that we've proved concept is actually needed. Yeah, so it's been inspired by the people that we've met along the way. And there's more to come for 2021 going forward. But this is kind of where we are now.

Mel Manning 28:06

And it sounds like the sort of key theme is relationship, because it's only through those conversations that you're having with people that you're working out. Actually there's, you know, they need food, but actually they also need, you know, whatever that might be. So it's only through those conversations you're having, isn't it?

Denise Bentley 28:22

I agree, it breaks my heart. I used to be part of the national feedback network. And I left probably about a few years after joining because I want to be very honest with you. I was just never really comfortable with stating how many food parcels are distributed over the past year. And the reality today is that I mean, way back there we were the 64th Food Bank in the UK, this is going back to 2010. Today, this this, this 1000s, the 1000s of food banks. And the reality is is that today, there will be people that walk into food bank that will be you know, that will get a cup of tea and this is our view and here's some food Do you need anything more? Have you got problems? Here's a leaflet. We've missed so many opportunities every day in the UK by not sitting that person down. And for me back then asking those questions when someone said to me, You know, I've had no food for a year. It'd be wrong for me to say I'm really sorry to hear that. Here's leave that go see the caap Yeah, you know, so that's why we put everything in house. So you don't have to go from pillar to post you could get all the help that you need as a continuity of support from a project to ensure that you leave with a beginning of a solution. Unfortunately, wait back then. It was a dumb thing. It was a really well could have but I'm really pleased to say that today. It's It's It's interesting. There's a lot better a network of food banks now that are looking to embrace the model that we designed, but way back then it wasn't the thing.

So I'm hoping that, especially with Covid, that there is a shift in thinking, this shift from wanting to throw food at people almost as a gift through food. And they become dependent on it into, actually, if we don't do anything for the people that have been systemically inequality and poverty all these years that have never worked, they will be the bottom of the pile that already have people that have been furloughed, that lost interest recovered. So this is our work. And we have to find a way to level up the playing game. And so the way to do that is to have those conversations that might be difficult, but let's be brave, let's have those conversations. Because the way that we can help people get to where they are, to

where they want to be not what we want to do, but they might want to be a painter or their lead might be I want to be a caretaker and you have to embrace where they are someone brings purpose. That for me is more powerful than anything else.

Mel Manning 31:04

Yeah, absolutely. And you mentioned earlier about child poverty. And obviously, Marcus Rashford has sort of almost brought it to the light, because it's been in the media, and talking about child poverty within holidays and not getting access to food. And I know you mentioned that you worked with families Is that how you would address child poverty, poverty is through when families coming into your service.

Denise Bentley 31:27

And you know, I looked on at the whole of last year, I'm on the national food strategy, advisory boards as well. And my task is to kind of bring the poverty angle into our thinking about what the food system for the UK and he said look like the next 75 to 100 years. And but you know, we've never been pre pandemic before, it's really difficult to know what to do. I was kind of like still waving the banner about, we need to ensure people have enough money to buy their own food, as opposed to let's give them food. And the messaging coming from Marcus and this Marcus's first foray into this area, is let's give them a free school meals. And that's great, that's great. But if when that child goes home, there isn't enough food for the child to eat, and a parent to eat, or the teenagers that don't go to school, or college, or those or university because they don't get reasonable meals, what happens then what I've been advocating is we need to look at the whole household. And it's not as simple as free school meals.

So it's great on one hand, but he's raised awareness around that area. And you know, in 20 pounds Universal Credit, uplift, interesting, but it makes no difference to the people that were seen on the ground. And so Ross from I think often has a purpose in being in existence since 2011. And started off with let's give them a food. And then we learnt about the issues they were facing. And actually to be to be fair, I mean, we asked a number of agency to refer in our home, they hold the programme. It's mainly social services and schools. And the common denominator nice often is that families are claiming benefits, which is why they can't afford to feed themselves. And so we introduced Welfare Rights advice to that a snapshot of the whole household to see whether they came in everything they were entitled to. There was one year where 75% of the families that attended were undertaken by around 75 pounds per week, what we found is that if we could reinstate that income, they wouldn't need to come back to holiday programme. And so we learnt and every year we've been proved Greg Bentley's come along, they don't have all that they're in touch, too. And that's what causes the whole hunger issue.

So any holiday programmes never happened without talking to households or to parents, is just the sort of sticking plaster in the problem. What we've been advocating nationally to government and locally is the need to do a little bit more, grab the opportunity that we have where children

come along, to engage your parents will find that what what why are you reliant on fiscal means? We don't know that you have it. But actually, if you can't pay your rent, then it's gonna cause real problems. But the elephant in the room is welfare reports. I'm sure you've heard about Universal Credit, the bedroom tax benefit app, and the benefit cap is the most draconian out of all of them. So as an example, there's been a lot of campaigning around 20 pound Universal Credit. But at the same time, I'm working with families in Tower Hamlets where They are 400 pounds short every month just to pay their rent. So there's one Mum, for example, she's in a four bedroom flat. And she's from a domestic violence background, she's lived in 37 different properties in 16 years, she pays 2000 pounds per month rent, a Universal Credit payment is all she sees, is 1600. So what I'm saying to politicians is great 20 pounds Universal Credit, uplift, but apply back to this woman's circumstances does she see it? Because to the landlord, she's still short 320 pounds every month, which is a huge amount of money.

35:48

And that's just to pay the rent, we're not talking about the food, and the energy bills and everything else. And nationally, hundreds of 1000s of people are being benefit kept every quarter. And so my my my conversations with the powers that be, is really saying it's not sustainable. And it costs more to service someone in policy, then to uplift the housing allowance that allows you to cover the 100% of rent. It's really simple. It really, really is. And they're beginning to listen, their conversations, I'm having the beginning to listen. But it's a shame that with all of the campaigning that there is around this issue, they're missing the really fundamental trees, the benefit cap causes rent, arrears cause homelessness, they put into hospitals that cost more illnesses, merry go round, and we seen it. And so the work we do with people is through our understanding of the benefit cap that says, if you work hard time, the benefit cap is removed. I told one particular person, they burst into tears, they said no one's ever told me this, if I knew I wouldn't be living on 15 pounds a month. Yeah, that's the reality of it.

You know, so with families with the work we do with them, sometimes early intervention, we're working with schools to refer people to us earlier before they identify, identify their problems. And, and we do this so we can help them not have to end up going to feedback. Because they can get help with the right time. So I think it's got more work to do in this space, especially as we merge from coffee. And there is a, in my opinion, there's going to be a lot of people in the same kind of position. And I think it's gonna be up to government to decide, do we service this poverty debt or this poverty problem? Or do we do something practical, like what costs joe biden's doing? By really investing in the community investing in people to try and get out of the impact of COVID? On the impact of the past few years? I think we need that kind of brave approach here in the UK,

Mel Manning 38:05

How do you do not get overwhelmed? Because, you know, especially with COVID, and thinking forward and how we move forward, you know, in all our lives, how do you not feel like, you know, just do some days, you do feel like gigabit giving up? Or thinking, you know, should I keep going with this? Or is it you know, are you what are you inspired by what keeps you going.

Denise Bentley 38:27

So we're talking about funding, or the lack of earlier. So we I don't know how many people have helped us stop counting. To be honest, it was never bad numbers, but it's, it's tens of thousands of people, and we receive no funding whatsoever for the local authority. They are the heaviest users of our service, everything from social services, right through to mental health teams in the NHS. But this being, you know, and you still have this to come when people begin to understand your patient admission. And you get everything from a child that is living in poverty that walks up to you gives your team that says, hey, you are I want to end child poverty. And I'm looking at them saying but you're in poverty, right through to churches that will give time and time and time again and say we really trust what you're doing. So here you are, here is what I'm sowing into your ministry, right through to corporates that come along and say we want to understand more well across the road from you in Canary Wharf. We can't see the poverty show us where we show them and show them the solutions and they say, Is it really that simple? Okay, we're in really, right through to meeting their employees that decide that they want to do employ, but they want to do their employment or their career differently. They don't want to work for company that's not doing anything socially.

I've met a range of people, right across society. Donors lucky, say, whether it's generous ones, you know, they've given sort of, you know, large donations of money and said, you know what I believe in your vision as well. If this is what you need be back in the support we've had over the years, which is basically what I'm trying to say, has been amazing, especially over the past year where people saw the need, and said, I don't even know what it means. But I'm only here to help charity anyway, I believe what it is doing. It's that kind of thing that keeps me really, really encouraged, it is humbling for my team, it really inspires them. Because from their perspective, the work that we're doing is being recognised is being recognised. There are some mentions of the media and everything else. And to be working alongside volunteers that said, we see you, and we want to come alongside you, and help what it is that you're doing. scale up, we want to learn from you, there's nothing more empowering, for my team's experiencing that, but for me, just the whole big picture. It's just, it's humbling. There are times I'm at home, I look at my husband. And I say, it's just meant to be a food bag, because I want to do more than that. But honestly, there are times that we were just kind of like watch at what the charities achieved.

So I find it so encouraging. I am I am blown away, if I never do anything else, and this is all that I did on die very fulfilled person, I think because fulfilled in a sense that I've been of these past four months from work on leave. And I speak to my trustees, and they said, you know, we really, you know, concerned that, you know, you'd walk away and be on leave and everything would really slow down. But Denise, your team are so

professional, they just stepped up to the mark, and they carried on. And that for me is really encouraging because it was never about me. Never about me whatsoever. And it's almost like the flame has been passed on. They've all been sort of, you know, enabled empowered, set of buyers, so to speak. And if I never did anything else, the work of personal foundation would continue with the vision of we want to do ourselves out of business. We want to transform Britain, you want to see an end to poverty. And we know how to do it. And it means that there'll be no food banks, that will shift perhaps towards helping people into work. I don't need to tell them how to do this. They know it. So I'm really not needed. And that's a biggest compliment. Ever.

Mel Manning 43:10

That shows great leadership actually be cause they're not relying on you know. You models something obviously that they can then move on to use. Not get rid of you we don't want to lose yet Denise!

Denise Bentley 43:22

It's really not a problem!

It's really hard work and you'll get to this point where you think maybe I should take a step back and to be honest my work is kind of pointing out more towards raising awareness, sharing on the inside change power office to do what they need to do and to do that you need to ensure that people are empowered back in the team because are amazing and there are times where you need to come and take a step back and rest yourself you'll get to that point yeah I'll help you get there!

But yeah it's it's really fulfilling and ended just translate my belief that takes a village never do this.

Mel Manning 44:15

How do you look after yourself then? In terms of self-care have you got any tips of what helps you to relax? I mean I'm sure you probably last the last four months you little bit maybe

Denise Bentley 44:23

oh gosh it's amazing absolutely nothing apart from gardening. That sounds very middle aged but I don't care.

Mel

It's therapeutic!

Denise Bentley 44:34

Oh yes, especially during Covid but when he would he would be start something as you will know especially when you invest in startup stage you have to put your life and soul into what you're doing and be ready for when people don't understand or don't believe what it is that you've been tossed do you still got to do it and it does take a look a lot energy out of you and I've worked until 3,4,5 o'clock in the morning, at seven days a week I get to this point and so I got to this stage back in October with cottage and things started to calm down a bit before the 3rd wave. So I said to my trustees I need to take time and he take time out because I can feel myself going and I've always tried to advocate self-care at work and so even from you know a year ago. I said to team up table gonna start working from home is going to be different from its two this and it's not part of the rhythm of how they do their work they're working week for me I have two children and they were denied a large part of me in those formative years and I've kind of slowed down with no intention to go back to working seven days a week. I put the district boundaries in now, I could be more stricter, there are times where I'm called on to do things that might be outside of my working week but if I give six hours on the Saturday for example if something urgent come up, I'm off Monday. I'm taking it back immediately.

I have to preserve me because he essentially it's a marathon this game is this game that were in, it's a marathon not a sprint, and if we've been given the opportunity to hold the baton and take it forward we've got to be able to run that long base and you can't do those towns because you are not only a danger to yourself a danger to others. So I changed and my lifestyle has changed I've now got hobbies I didn't have any before it was all about work. And yeah I'm taking time back, I'm not getting any younger, 55 and counting, and so I'm blessed because I have a tea that has doubled over the past year and I'm just in this phase now of empowering even more individuals to move forward and make the right decisions on behalf of the charities, so I can take a step back and do more the work outside of the charity promoting believes that we do but I can't do that you can't empty so I really tried to work from always being on form and if I recognise that I'm not I'll take the time to ensure that I do.

My faith is very important to me I'm only here because of God and I'm not kidding you I've got healed when my mom died from the same issue end and I know my purpose and somewhere that in mind I have to try and do the right thing in all that I do so yes i'm just very grateful for life and i tried to pace myself i have to get a little bit more fit so i have the time to do that now i didn't have the time before so i'm really grateful to just how things have worked out in the end.

Mel Manning 48:05

I think you're right. I think especially when you run your own charity or business you're always so busy and so invested in it and you can forget to take time out. I've just started sewing and I've never done anything creative! My mission now is to make a piece of clothing! I don't know why I didn't do this years ago because I just find it so hard to relax. So it's so important to have hobbies outside of work.

Denise Bentley 48:38

Oh gosh yeah, we've been working on this garden for the last year, and I said to my husband, I think we should be self-sufficient. So we've got raised bed and are growing vegetables. My daughter always says that I could be doing this but I'm always tied up in work. It's something I made a point of doing. I SAID, Okay I'm invested in this. I rescued the plants for the garden centre and it's amazing because you can see so much in nature but it almost speaks to so much of what I do in my job and that is to take people who are broken and help to heal them and bring them back to life so to do that with plants is just amazing and very relaxing.

Mel Manning 49:42

So how can people help with Frist Love Foundation? Have you got any needs? We talked about funding, is there something people can do? How can people help?

Denise Bentley 49:53

So thank you thank you thank you, donors are the lifeguards of any charity. Not always easy to get funding. Especially in your small charity we don't have a fundraising manager on tap we've only just recruited one after eleven years but the reality is I mentioned we don't receive new funding from local governments so we are completely reliant on donations from local community and a wide network of supporters. The main thing for us is that sustainability of the charity been able to cover operating costs and that means it's not a one of donation or those that although those things help is that person is willing to kind of make regular donations into the charity to support the work that we're doing in terms of where we go from here and our vision for next year will see us really expand our employment programme and this year we want to really bottom out and expand our befriending programme and this is all about relationship building and uplifting people not skinning them and that's kind of help that we need.

At the same time we need to ensure that our core costs covered so there are number of ways that people can kind of donate and you know in terms of raising funds. The easiest way through our website and there's a donate button you can choose how much you want to donate but want to also say that their processing charges where that's concerned and so what that means is that you made you know donate £100 you

might get £90 or something pounds or something but the easiest way to assure that we do they receive all of your donation without any processing charges upper or opting to cover the costs of the processing fees or making direct payments into our bank account. If you want to do that the way to do that is a contact us through our contact us link on the website said this not say that you'd like to make a donation anyone the 100% to come to us and we can basically work with me to set up through your bank account.

There are other ways and that you can support us in that shoe fundraising and people love doing this, whether it's a virtual 10K and the cycling to the moon and back, people are really creative with their crazy ideas about how they can fundraise but that's one way that it can be done, and there are some employers that will match fund donations and also any monies fundraise. So anyway you can get in touch with us through the website we can and let you know how to do this. And of course a lot of our support comes in by a funding but the other ways through corporates who companies that have different skills or different products that can support the work that we do so sometimes you get approached by companies wanting to find out how they can support our work but wanted to know more about the problem. If there are any companies that would like to know more if they can inspired by anything shared please do get in touch again it's via the website we will be in touch within a couple of days if not before, and happy to come down show here about the work that we do and how you can get involved, and there's always volunteering opportunities, especially still through writing digital inclusion, picking laptops and tablets to help people that are not included in that way get themselves up poverty through being able to get online so there are a number of ways I would say the best way is just in touch with me and I'll be in touch. So just send a message saying I want to speak to Denise, and I'll be in touch and we can explore different ways that you can support our work.

Mel Manning 52:50

That's fantastic, oh thank you so much Denise for Today, it's been really great talking about first love foundation it's being really interested to hear about, but also hopefully someone will have heard today and will be able to help or support in some way.

Denise Bentley

Thank you very much Melanie for having me.

Mel Manning 54:09

I felt really inspired talking with Denise today their passion about not for getting one in the midst of crisis was so evident and her endless pursuit to help those in need. Thank you, Denise. To find out more about first love foundation please visit www.firstlove.org.uk

Thank you to all of the young people have been involved in making today's podcast Elsa Arnold, Freedom2's youth trustee and our Freedom2 ambassadors. The music is written and performed by Josie Beth.

I am Mel manning thank you for listening. Please subscribe to our podcast and follow us on Instagram @freedom2UK or go to our website www.freedom2.org.uk.

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