

Giving Done Right, Season 6, Episode 2 - Lysa Ratliff Wants You to Trust Her

Lysa Ratliff: If you're gonna partner with us, partner with us. If you are on a mission to solve a specific problem, rely on some of the expertise that exist in the nonprofit sector.

Phil Buchanan: Welcome to Giving Done Right, I'm Phil Buchanan. Running a nonprofit has never been easy, but today it's like next-level difficult. As our research at the Center for Effective Philanthropy has documented, nonprofits are experiencing sharply increased demand, massive federal funding cuts, an arduous, to put it mildly, fundraising environment, and new concerns for the safety of the populations they serve, sometimes even concerns for the safety of their own staff.

These deep challenges come courtesy of a federal administration that has gone after the nonprofit sector with rhetoric suggesting that nonprofits are, to quote one presidential memo, "anti-American." And this administration has moved to target organizations whose missions it doesn't support. This is not a partisan statement. It's not even an ideological one. It is a fact that has alarmed both conservative and liberal believers in civil society and nonprofits.

Given all of this, I wanted to talk to someone who leads an organization that is explicitly focused on inequality. Lysa Ratliff is CEO of KABOOM!, a national nonprofit working to end playspace inequity for kids. KABOOM!, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, has built or improved more than 17,000 playspaces, engaged more than one and a half million community members, and impacted more than 11 million kids. Lysa's one of the nonprofit leaders I admire most. She's got so much knowledge and insight to share with donors who want to achieve impact in communities and fields around the country and around the world.

Lysa, welcome to the show.

Lysa Ratliff: Oh, thanks for having me, Phil, and I admire you as well. You're one of the leaders I turn to to just continue to have the courage to be bold and problem solve and do all the things that need to be done right now. So thanks for having me.

Phil Buchanan: It is hard right now, right? I mean, it is a tough time to be leading a nonprofit. How are you experiencing that challenge?

Lysa Ratliff: Let me start with saying this, because I can never filter myself when I'm with you, and I don't think that we should be filtering ourselves. So I appreciated your

opening because it was very honest, and I want to have a very honest conversation that is really intended to inform. So anyone listening to this, this is not an attack. It's not someone's right and someone's wrong. It's how do we, as adults, have really honest conversations that allow us to see very clearly what's going on around us and what we need to do to solve those challenges. I try to speak truth because my work at KABOOM! and in my life, quite honestly, is about protecting our kids and making sure that our kids have half a shot at the fullness that lives within them. And that means that we've got to see a 360 view of what our country looks like, what our communities look like, what the experiences of people whose, quite frankly, life is in our hands in many ways from the work that we do, the policies we set, the efforts we put into problem-solving. And so I want to start there because I think it's really important for us to feel safe and for anyone listening to feel safe and not threatened with honest conversations because that's where the good work is.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, I agree, and it makes me think of the report that you just put out, which is called *State of Our Kids*. It's incredibly well done, powerful, really sobering. We'll put it in the show notes, but you report that 28 million children in the US don't have access to a quality park within a 10-minute walk of home. Could you talk a little bit about why that matters so much?

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah, thanks for mentioning the report. We just did a webinar on it, and it's being well-received. We wrote it in a way that is digestible for anyone that reads it, and our work has really been about making sure there's access for kids to have great places to do all of the things that need to be done in childhood. Childhood is the foundation that is set for our lives. We learn how to navigate our bodies and our space in this world in childhood, and the currency of childhood is play. Not enough play spaces, there's not access to the quality play spaces that are needed, but the report that we published in partnership with peers and experts from across the country, and we had a youth editorial board to keep us honest.

Phil Buchanan: I saw that. I love that.

Lysa Ratliff: Oh, they're amazing. The webinar is somewhere out there recorded, and it's worth it just to listen to them. Fast-forward through me and listen to them because there's so much hope in what these young people have to say. But the report came from us as an organization. You know this: We design our spaces by listening to kids and caregivers. They are the experts. And I've been leading the organization since 2020, hello pandemic, going into a time where we're all stressed out, we're tired, we're exhausted, we're dealing with the heaviness of the world, and we, I don't think, have done the best job of tuning into what our kids are experiencing. And so the report moves beyond public space and play spaces and what KABOOM! typically does and really looks at the mental health and wellness of our young people and how they're struggling right now. And to provide solutions

around them requires us better understanding what's going on with them. That's essentially what the report is all about. There are some call-outs for different subsets of Black and brown communities and what they're experiencing so that we can get honest and get to the truth of what they're experiencing so as we build solutions, we're doing that with the awareness of what our young people are experiencing right now.

Phil Buchanan: Folks who listen to this show will have heard me mention before that CEP has an initiative called Youth Truth, and we've surveyed millions of young people, and a lot of the themes really resonated. And we're actually launching a project right now on digital agency, you know, putting some boundaries around that screen use because it's so important. One of the things we've tried to do in that work at Youth Truth, and that I really appreciated about your report, is not to back away from what you just mentioned, the importance of spotlighting the different experiences of different communities based on identities. I think this is so crucial because of the number of donors and nonprofits that we've seen step back-

Lysa Ratliff: Mm

Phil Buchanan: from doing that. I'm not trying to call anyone out, but we've seen it. I hope people who have stepped back will reconsider that choice, but I wanna go into it a little bit. There's a line in the report that really stuck with me, "Black children are adultified." Can you explain what is meant by that?

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah. And any of the Black community that's listening knows this all too well. It's not something that's just happened you know, yesterday or a year ago or five years ago or seven years ago. Oh, how to express this? This is embedded in our DNA and how we've all been generation over generation taught to see the world and to see different identities. And Black children have always been adultified and looked to as adults. Side by side, you get a young seven-year-old Black girl and a young seven-year-old white girl, and the way that we have been preprogrammed and wired is to see a little girl, and in some cases, maybe a troublemaker. So you're looking at the Black girl who's exerting her energy, and she's maybe a troublemaker. We see this with cases that are in the news right now where young men are being found murdered, and there's this debate around, did he do something wrong? No, a young child that is in our care still as adults, has been murdered or is gone or has died or whatever the case might be. We don't need to debate that. And if we're honest with ourselves, we... And if we look at the data, forget being honest with ourselves, if we look at the data, we see in schools with suspension rates, we see schools with disciplinary action, and we can look at what the percentages tell us of the likelihood across races of who will be disciplined, who will be suspended, who will be scolded for the same behaviors, and that is something that is miswired in our perceptions, in this case specifically of young Black kids, and that's where

adultification comes in. We're looking at literally a seven-year-old and holding them accountable as if they were an adult.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. Right. And it's hard to process unbelievable truth about, you know, 2026, which I never would have imagined if you'd asked me about it a decade ago, is that there is a movement to not even look at the data that shows us what you're describing, whether it be disparate student discipline, it carries right into our criminal justice system, as we all know, in terms of disparate treatment of the same situation based on race. And you also talk in this report, and I don't know that we're talking about this nearly enough as a country, what Latino kids are going through right now, given the ICE actions and the level of fear among children in communities. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah. It breaks my heart. I'm glad you brought it up, and I give it up to the advisory committee and to my team for pulling this report together and having the courage to talk honestly about the data and what we're seeing and how it's impacting our young people. So in the report, there's the macro environment and things that are affecting all of our kids. It's not discriminating, right? So screen addiction is not discriminating. Suicide rates, not discriminating. There are subsets of that data where you do see increases in different populations, but it's not discriminating. It's all of our young are in trouble. But we do call out three separate groups of Black and brown populations because of the horrific and unique experiences that they're going through. So there's the adultification of the young Black child, there is the experience of the native or indigenous child and community, and there's also the experience of young Latin and Hispanic children and families. And no matter where you sit on what we need to do about immigration, we're talking about children who have their parents, their families disrupted.

Phil Buchanan: Mm-hmm.

Lysa Ratliff: And so when I'm thinking about a five-year-old or a six-year-old or a 12-year-old or even a 15, 16-year-old who's trying to get ready for college, and they're walking in fear in their communities, their parents are making them hide, or their family unit is getting disrupted because a parent or caregiver is gone, we have a problem there. So being kind and gracious to the experiences of all of our families is important, and it was really important for us to name the realities of what's going on for our young Hispanic kids.

Phil Buchanan: Let's talk a little bit about donors. On this show, we're trying to reach both individual donors, but also foundation staff, foundation presidents. When you think about the response to what's happened over the last 19 months, what has inspired you and what has disappointed you in terms of donor, funder, whatever word we wanna use, response to those challenges?

Lysa Ratliff: Oh, gosh. We could have a whole report on this answer. It's complex.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, right.

Lysa Ratliff: So I'm gonna, um, I'm trying to directly answer your question and then share just some personal perspective. What has inspired me, you know, we set on this path back in 2021, 2022 at KABOOM! to really be a data-informed organization to unapologetically pursue our mission to achieve play space equity, to demonstrate that it's possible, and that required us functioning much different, making investments in different areas like measurement and evaluation, like our policy and advocacy work, building much more dynamic community responsive spaces. We were only able to do that because our funding started to become much more diverse, so more foundations were coming to the table. We had historically been an organization that had primarily gotten our funding from corporates who love to volunteer, and we love you corporates for joining us. So a lot of good work has happened, so it inspires me that an organization like us that was reliant on one source of giving for more than two decades was able to take an investment, and in this case was the MacKenzie Scott investment that did it for us, take an investment and begin having a much healthier portfolio of funds. So we have more foundations funding us than ever before. We have public dollars coming to the table, and that hadn't been true in our history. So that's all very inspiring, and we need more of that. What's hard, and this is where it gets into a bigger discussion and I get really honest about being a leader. Uh, what's hard is a lot of stuff that you have in the report, and stuff that you and I have talked about before where an organization like us, we can... This is a solvable problem. So we know in a lot of cases exactly what needs to get done. We've got mayors lined up. We've got municipal partners putting 50% of the funding on the table. We've got peer organizations coming to the table because we can't go it alone. We've done all the work in rallying a community that can solve the problem, and in so many cases we get funders that are nitpicking against how much they will put on the table to support you solving the problem. And so though we have a much more diverse portfolio of revenue coming in, it's in a lot of ways, and I think, you know, we can get into this, I think it's because of pressures of public funding being cut and more nonprofits coming to them, and them trying to navigate their own priorities. But we are expected to do more with less, and we continue, even though we've had these reports and we've had this hope that there's a shift in giving and, you know, we see some previews of that, but as a whole, you know, we don't have philanthropy or foundations fully trusting our expertise in solving the problem. You know, we continue to be scrutinized and budgets picked apart, trying to save on this line item or that line item instead of trusting us to provide the solutions we know we can provide to a community. That's still there, and it's still hard, and it takes a lot of work, and it's not to discount the good work of foundations. I understand and appreciate something that they may not even see around the volume of nonprofits

that are coming to them, expecting them to stand in the gap, but it makes it very difficult.

Phil Buchanan: What you're describing in terms of the power of that, I think it was \$14 million unrestricted gift from Mackenzie Scott, as opposed to maybe the previous prevalent model, correct me if I'm wrong, which would be funding for this place base and this community or this place base and that community, you were able to actually invest in strengthening the data systems, strengthening the organization. But am I hearing you say that hasn't exactly inspired legions of other funders to be similarly trusting? Because... I ask that question because I think there was this, like, fleeting moment, maybe, in 2020, 2021, 2022, and we documented this in some of our research, where it seemed like there was real movement toward more unrestricted giving, more understanding that nonprofits need to make those kind of investing. And, and just anecdotally, do you feel like that's slipped back or what is the current challenge that's preventing people from recognizing that you use those resources to strengthen the organization, be able to do things better and differently than you were before, and yet you're still having difficulty getting that kind of support?

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah. I do think it's getting more and more difficult. I do think that there was a little window where it was like, "Oh, let's trust nonprofits. You know, they're credible, they're closest to the problem. They actually have leaders who can problem solve, who have the business acumen and insight and lived experiences in a lot of cases to be able to solve at a pace that we haven't been able to. Let's trust them." So there was a little short window that I experienced, and-

Phil Buchanan: Mm-hmm ...

Lysa Ratliff: you know, quite frankly, I got peers that we go to lunch, and we support each other and we talk. And so most of us experienced, like, that little window of hope, quite frankly, feeling seen for the first time in many of our careers, feeling seen and supported. And then it's trickled away. And it's trickled away, not funders abandoning us. It's funders challenging how we're using the funds. And so in a case like ours where we got this beautiful investment to have the courage to shift how we work, to become more sustainable, to become more secure, to have a better path to solving the problem, we made year over year investments. We utilized that funding to make year over year investments, and we came out the other side. So the reality we live in right now is we are no longer focused on solving one playground problem at a time. We're working with public systems who, like us, are trying to braid together resources, so they're putting resources on the table to give to us. 14% of our funding now comes from public entities, which was zero throughout our history. We've managed to get them to commit that money.

Phil Buchanan: That's like local and state governments?

Lysa Ratliff: Local and state government. And we can get into that. It's, you know, them trying to problem solve on constrained budgets. How can they put some of the funding that they already had in place for city infrastructure like play spaces and make it go further by partnering with an organization like KABOOM!, that has the technical expertise and has the ability to tap into private resources to match it? And I say that, and this probably illustrates the challenge; we have \$6 million right now on the table from public entities waiting to be matched. And so we're at the ready to do the work, and we are literally begging private funders to come to the table to match the \$6 million that our public institutions have come to the table with to solve this problem this year. We'll come together. You'll close and open your eyes, and there will be a beautiful community-informed, community-designed play space that, by the way, we now have the data to tell you that when we do it our way, there's a 223% increase in use and it's incredibly, you feel my passion coming out because it's so frustrating that it's still not enough. We have done that. We have gone out and navigated those partnerships and brought peers and friends and organizations to the table. We just got a Trust in Practice Award for nonprofits who successfully build trust in communities. So we got all the ingredients and we're doing all the things, and yet we continue to be scrutinized down to the .52 cents for the budget.

Phil Buchanan: What would you say, I guess, to the donor who says, "Well, yeah, we're trying to be accountable. We wanna know that the resources are being put to good use, and maybe we've been burned before." 'Cause that's what I hear a lot, right, when I have this conversation with folks that's like, "You know, I wanna make sure it's effective, it's having impact." What's your response to that?

Lysa Ratliff: My response is, of course you're trying to be accountable, so are we.

Phil Buchanan: Right.

Lysa Ratliff: So we're all trying to be accountable here. The last thing we ever want... And in some ways we're taking a chance, right? So we're trying to solve very complicated problems, and some things work and some things don't. And so some of that accountability can be we tried something new, and we learned something from it to be able to do better. And so I would say to them that we are too. Oh, you have no idea how accountable we are trying to be. We are scrutinized to the umpteenth degree on how we utilize our resources. And so at some point we've got to have some alignment on what we are collectively trying to accomplish, because we're both trying to be accountable. We're both trying to look at how we can move the needle on some of the societal issues that have been neglected or need to be addressed. But how much do each of us wanna solve this problem is really where I challenge us. An organization like us, we're all in. My peer organizations who I talk to all the time,

literally putting our physical health on the line to do the best work we possibly can, but it's personal. It's personal. You know, how I use my life, how my peers use their life, it matters and it's personal. And so every cent we spend, every trip we make, every meal we have, one, it's scrutinized, you know, it's audited. So, like that's accountability right there. But we too wanna be accountable. That's what I would say is, yeah, we too wanna be accountable.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. Yeah. I've known you long enough and well enough to say, and it's probably already clear from this conversation, you're, like so many nonprofit leaders, you're a brilliant woman who could do any number of things. So the notion that you're doing this for any other reason than that you care passionately about getting it right, you know. Like, that's the problem I have. Why do you think folks are doing this work, right? You know, like, so to your point, you're holding yourself to a very high bar.

Lysa Ratliff: Yes. Yeah

Phil Buchanan: because of how much you care. Yeah.

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah. And I've said this to you before, it's that part to me, like, okay, yes, a donor feels and sees and experiences, but in my case, my passion for kids and community. There's a couple of things that I know to be true, and one is that what matters most is how we protect and care for our young. I also know about the possibilities of us, and so when I talk about those things, I'm all in. Like, you get my, the fullness of me and what I have experienced in a business context, what I have experienced in a life context. But I think what is often mistaken, passion is mistaken for, "oh, here's somebody who just is, like, personally trying to fulfill their own needs through this work." No, I am putting my passion and my expertise into problem-solving. So I'm passionate, and I'm qualified. I can be doing anything. And my parents told me that. Anything they can do you can do better. I am going to be prepared. I'm going to learn. I am going to acknowledge when I'm in over my head and ask for help and get someone better at the table. I know how to do this work, as do my peers. And I think oftentimes our passion causes people to not see our capabilities especially when we are more capable in some cases because of lived experiences that line to our mission. We can talk about kids and childhood experiences all day, and I can tell you things about my experiences and my childhood that directly reflect the communities and kids we serve that give me a shortcut into solving the problem. I also have gone to college. I have gone to, you know, like all of the things to prepare me to be able to do this work, and not that that matters, but I'm prepared. I'm ready. I'm not just passionate. I'm prepared.

Phil Buchanan: More after the break

BREAK

Phil Buchanan: I sometimes wonder, I've never asked you this before, but whether an organization like yours with a mission like yours has a particular challenge with a certain kind of donor who's looking for like a changed life trajectory. You know, they, they want a single organization that can shift the life trajectory of a young person. Whereas what I think, and please take issue with me if you think I'm mischaracterizing it, what KABOOM! is, is a crucial piece of an ecosystem that needs to be in place for young people to thrive and for people to have a fair shot at success. It's one piece, and so you're not gonna be able to trace that back to Phil was on the playground, you know, at age 11, and so at age 37 his life looks different. But you know that if that piece isn't there, it diminishes the chances of success. But it takes many different elements, and I wonder if you sometimes deal with donors who are pushing for a level of cause and effect of the single intervention the single thing that you're doing that isn't realistic. Is that a thing that happens?

Lysa Ratliff: Oh, yes. That just happened. That just happened. And it does happen, yes. Bull's-eye. So *State of Our Kids* report that we talked about, we were trying to get funders to fund that, and we self-funded it because nobody wanted to fund the kind of pulling this community together for this data, or they didn't see the possibilities of it. I'll give them that. But I was just talking to a funder prospect about funding our work because of the ecosystem that we bring around kids and communities. And so yeah, you're spot on. You look at our work, and we're putting pieces and parts together, yes, we're building play spaces, and there's something tangible that comes out of the other side of it. But the how we do our work and the who we partner with to get it done, in many ways is just as important as the product that we're delivering to community. And so I was sharing with this prospect, giving a preview of the *State of Our Kids* report and talking about mental health and talking about students, four in 10 students are experiencing complete hopelessness, and that there's not just one remedy to that. And there's not one cause to that. And so if you look at what our young people are experiencing, they are seeing adults who aren't in community with each other. They see adults that aren't often problem-solving with or for them. They are going to schools that are underfunded. They don't have the meals that they need. There's just a surround sound of things that require us to problem solve collectively. So there's the play spaces that we build, but there's the mayor that we bring to the table. There's the peer nonprofits that are working alongside us doing other supports to care for the kids that are so critical to drive key outcomes. And this funder said to me, "Well, if we're talking about the mental health of kids, then, you know, we're going somewhere else because you can't give me those statistical proof points that you're driving results with single populations." And

I... it kinda pisses me off because we all think about our lived experiences no matter what chapters of our life. It's the surround sound that supports us. It's not one thing.

Phil Buchanan: That's right.

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah. So yes, yeah, bullseye. I'd like for us to see how important it is for us to work much more holistically, and that we can solve multiple things at once. And to have healthy bodies, healthy communities, strong leaders, good policy all at the same time are things that all contribute to these successful outcomes. It's not one or the other.

Phil Buchanan: Or art or music, right? Like, these are, I think, the sort of... I mean, I guess the most extreme version of this is sort of like the effect of altruist attitude, that if it is not an intervention that saves or directly shifts the quality of life of someone, then it doesn't really matter. But I think, to your point, that really misses the reality of all of the things that have to be in place. And the surround sound, you called it, of things that a young person needs, I'm curious to what extent, and I imagine it's both, you know, that's coming from the data and the research and all of that, but it also, does it connect to your own experience? As a child, was that true for you as you think about the opportunities that you had?

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah. I'll say two things. When I think about myself as a child, and just like all of us, there's marker moments that we tune back into that is like oh, yeah, that meant something to my trajectory. But it was the fullness of my experiences and my ability to take... I always talk about how when I was raising my kids, that they may not remember what's happening in this moment. I'm trying to lock in this memory of my child at five or six years old. And it's just a day-to-day thing that's happening, and they might not remember what happened in this experience. But this experience, this moment, will lead them to the next one, to tomorrow, to the next year. How they felt. Were they traumatized from this experience? Were they inspired from it? Did it comfort them, or did it introduce feelings of unsafety that now they gotta figure out? All these moments and all of these things around us matter equally. So for myself, there's hundreds and hundreds and thousands of experiences and people and moments that made me who I am and will continue to make me who I am. So that's one side of it that's very personal, and I think if we all close our eyes and look back even at yesterday, what happened yesterday? You know, did you get some news? Did something happen that builds on who you are? It also makes me think about, you know, I talk a lot about our work in Uvalde. In Uvalde, Texas, where we have been able to demonstrate that achieving play space equity is possible. We have a community there that we've gone back and we've built 12 play spaces, and there's community members that have come back for one playground, two, three, four, five, 12. And they have shown up with joy and problem-solving and community at every single one. And in between time, have also fostered these connections and support

of each other that didn't exist before they started. And so you think about the web that has been woven within that community that creates a greater collection of the power of them that did not exist because they weren't integrated into each other's life. Like, that's, it's, it's hard to measure, but it matters so much.

Phil Buchanan: That's really powerful. Were you in Uvalde before the school shooting, or did you go after?

Lysa Ratliff: Right after. So we were in Uvalde, I think our first trip there was three, four months after the school shooting, and we're only gonna go there if the parents and community thought we would be helpful. And we had a play space in the ground within eight months, and we had a family. At this point, I call them a family of community champions, and leaders, and get-it-doners who have gone on a path with us ever since then to solve the problem in the community of making sure that all kids have great places to play. They have taken the lead on that.

Phil Buchanan: What I'm hearing you say is that there were sort of unintended side benefits of this work in terms of the relational connections and the way the community came together. Yes, they got the play spaces and eliminated the play space inequity, but they also came out with something more. And I think we s- often miss important things when we try to measure in too narrow a way. Like, I think you can think about something that's, like, much studied, like the interventions of Nurse-Family Partnership, an organization that provides care for expectant moms who are more in at-risk situations, and then they've been able to show that the outcomes are better for those kids than those who don't have those nurse visits both before and after the birth of the child. And there were some efforts in some of the studies that I looked at years ago to monetize that. You know, so you put it into cost savings from lower rates of incarceration or tax revenue from higher rates of employment. But that misses so much. It might be important to do, but it misses so much. How do you quantify the value of a relationship between a mother and a child when the mother hasn't hit that child? You know? But we can't necessarily monetize it or turn it into an ROI equation, and that's kinda what I'm thinking of when I hear you talk about what happened in Uvalde.

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah. It's all the in-between stuff. I will say, and I'm, I'm really excited for this, the Trust In Practice award that we won from Allstate and Aspen was really looking at our work in Uvalde and how do we work with ideas42 and the local library there over the next two, three years to prove and measure that trust is productive. And so we're working on that with behavioral science and all of the things that we need to do to create metrics and measurement around something that has been slightly intangible in our work, but it's been necessary and those in between moments that matter. We're pulling the data to show that we can prove that trust is productive. Trust-building is productive. The way that we're working in partnership

and side by side with other entities is actually really productive in problem-solving, and it drives toward critical outcomes that we all wanna see improve. So we're working on that now. It's a big challenge.

Phil Buchanan: That's amazing.

Lysa Ratliff: Thank God for ideas⁴². But yeah, we're working on that now.

Phil Buchanan: Before we close out, I wanna bring us back to where we started, which is how difficult it is to be leading a nonprofit in this time. And we had already, in our annual *State of Nonprofits* report, for a few years we'd been highlighting burnout as sort of crisis level. And yet, year over year, we saw a massive uptick. So we went from 29% to 46% in a single year of nonprofit leaders saying they were very concerned about their own burnout. That was the most extreme response option, right? So you have almost half of nonprofit leaders in that place, and then a whole bunch who are somewhat concerned, right? Which is not so great either. And they're also concerned about burnout for their staff. If you were approached by a donor who would say, "What are the things I could do to either help with that or to not contribute to it"-

Lysa Ratliff: Mm ...

Phil Buchanan: what were the two or three things you would say, whether it's a foundation program officer, individual donor, if you care about the burnout of the leaders at the organizations you're funding, do this or don't do that?

Lysa Ratliff: Ooh, wow, that's a good one. The burnout is real. I will say that. I, I'll answer it, but I also wanna say that there's two things that are true at once. One, I am living beyond my wildest dreams in doing work that I feel matters in a space that I love, and I didn't dream big enough for myself. And here I am, able to do something that one day when I'm gone and I take my last breath, I will look back and say, "Gosh, I got to do that. I got to leave something better than I walked into."

Phil Buchanan: You absolutely have. Yeah.

Lysa Ratliff: And that's true, and at the same time, and oh, it, it tears me up because I'm like, at what personal cost?

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, right.

Lysa Ratliff: I go nonstop. And I'm talking, I say I, and I, I'm having lunch with friends and others that are in the very same boat, which is why it makes me

emotional, and I'm... other staff's care is in my hands who I also see, they're all, like, they're at the center of their purpose, putting their all in, but it's at a personal cost. They're tired. They're worn out. They are trying so hard to solve this way. Okay, they get a rejection here. Solve that way. Okay, we're gonna find the solution. We are going to figure this out. And I don't think it has to be that way. So what I would say to funders is if you're gonna partner with us, partner with us. If you are on a mission to solve a specific problem, rely on some of the expertise that exist in the nonprofit sector, because not only do you have a sector that is very proximate, very capable, very committed, it's also full of people who are, in many cases, just like, putting their physical being on the line to figure it out. And so no need to, like, play ping pong ball with us. Be right there with us at the table solving the problem, and if there's challenges with resources or if you're nervous about capabilities, then let's have an honest, open conversation. Nothing's off limits. Let's talk about that, because we don't have a lot of time to waste. Our problems that we are all focused on for us are, in many cases, solvable but also urgent. And so don't waste time trying to dance around solutions. Like, either you're gonna come to the table with us, bring your expertise, your leadership, your ideas, and trust in us that we're doing the same, but don't do a dance with us that slows us down. We're all adults. We're all doing our good work. You know, let's shoot from the hip with each other, and if there's synergy and alignment, make it good. Make it good. Make those investments, make them big, be bold, leave something big behind. Otherwise, move to where you can think and be big. And those leaders will appreciate it. They will solve problems like you can't believe. But don't go in and out of water. Just be all in. We're all in. You be all in.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, I love that. I mean, this is, like, maybe highly specific, and it's because of an experience I just had yesterday of getting a no on a grant proposal that we had been cultivating this funder and going back and forth for 18 months, right? And getting all kinds of positive signals. And I'm still trying to understand what happened, but I believe that the no was for a reason that was completely knowable 18 months ago, right? Like-

Lysa Ratliff: Yeah.

Phil Buchanan: And I often think how much easier it would be for us if we could just get quick no's on stuff. Please. Like, because we put a lot of energy into this. And we're trying to make decisions. There's so much uncertainty. I mean, always trying to project, well, what is the percentage chance this one closes and that one closes? And, you know, I'm not sure, unless you've operated in that context of, like, four different scenarios always, that you really know what it's like. And it's challenging, and it's taxing. So I mean, that also, I think, contributes to the sort of just the stress level. But Lysa, I so appreciate you and what you're doing at KABOOM!, the smarts and passion which go together so well in you as an amazing leader who is

transforming communities and affecting a whole lot of kids' lives for the better. I always love talking to you, and I really thank you for spending this time with me.

Lysa Ratliff: Thank you too, Phil. And thanks to anyone who's listened to the full conversation. Like, we need each other. I will kind of go back to where we started. I'm honest, unfiltered. You know, sometimes it gets me into trouble and whatever. You know, I know how to fix things. But we need each other, and part of the good work that we collectively have to do comes from very honest dialogue with one another. And let's make our work together count. Ultimately, that's what this is about, so I appreciate you always bringing to the table space where I'm free to be me, where we can have honest dialogue, and really ultimately it be about doing better in the world.

Phil Buchanan: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Lysa.

Lysa Ratliff: Thank you.

Phil Buchanan: There are a ton of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes. You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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Giving Done Right is a production of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. It's produced by Cold Italian.

Our original podcast artwork is by Jay Kustka. Special thanks to our colleagues Sarah Martin, Molly Heidemann, Christina Tran, Chloe Heskett, and Naomi Rafal for their marketing, research, writing, fundraising, and logistical support.

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