Giving Done Right, Season 6, Episode 8 – Building Community Power With Camille Llanes-Fontanilla and Saúl Ramos

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: In the decade plus of being at SOMOS, I think the hardest conversation I ever had to have was actually with families who were filling out those forms and trying to find out who might be the person in our community that they can sign off the rights of their children to should there be a raid.

Phil Buchanan: Welcome to Giving Done Right. I'm Phil Buchanan. What does it look like to build community power to address systemic inequities? SOMOS Mayfair exists to do just that, working in East San Jose, California, supporting children, organizing families, and connecting neighbors. Sobrato Philanthropies, the philanthropic arm of the Sobrato organization, has provided more than $20 million in support to SOMOS Mayfair. Today, I'm super excited to talk to Camille Llanes-Fontanilla and Saúl Ramos. Camille is the senior vice president, community impact and systems change at Sobrato Philanthropies and the former executive director of SOMOS Mayfair. And Saúl is the current co-executive director at SOMOS Mayfair. So we're gonna explore lessons donors can learn from this one remarkable example. So welcome Camille and Saúl

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: It's great to be here. Thank you for having us.

Saúl Ramos: Yeah. Thank you so much. Looking forward to it

Phil Buchanan: Let's start with just what is Mayfair? Can you place us geographically and give us a sense of the community?

Saúl Ramos: We think about Mayfair as this wonderful, historic neighborhood in East San Jose, right in the middle of Silicon Valley, and existed before Silicon Valley became what is now known and equated with technology, capital, and innovation. And it has its origins in agricultural industry, and it was the place where immigrants and farming families came to live. And it was not a nice organic process in which here I am, I'm landing in Mayfair. It was because there were some real exclusionary practices in San Jose, not allowing Mexican Spanish-speaking people of color buying homes, renting homes in San Jose. So where'd they go? They would go to Mayfair. And that history is important because that struggle, that need to build institutions is what allows for this neighborhood to be what it is. It has been the culture of the neighborhood to really build and organize for the institutions that it needs to be able to thrive. And right now, what we can say about Mayfair is mostly Latino, mostly Mexican, the Chicano Mexican Americans, with a growing population of Filipinos, Vietnamese, API folks that continue to be the fabric and the backbone of Silicon Valley.

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: You know, I would add that this is my home. I was born and raised in East San Jose. My grandparents lived in Mayfair proper. For me, as a

student who went to East Side Union High School, I really saw the immense talent that is in East San Jose but is often overlooked. And so, you know, there is that phrase, and we talk about it in philanthropy, that there's immense talent but limited opportunities, and I would say that really categorizes my experience. And really wanting to push for the kinds of changes that a community needs so that more and more kids have access to opportunities so that they can truly live into their full potential, and that's how I experienced, you know, my friends, the people I grew up with. And unfortunately, not all of us had the exact same pathways available to us. And so that's really what I want people to understand, that it's rich in history, it's rich in diversity, and it's rich in talent, and we deserve the same kinds of opportunities other neighborhoods have as well.

Phil Buchanan: And so close to other neighborhoods that are so rich in financial resources.

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: That's exactly right. I mean, you can walk into the heart of downtown from Mayfair. We do it, you know, once a year to demonstrate how close and proximate we are to the center of wealth in Silicon Valley, and yet sometimes so far apart

Saúl Ramos: You know, yes, you feel the difference in terms of wealth, but also you feel it when difficult moments like COVID are experienced in our community. You can really look at zip code lines and understand the difference of what the impact is. So it's both ways.

Phil Buchanan: So let's talk about the organization now. Like, SOMOS Mayfair, what role are you playing in this community? I love the way the organization seems to be focused not so much on saying, "We do this," or, "We do that," but rather on empowering people in the community

Saúl Ramos: The way that I describe SOMOS is a leadership development, power-building organization, and we're able to do that because we can have the opportunity to generate and regenerate leadership in this community. And maybe an example just to ground us of how that works, I wanna bring, you know, a real person. I'll call her Maria, a promotora with us, a owner of a worker-owned cooperative. And Camille will probably remember this. When we had our inaugural Bridge to Kinder to address kinder readiness in our community, we knocked on almost every door in the neighborhood looking for those kids to invite them into the program. We were not looking for leaders. That was not the criteria. We were looking for families that wanted to participate, that wanted to build community. She came into the organization. She became very active in our workshops. She decided to be part of our leadership development program. SOMOS has been Promotores-led for generations, since its inception. And after years of participating in that, she became a really strong advocate, not only supporting the needs of her children, but the children of other families as well. Then they challenged us as Promotores, as leaders, as organizers, to be like, "Hey, we need to get compensated for our work as well." And we went through this whole year of learning as an organization to look at, okay, what is the model that we can look at? So they decided as a group to go and form a limited liability corporation and form a worker-owned cooperative, and that

really transformed their lives. So now they were able to be contracted by the organization, and instead of getting $15 an hour in informal work, they were making over $65,000 a year. So with that, what I want to illustrate is that when we think about SOMOS, it is that infrastructure that allows for leadership development, that allows for very concrete opportunities to materialize, that allows for people to be seen, for leadership to be legible, to be recognized, and to be built upon. To some degree, I also think about SOMOS as an ecosystem developer, right? Because that was the first time SOMOS was really thinking about worker-owned co-ops. That's the first time that SOMOS, to some degree, and 30 years ago, we started pushing the Promotor model, and that has become a staple in what Santa Clara County now does, is now we have six different co-ops in the neighborhood. So it's not only are we thinking about leadership individually or families individually, but we are shifting in the way that people are thinking about their own leadership. We're shifting in the way people are thinking about their own economic possibilities. So that is what SOMOS does in this community. It's infrastructure for leadership development, and it's an opportunity for us to power build together. And the last thing I'll say is that it's a home. It's a political home. It's a home for immigrants. It's a home for people that want to recognize their own values and their own language in an organization and feel compelled to be part of that. So that's what SOMOS does in our community.

Phil Buchanan: That's great. And Camille, obviously, you were Saúl's predecessor. Saúl is co-executive director, and you made a crack when we first talked about it took two men to fill the role that you, one woman, had been playing. I don't know how Saúl feels about that. Um, but

Saúl Ramos: I'm good with that.

Phil Buchanan: You're good with it. Okay, good. Camille, anything you would add about the role or roles that the organization plays in the community?

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: Well, you know, I cracked that joke primarily because, and I think both Saúl and the other co-executive director, Victor Vasquez, recognize that women at SOMOS, but also in Mayfair, have been leading that community for generations. When I think about the leadership of SOMOS Mayfair, it is primarily immigrant mothers who are hungry for a different dream and a different vision for their kids, and that is what inspires them to sign up for the Bridge to Kinder program, to sign up for leadership development for themselves, and to sign up for economic mobility, to say, "I wanna be a business owner." Those are all the things that I think propel the leadership. It's like this, this hunger in their bellies to do more, and that's really what inspired me to do work at SOMOS. When I first took over, it was at a time where SOMOS was in a much smaller state in terms of budget. We were big at inception because we had a multi-year funder who made a deep commitment to the neighborhood, and then as that funding sunsetted, we were kind of in a contracted state when I had taken over as the executive director. And I think some of the feedback as I did a listening tour was really around how it felt like SOMOS Mayfair didn't have a focus. I was hearing from a lot of donors, "They're not focused. They don't… They have lots of different projects and programs." And I think as I was evolving in my role, what I really came to understand is it wasn't a lack of focus, it was an actual explicit focus on the needs and the voices of the people of the

neighborhood who were really urging us to take on the issues and the challenges that were presenting themselves to them and their families. And so we started in early education. Ultimately leads you to start to look at your K through 12 educational system. And as we were building programs and doing organizing work in that space, we were also then compelled to think about how do you provide economic mobility to the parents? Multi-generational change requires both the children to have pathways, but it also requires the parents to be stable enough to support them. And then, you know, as I was ending my tenure there, we were working on affordable housing. And in every phase, I would say it came from the voices of the people who are most impacted by these issues, and I think that is core to who SOMOS is. And so I would really affirm it's not a lack of focus, it's a complete commitment to the people who call SOMOS their home.

Phil Buchanan: And so now, Camille, just to stick with you on this, you're on the other side of the table, and I'm curious how that feels for you and sort of what lessons you're applying from the role that you played leading an organization that, I mean, I think it's fascinating that you got this critique, you're not focused enough, because I think donor mindsets tend to be about, well, like, what is the thing that you do? What is the model? How does it fit into my logic model? And you're saying no, and please take issue with me if you think I'm mischaracterizing it, but we're here as a support and a facilitator, not the driver of the change, right? So we're empowering people in community to get what they want. How do you think about that now as a funder? Because I assume that you're getting asked by the person you report to, our friend Alexa Cortes Culwell, or maybe the board, "Well, what are we accomplishing?" You know, "What are the metrics?" How do you think about that now that you're on the funding side?

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: It's been an evolution. So I actually hit five years this month, and I think in every year that I've been here, we have sharpened the way we think about this work. And so first I'll say that the foundation of the Sobrato family, the organization, and Sobrato Philanthropies is really rooted in something that I'm completely values-aligned with. And I think that's important because, again, like SOMOS, to be able to do work that is aligned with community, you have to have a really strong value base to begin with. And so, you know, our founder, John A. Sobrato, has had this longtime belief that the people who have the most have a commitment to responsibly invest in the people and the communities that don't have access. And so that ethos shapes how we show up as a philanthropy. And that is the call to action that I took when I was invited to join the organization. And so a couple of things that I have learned in my time here to move us from twenty five year history of being a place-based, committed philanthropy to this region, to build from that foundation has required lessons learned, lots of conversations, with our board, to your point, and our leadership around what does it mean to be a funder that supports a broader ecosystem rather than a single organization? That's required us to have conversations about evaluation focused in contribution and not attribution.

Phil Buchanan: Mm-hmm.

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: What does it look like to hold up and support an ecosystem and be a leader in that, but to be a contributor and not everything has to

be attributed to us. And so that's a core thing that we talk about. We have also evolved our evaluation structure. And so rather than having evaluation structures that are focused on individual organizations, we have actually moved to a really incredible evaluation model, and I've done this in partnership with John Matthew Sobrato, third-generation grandson, to gather community-based data so that we can actually look at the conditions in which we are living in in Silicon Valley. And we have a growing rate of inequality here. We have more than 40% of our neighbors actually can't afford to live in this region. And so we are getting now real-time data year over year that shows us kind of the conditions that the people, for example, of Mayfair are living in. And so then rather than thinking about like what is a single program gonna do to address that, we're now able to think about what is the constellation of organizations that are really required to be able to support residents and families in this affordability crisis as inequities grow. And so that's kind of the frame that we've held. So it's been an incredible ride so far. I feel very trusted in the organization. You asked how does it feel to make the switch. As someone who comes from grassroots organizing, it was a leap to say yes. I loved my time at SOMOS. Again, it's the neighborhood I was, you know, raised in. But I think I wanted to make this decision to really think about the many Mayfairs that are across Silicon Valley, and how might we really support the change that's required for these low-wage, housing insecure residents to have what they need.

Phil Buchanan: And I'm curious about this issue of, sort of, you've got incredible wealth, and then you've got people who can barely afford to live in this place. And it makes me think of the report that Alexa Cortes Culwell, your boss, I guess, and Heather MacLeod Grant published a decade ago. I think it was called *The Giving Code: Silicon Valley Nonprofits and Philanthropy*. And one of the big insights there was not so much that people in Silicon Valley weren't philanthropic, like they were giving at a high level, but the overwhelming bulk of their giving was going elsewhere, not back into the communities whose streets they were driving through, or if they ran a business their employees were living, right? So do you feel that's shifted? I'm curious, both of you, like, there's so much wealth there. If anything, it feels like, you know, in the last two years there's been a sort of retreating back from philanthropy, and I wonder how you see this now. Has there been any progress since that report came out? It got a ton of attention. Or do you think the problem, you know, essentially remains?

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: That report is actually how I first met Alexa. She reached out to SOMOS to highlight us because, again, we're a grassroots organization on the ground that was, I would say, punching above our weight, and no one knew we existed in the region. And so, it was an incredible opportunity to be highlighted in *The Giving Code*. I would say from my vantage point, it's been cyclical. I think after that report, during COVID, maybe during some very tense social unrest, there has been increased giving to local organizations in the Valley. Sometimes, though, after maybe a specific crisis or an event, we kind of fall back and go back into our natural ways. And so I think at least for the Sobrato Organization, one of the things that we are doing is using that data. It's public data. Oftentimes, it's just illustrated in a way that's really hard to understand. So we have evaluation partners that are helping us unpack that data, make it crystal clear, so that we can actually tell the region a story about ourselves. Because without the data, it becomes kind of

philosophical, sometimes political. And I think one of our strategies is really to just ground us in the reality of what we're actually talking about. You know, the fact that 64% of the people who can work in Silicon Valley are actually working, which is aligned with the national average, and yet we find that 40% of them can't afford to live here. So that compels us to ask a lot of different questions about wages, systemic challenges to the different kinds of sectors that hold up Silicon Valley. And I think, you know, we wouldn't be able to have these conversations without that kind of data. So that's one way we're addressing it. The other thing is, for my team of more than twenty people who come from community, who were raised in Silicon Valley in many cases, and who've done work on the ground similar to Saúl and I, you know, we are out in community really understanding the nuances and the challenges, and we're bringing that back to other funders. And so some of our accountabilities as staff are around supporting alignment in our local communities. You know, how do we connect city, county, nonprofit, and other funders to understand the problems and to be able to work together on solutions? And, and me and my staff are actually held accountable to being a facilitator and a connector, as well as leveraging other dollars. So we have KPIs that we look at quarterly to say, "How well are we doing on these things?" And that's how I've been able to demonstrate to our board progress, even in the short term, when maybe we're not quite yet moving the needle on these community-wide societal issues.

Phil Buchanan: Is a KPI like how much other funding is coming in? Is that what you're holding yourself accountable for, is actually influencing other funders, making the case, and seeing action?

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: Yeah. Yeah. And not to Sobrato, right? But to the initiatives to the organizations that are here in our region that are working on some of these challenges.

Phil Buchanan: Okay. So Saúl, unlike Camille now, you still have to worry about meeting payroll. And, like, bringing in the revenue. So, like, how are you experiencing the funding context, and what do you wish for from donors? Even how it's just been to try to fundraise in this climate.

Saúl Ramos: Definitely agree with Camille on the cyclical, I wanna say pattern that we experience from funders. Since COVID, and just to land on a very concrete example, SOMOS was getting supported from about six family foundations, similar to Sobrato. Two of them have retreated because priorities continue to shift. Whether it is we are doing more emergency response, whether we are focusing on a different issue, whether we are going through a strategic planning process, that is consistently what we've been hearing to how they recalibrate how they think about their funding strategies. So is it getting harder? Absolutely. I think the piece that is important for us to name in which we are really looking forward is to really explore this idea of place-based funding and making sure that our donors and partners and ecosystem partners, city, county, understand that the investment in this place and investment in Mayfair is something that we are really pushing forward and really trying to have folks understand because it has a different implication and a different philosophy and a different approach. And by that, I mean that can we get away from, "I'm gonna fund education. I'm gonna fund housing"? And can we really think about how do we fund

the infrastructure that is needed for communities to make their own decisions and to become more self-sufficient and for self-determination to come of the very top? And that is a very different approach because you have place-based funders. So you have funders who will say, "I wanna fund in Mayfair because we know that that's a community in need, and I wanna focus in education." And often that funding doesn't touch that infrastructure that I'm talking about, the power-building infrastructure, the leadership development infrastructure. So I think what is important for us to elevate, and that's something that we're trying to do consistently, and I think that's also what Sobrato's helping us illustrate, is how is it that we can shift this narrative, and how can we shift this focus so we understand that we can no longer sustain funding by just segmenting that and fragmenting that? A family does not experience housing on its own, childcare on its own. They experience all the things all the time and at the same time, right? So that is something that is incredibly important for us in moving forward. Now, when it comes down to Silicon Valley and the culture here, we have not cracked the code. It's been incredibly difficult to get the corporations and to get the foundations that do exist locally to really focus on the current issues. To your framing earlier, what is their responsibility and what is their response to the people that sustain the economy, to the infrastructure that exists in the cities, to the culture that has thrived and has really risen from these neighborhoods? We need that partner and our funding partners in that ecosystem help, to help us shift things around. So that self-awareness of what is it that you're doing and what is it that you're not doing and what can you do with your grantee partners, I think it is one of the key elements that we would like to see other funders stepping into as well, so they can be more present and understand not only what they're contributing to, but also what they are influencing as well.

Phil Buchanan: Stick around. We'll be right back

BREAK

Phil Buchanan: I have so many thoughts going through my head listening to you both. One is, how infuriating is it to hear, "We can't fund you 'cause we're in strategic planning"? I mean, I… It's just like, I would so love… I lead a nonprofit. Like, "Oh, I'm sorry, we're gonna just stop doing anything, like, for a while, like the things that we're set up to do, because we're in strategic planning." Like, only funders have that luxury, not to be too brutal here. And I feel like maybe I talk about this more than I should, including on this podcast, because, you know, it gets more attention than it deserves. But where you are, effective altruism is, like, something a lot of people talk about. The sort of literal interpretation of effective altruism would mean that if you're in Silicon Valley and you're thinking about how do you do good, you would not support a local organization because you would say, "Well, my dollar can go further somewhere else." And, like, I can't get my head around how much that's actually informing practice as opposed to just, like, a lot of articles are written about effective altruism. But I think it might get more attention than it gets actual adoption. But

nonetheless, you are kind of fighting this sense that, oh, maybe I can do more good somewhere else, and trying to make this case that, no, no, no, you owe something to the place you are and the people who live in that place and, and are employed in that place. So that's another thought going through my head as I listen to this. And then the third thing is this notion that the crisis funding and somehow, like, the level of crisis has receded when, in fact, this is not exactly an easy time for communities like the community served by SOMOS. And somehow that crisis, the crisis of lawless actions by ICE, for example, the crisis of the fear that that lawlessness has created, I'm not sure that's gotten the same philanthropic response that, for example, the pandemic did. So can we talk a little bit about, like, what is actually going on in communities right now, what you're seeing, Saúl, in terms of the families and people you seek to support?

Saúl Ramos: Unfortunately, the fear does change how communities react, how individuals calculate their outings, how they show up to work, to school, or they don't. And that is exactly the wave that we've been seeing. When the killings and the mass demonstrations happened in Minneapolis, we'd been working with our Promotores to go and support families and fill out and contemplate the idea of creating emergency plans for themselves and their families. So whenever those… There was a, you know, breaking news or a development and that hit the national media, especially in Spanish-speaking media, the number of families that wanted to have a conversation would increase substantially. We're looking at about maybe 10 families a week, 15 families, going to 40, 60 families in that period of time. So that just tells you the level of anxiety and fear somebody has to experience and make that calculation, "What is going to happen if I cannot pick up my child from school? If there's a raid in my community, if they come for me or they come for my spouse?" So that is always very much present in our community. So what is happening concretely, even though Santa Clara County has not experienced that level of enforcement, what we have seen is more targeted approaches and more targeted arrests in our county going after individuals. And I think, you know, the criteria has been all over the place, so we can't even speak about a pattern here of what is happening. So that is one element. I think, you know, we've seen news recently, July, June increased presence in informants at airports, and that created, you know, San Francisco, San Jose, and that created another layer of fear. There's been recent news about a potential development of ICE in Gilroy, which is very close to San Jose, and that also has created a response from our community. So how does that translate into the day-to-day? School absenteeism, non-participation or low participation in programming, parenting classes, medical appointments missed or postponed, and just an overall increase of lack of trust in the systems, in the public systems, services that are available to families, not wanting to interact with those systems at all, and that has been the pattern. I think that what is happening also simultaneously with what's happening with the war in Iran and, and with the passing of HR1, that we see this erosion of the public safety net and funding decreasing, and we see that, how that is impacting the city, that is how impacting the county, and then that impacts the nonprofit. So there's an erosion of services that is happening at the same time there's an increase in enforcement, and we see different manifestations in different ways. So when we think about what we're doing and we think about organizations like SOMOS and others in our ecosystem, like Amigos de Guadalupe, part of the Si Se Puede Collective, there is a very concrete leaderful response through the rapid response network. But I mentioned that we are really working with the Promotores to

work with families and create these plans, emergency plans in connection to services, in connection, in navigation to these services. At the same time, we want to create a space where we can imagine what comes next. What is important for us to think about how do we get out of this and what is it that we need to build when this is over? So I think, you know, that is the other space that we need to create and really build resilience and agency to maintain that because yes, it is hard, and at the same time, it is necessary because we cannot be really paralyzed by fear as, as a community, as an organization, and we need to make the effort, and that is where the work is for us.

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: In the decade plus of being at SOMOS, I think the hardest conversation I ever had to have was actually with families who were filling out those forms and trying to find out who might be the person in our community that they can sign off the rights of their children to should there be a raid. And I'm a mother of two so that sits with me, and I think I bring that clarity to my leadership, both at SOMOS and now here at Sobrato. And so I think, you know, the conversations I've been having with peer funders is to really acknowledge everything that families are going through right now, and then also thinking about the leaders, like Saúl. The amount of pressure that an executive director and their team goes through in navigating these shifts in funding, the onslaught of constant demands. I mean, when you run a community organizing organization, you know, there needs to be an action constantly. Anytime something happens, there needs to be a response. The toll that takes on your staff, on their own mental health, and then the community's mental health, it's a lot to hold. And so I think conversations with funders about how do we not compartmentalize our strategies into specific issue areas, into direct service versus systems change or community organizing, but, like, really start to just realize the interconnections between the issues, the tools that we use, and how we show up as funders is really what I've used my role to do in this time. I'm fortunate to be in this valley where a lot of other funders understand those nuances, and so we have partners to work with. But I think it requires a lot of case making, and again, it actually requires a lot of data. And I think to your point about effective altruism, I think one of the biggest things that we have done is really talk about how the health and safety of a community is measured by the unhealthiest parts of our community, right? And so if we are sitting here in Silicon Valley and we are seeing how much wealth there is, we can't really shy away from the pockets of poverty and inequality and harm because eventually it does start to impact the broader community. Our kids go to school together. We drive down the same freeways. So when unhealthy parts of our community show up, it starts to affect us all. And so I think those are the kinds of things that me and other funders are really grappling with. But to Saúl's point, when money is being cut because our cities and counties are scrambling to address, you know, policy changes, it is feeling like there's very limited options on where we can get support right now. And so I think this is where-

Phil Buchanan: Hmm. That's sobering ...

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: individual donors can really have an opportunity to step in. I mean, I think Alexa and I have also been talking about the beauty of mutual aid networks, you know, SOMOS and other organizations, Latinas Contra Cancer.

Organizations have this model, and if people aren't aware, mutual aid networks are when neighbors show up for neighbors. And it's largely been in low-income communities like Mayfair, and I think Alexa and I have been talking about what would it look like for neighbors showing up for neighbors across the entire region. It's something we're contemplating right now.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah. So much in everything you both are saying. I mean, one of the things that you sort of alluded to earlier was just the toll it takes on staff and leaders at organizations. And I just wanna say, like, we've been tracking what we see as a burnout crisis among nonprofit leaders. And in our last annual *State of Nonprofits: What Donors Need to Know* report, we saw 89% of nonprofit leaders expressing concern about their own burnout, and 46% said that their own burnout was very much a concern. That's sort of the most extreme response option, which was up from 29% just a year prior. The financial indicators are moving in the wrong direction. You know, in aggregate, more organizations reporting deficits, more nonprofit leaders saying they're concerned about the financial viability of their organizations. And then I hear a lot, and I understand from funders who say, “Okay. Well, what's needed is more collaboration among organizations.” There is a story that funders, well, you know, and sometimes it's true and sometimes it isn't, will tell about duplication, too many nonprofits working on the same thing. And so there's, you know, interest in sort of fostering collaboration. That makes sense if it makes sense from the standpoint of the nonprofits themselves. But I guess I wanna ask you both how you think about that because you mentioned, Saúl, Sí Se Puede, which I guess is a collaborative effort of organizations working in the community where you're working. That's not a new thing. That's like a long-standing effort. Can you talk a little bit about how you work with other organizations and what you think of the... Again, I hear it all the time from funders, the kinda story that gets told, which is like, "Oh my gosh, there's so many organizations doing the same thing, and they're overlapping, and there are too many nonprofits, so they need to merge or collaborate better." Like, I'm curious your take on that as somebody who's really prioritized collaborative work, and then Camille also.

Saúl Ramos: The Si Se Puede Collective, yes, it's five different organizations in the neighborhood. And really what we wanted to do and what we are continue to work towards is really leveraging our resources and strategies to have one common destination and common focus, which is changing the neighborhood. And one of the things that I just wanna point out is that to your point about collaboration: collaboration is not the destination. We're not here to collaborate more. We're not here to become a single organization. But really the po-

Phil Buchanan: It's a means to an end is what you're saying.

Saúl Ramos: It's a means to an end. Exactly. And I think, you know, the possibility here and, and specifically with this collective, and we have five different organizations with five different cores that we can then leverage. And when we are able to coordinate those strategies and that focus, you know, we've been speaking about SOMOS and how we really have built on that tradition of community organizing, leadership development that has been in the neighborhood since its inception. Amigos de Guadalupe does tremendous community organizing as well,

but focused on immigration as well, and they've been, like, the agency that has been able to provide those very basic needs around housing, immigration, and legal support for the neighborhood. Grail Family Services, they have a wonderful high-quality preschool program serving and supporting families as well.

Veggielution has a wonderful six-acre farm in the neighborhood that really addresses in trying to work on issues of food systems and climate justice. And the School of Arts and Culture, which is an institution also as a result of a lot of community organizing, really elevating the culture and the heritage of our neighborhood. And all of us, even though we have different cores, we are able to then think about what are the single strategy that we can then focus and really come together to support the neighborhood and really have that understanding. I think what we also want to exemplify in the neighborhood is a different way of working together, understanding that relationships are key to moving our strategies, and not just at relationships between the different organizations, but also relationships with our system partners, city and county, and our relationships with our community. And as we mentioned earlier, the way that our community experiences the collective, they may go to SOMOS for leadership development, but they may have their children in preschool, and they may attend the events of the School of Arts and Culture. So how do we create this seamless experience for a community in which they have an opportunity to enter through any of these institutions and get the support that they need in the neighborhood that they want to remain? And where our focus is, where this collaboration lead us to, is how do we think about permanence and create a strategy for permanence in this community through these very different angles?

Phil Buchanan: What do you mean by permanence, Saúl?

Saúl Ramos: Really targeting displacement, which is happening in our community. And really targeting displacement in different ways, right? Not only housing, but really looking at education, right? We have schools closing in Mayfair and East San Jose, low enrollment. Families are being displaced because they can't afford it. They can't afford to live here, as Camille was expressing in terms of not only the price of housing, but also the economic opportunities that are dwindling in some instances as well. But again, you know, how do then we create economic opportunities for families to remain? How do we ensure that there is a health system that supports the needs of our families? And of course, food and climate issues that are impacting us in different ways. So we're looking at displacement in all these different ways, given the different cores and the different abilities and capabilities that each of these organizations are developing in the neighborhood.

Phil Buchanan: So you're saying five organizations, different focus, but coming together around a shared strategy-

Saúl Ramos: That's correct ...

Phil Buchanan: that's about permanence, preventing displacement. So a community member comes to you, you see that they need something from one of

those other organizations in the group of five. You make sure to make that connection because you're all aligned and you're coordinating on that objective.

Saúl Ramos: That is exactly right. That is exactly right.

Phil Buchanan: And Camille, from your standpoint as a funder, you know, what is your take on this mantra of nonprofits don't collaborate well enough, deeply enough, there's too much duplication. Do you see some of that? I mean, obviously Si Se Puede is an example of where it's working really well. Is that more the exception? What is your view?

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: You know, it's interesting. I was one of the four original founders of Si Se Puede Collective, and I'm very proud of the infrastructure that we built. And we did. We were under pressure from funders. We were constantly being told that there was duplication in the neighborhood and we needed to be clear about what our core competencies were. And I think we took that feedback, but we really sat down as leaders and really thought about not the organizations and not what we were hearing from funders, but rather what do residents and families need from us. And that's when we decided to build a collective that would have a seamless approach to be able to move outcomes in a neighborhood, not because the funders were asking us to do that, but because we knew that it was gonna be better for the families. A family experiences all those things in real time. Even affluent families need all those things. We need childcare, we need food, we need housing, and so we have to be able to access them in the most effective and efficient way, and they should be high quality. Our kids should not get less because of the zip codes that they live in. And so that was really the premise of Si Se Puede Collective. I will say now in a funder hat, we are incentivizing it through our grant making. And what I mean by incentivizing is in addition to grant funding our individual organizations in these neighborhoods and communities that we fund in, we are also supporting the infrastructure, so we are giving collective grants too. So I think sometimes funders think, "Well, if I force y'all to collaborate, I can give you less money." And for us, I think it's really turned out to be like, no, you actually have to resource them more. You have to resource the individual organizations to do their core work, and then you have to provide funding for the collaborative so that they can do the things that they need to do in terms of shifting their operating model, building out an evaluation system. Those are things that are not gonna be funded by the individual organization that's already kind of at their limits to support their direct services and programs. So that's part of our analysis. The other thing I talk a lot about is whose water is it to carry? And so our strategy here at Sobrato is not only a grant-making strategy. We have roles around being a connector and convener. So like I mentioned earlier, you know, bringing other private philanthropy and public entities to understand the data, to understand the issues, to understand the really incredible organizations that are doing work on the ground. We do a lot of that work. And then because we're a real estate company, we have the incredible asset of having nonprofit centers in three of our priority communities. And so we actually have the opportunity to use real estate to provide low-cost office and programmatic space for nonprofits so that they actually can align and work together and reduce some of that overhead of them being in the same building. So in many of these strategies, we believe in collaboration. We think it's good for the end user, the resident, most importantly, or the family, but I think we

have found tools to actually support that level of collaboration rather than just asking organizations to do it.

Phil Buchanan: There's so much richness in what you both have offered, and I wanna share some of the things I'm gleaning and then ask, "What did I miss?" We have talked about contribution versus attribution, right? Like, as a funder, recognizing that you're not gonna be able to draw that causal line between what you funded and what happened, but you can say you contributed to something. We've talked about consistency of support, not just crisis-driven response. Community needs don't go away just because the press coverage of crisis X or Y is less. We've talked about, and I think this is super interesting, like, the way the silos get in the way. And this brings me back to when my wife was working as a therapist in a school and, you know, recognizing that she had to, even though it was against the rules, like, stock up on snacks from Costco because people were coming to talk, and they were hungry, and they were not gonna learn. And yet we somehow separate these things out when we fund. We've talked about collaboration and how important it is. We've talked about wanting folks who have a lot of wealth to think about giving locally and supporting back in their community that's giving them so much. And then we've talked about empowering people in community to decide what it is they need as opposed to assuming, you know, well, this is the thing our organization does, and we're just gonna keep doing it regardless of what. But setting people up to chart their own path. Those are some of the insights I'm taking away from this conversation. What would you each wanna add, or what would you wanna leave folks with?

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: I mean, that was a great recap, Phil. I would add two things. On a personal note, you know, I could've been at SOMOS forever. I loved that job. It touched every aspect of my value set, my history, my connection to my grandparents. But I worked really hard with folks like Saúl, Victor, Celica, who actually works here at Sobrato now with me. I had an incredible leadership team, and we built a bench. And so I think one thing that I really want the sector to think about is, how do we practice what Saúl said, that leadership development is an ongoing journey? And how do we support a bench of nonprofit leaders to ascend into higher level roles? How do we, as executive directors, maybe vacate our seats when it's time so that we can sustain organizations? Because I think you're right. The burnout is real. The ideas and the innovations kind of come from other people on the team. And so I think I had this moment of, like, just really wrestling with, "Is it my time to leave?" And I realized it, it was. And there was an incredible bench of leaders, and I'm so grateful that Saúl and Victor heeded the call and that the board was ready to support them in that. And so I think that's something we don't really do in our sector. We tend to hang on, and then organizations can't breathe and thrive. And I think that's a demonstration to the residents. Like, if we're telling the residents of Mayfair that we believe in a leadership development pipeline, then you gotta demonstrate it also. So that's one thing I wanted to say. The other thing is a statewide policy agenda. So we believe that to be able to make the change that we envision in Silicon Valley and Bay Area, these are intractable challenges that are bigger than any organization or institution. And so we also support a portfolio of nonprofits who are working on statewide policy, that are working on the exact same issues we're working on on the ground. And I think that that connectivity is really critical if we're gonna drive durable, scalable change.

Phil Buchanan: That's great. And on your first point, maybe you'll prompt some soul-searching for me because I've been in the same job for 25 years. Saúl, what would you leave people with?

Saúl Ramos: I think I just wanna elevate the importance of really being rooted in communities. And I think that is leadership development that Camille just mentioned, it's an expression of that. The importance of investing in that connective tissue and investing in the infrastructure that is needed, and the institutions that have the trust, and they have the history, and they have the support of the people to be able to continue to develop the leadership that is needed for neighborhoods to make their own decisions. And if anything, you know, thinking about Mayfair and its history, think, you know, that is the place. And thinking about community organizing, power building, that becomes the vehicle and the mechanism. SOMOS and the Si Se Puede Collective, SOMOS is what becomes the infrastructure and the collaboration that we've been talking about. It is the expression of when that is successful between different organizations. So what I wanna leave funders with is the idea that, you know, when you support organizations, and Camille later will hear this, you can't just support the organizations for the core work. You have to support the importance of collaboration, the connective tissue, because then if we do it well, that becomes an expression of power building itself. And ultimately, where that is going to lead, it's not going to lead to the organizations just becoming bigger, but for the neighborhood to become more self-sufficient. The other thing around leadership development, completely agree with Camille, I think, you know, as leaders, we have a responsibility, again, to the place and to the people that we're serving. And our aspiration is to ensure that there is leadership development and leadership from the neighborhood across every different part of the organization, including in the seat that, you know, Camille and I have the opportunity to serve. So really supporting organizations to build that pipeline internally and externally is crucial, and we cannot ignore that part of the work because I think that's what transformation does. And into anything, I mean, this is what this podcast also demonstrated to me, that leadership exists not only in the neighborhood or in the organization, but also in the ecosystem of our funders, and it could go beyond that. So that's something that we should pay attention and invest in.

Phil Buchanan: Saúl, Camille, thank you so much for an incredibly rich conversation. Thanks for the work that you're both doing, and thanks for spending time talking about it all so openly and thoughtfully today. Really appreciate it.

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla: Thank you, Phil.

Saúl Ramos: Yeah. Thank you so much.

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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