

Tony Wagner PHT Interview Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Treasure Tinsley, Tony Wagner

Treasure Tinsley 00:01

Okay, so today is Monday, August 2, it's about 4:11pm. I'm Treasure Tinsley. Do you want to go ahead and introduce yourself? Just give us a little bit of, you know, biographical information about who you are, you know, where did you grow up? Where were you born? How did you end up in the Twin Cities to even begin with?

Tony Wagner 00:26

Okay. Well, my name is Tony Wagner. I'm the former president and CEO of Pillsbury United Communities. I grew up in North Minneapolis and as a child was a client of what was then Unity House, which is one of the constituent organizations of Pillsbury United Communities. So roughly from I would say, age 8 to 15, I was heavily engaged in the youth sports programs, youth programs at teen dances, and a summer camp that Unity House had that I went to as a kid. I have always felt that that was a special opportunity for me. Growing up I came from a dysfunctional family: alcoholism and divorce, and that sort of thing. But I did well in school, and that was a source of, you know, good vibes for me. And so, after I graduated from North High School in Minneapolis with the intention of going to the University to be a lawyer (I have no idea why except that I liked TV law shows). And so I thought I thought it'd be fun to be in a courtroom. Many of us who grew up in North Minneapolis got the impression that we were less-than in society. It always seems like the newspaper stories were mostly negative. And so, we lots grew up with a chip on our shoulder; that the world's unjust and unfair, and we've been unfairly attacked and probably because of that I I probably wasn't a real pleasant kid at least to some people anyway. I went to the university to become a lawyer studied political science. And I lasted for two years and then my home life fell apart. I ran out of money and I ran out of resources. I had no place to go, so I joined the Army in 1967. I spent

three years in the Army, signed up for Officer's Candidate School and became a 2nd Lieutenant. And after OCS, I got assigned to the Army's Defense Information School, which was about journalism in the military. I was trained to be an information officer. Also after OCS, I married my high school sweetheart and we're still married. We lived at Fort Knox, Kentucky and I became the editor of the Fort Knox Newspaper, "The Turret," Kentucky's third largest newspaper. Fort Knox

was a huge Army base and life was good. My wife and I considered staying with the military and making a career of it. I

mean, here I was, 21 years old, an officer, enlisted men and women had to salute me, we were automatic members of the officer's country club, and I learned how to play golf. You know, it was kind of fun. But

it was 1968 and unfortunately all that came to an end when I got orders to go to Vietnam. I went to Vietnam in 1969 and that changed my outlook on

the military. When I got back home, thankfully, I immediately enrolled in the University of Minnesota. I wanted to finish my education. Oddly enough, I left Vietnam in September of 1969 on a Friday, was out of the

army on a Saturday, and was a student at the University of Minnesota on Monday. It was a

tumultuous time at the U with all the anti-war protests and everything but I laid low and finished my

degree. I needed a part time job. My wife Marie was working full time at a church in North Minneapolis and she told me they were looking for a part-time youth director.

Tony Wagner 05:19

Well hell, I mean, I like kids, so I applied, got the job and to make an already long story short, I fell in love. I fell in love working with North Minneapolis teenagers and that changed my

thinking and career path to social work. I ended up getting a BA in social work and went right on to get

a master of social work's degree. I did my second year's master's degree internship at Augsburg College, a Minneapolis liberal arts college. After graduation, Professor Paul Steen, my supervisor at Augsburg, wrote a grant that took him out of his teaching role. The social work department at Augsburg was small (just two of us, Dr. Steen and me as his intern). Dr. Steen recommended that I be hired while he worked on his grant program. In the fall of 1973, I became an assistant professor of social work at Augsburg which was my first job out

of graduate school. During my time in graduate school, because of my work with northside teens I was active with the youthwork staff at Unity House and got to know them very well. Eventually I was invited to join the board of directors

of Unity House, which I did. Later I became president of the board. I

spent four years on the faculty of Augsburg and was in a Ph. D. Program in social work at the U. My wife was pregnant with our first daughter, and I was in a campaign running for the state legislature. All at the same time in 1976. Well, I was a nut job, I tell ya, and to make matters worse, Unity

House was falling apart as an organization with lots of turmoil. At that time, the board of directors was all white and practically all male and just prior to my time, met downtown. Within four years (I didn't have a lot to do with this), but within four years, several people of color joined the board. That the civil rights turmoil that was going on in the late 60s

and early 70s really was playing out in the agency, lots of staff problems with staff, board, and community complaints. We went

through three executive directors during my four years on the board. After the third one was terminated, some of my fellow board members said to me, "Why don't you take the job?" I'm thinking, hmmm... *I've a baby

Coming, I'm 30 years old, I don't know a damn thing about supervising people, I'd never done a budget, and I'd never written a grant or raised money. But I was 30 and cocky and said, Okay, sure. I'll do it.. So I started as the executive director of what was then called Northside Settlement Services in the fall of 1976

Back then, we had two neighborhood centers, Unity house on 25th and Fremont and what we used to call the Oliver

Branch that was the old Talmud Torah school in North Minneapolis. I think we had a budget of about \$400,000 and a staff maybe of 15. That's what I inherited. The organization was a mess. That was a time when Settlement houses were going through a really powerful revolution. I think that

up to that time, many of the nation's settlements had morphed into organizations that were professionalized, dominated by staff and leaders who weren't from the neighborhood.

Tony Wagner 10:11

You know, they became what I thought most social services looked like back then. Lots of well intended white

folks trying to do good things, but not of the community. And the

protests of 60's and 70's was about changing all that. I don't think I would

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have survived those years had I not been of the community (I was born and raised in north Minneapolis). In fact,

there were three or four attempts to get me fired in those years and I think I only survived because I had good credibility

with people of color, black leadership in the city who really had my back. During those times, it was a rough, time to be to be a so-called leader in this in movement.

Treasure Tinsley 11:11

Yeah, can you talk more about that? Just, you know, what that change looked like? And, I mean, really, why it was important for it to be of-the-community, and how that change kind of happened or what that transition looked like?

Tony Wagner 11:26

Well, you know, that time in our society was full of civil rights protests and issues. And somewhere along the line, I don't remember exactly when, the federal government, in one of its anti-poverty programs came up with this notion of *maximum feasible participation* of the poor. Grant making became dependent on an organization's ability to engage and have the poor participate in these programs, and what's being done to them. That opened up a lot of organizations that were well intended but unable connect with people in the community. But it brought in a lot of people who lived in the neighborhood, who were people of color, who had different ideas about how to do things. Many nonprofit organizations got those community people on staff or on board. Generally, that was a very good thing, with one exception. Just because a person is from the neighborhood doesn't mean they know how to run anything, or how to operate an organization. So, there was a lot of conflict over how to run an organization. In a way, that whole policy of our country, arguably was a setup for low-income people, because they were bound to fail. They were bound to fail at managing...because I mean, you know, managing Pillsbury United Communities today is an extremely complicated job. You just can't pluck somebody off the street and think that they're going to do it. So, there was a lot of the internal struggle and at the same time we white folks were dealing with our own racism and how that played out in the organization. Then, sometime in the late 70's, early 80's I began to change my mind. When I started, I was of the mindset that my job consisted of hiring educated professionals but, I knew that many of our staff were white professionals who were too distant from the community. I thought we could get them training to get them better connected to the community, and we spent a lot of time and effort trying to do that. The epiphany was that didn't work

very well. People were too entrenched by the time they are in their mid-20s, their minds are made up and it was very difficult getting them to know the community and get connected to it. It occurred to me we would be much better off simply

hiring people from the neighborhood, with or without education credentials. Hopefully, they had degrees but if

they didn't, it was better for us to get them credentials they needed or wanted than it was to get so-called credentialed people hip to the neighborhood. Over the course of 10 years, we went from an organization that was 80% white, to

an organization that was probably 80% people of color. But when I retired, I was the only MSW left on staff.

Treasure Tinsley 16:00

Wow,

Tony Wagner 16:03

In most human services, and I would argue in most aspects of

our society, we think the most important credential is education. So, education becomes the dominant job requirement. What we did at Pillsbury was to say the most important credential is your ability

to work with the people we serve. Education is important, don't get me wrong, I'm not anti-education, it's just not the most important. The most important thing is to have

the ability to gain the respect of the people that we work with, and that we want to serve and want to develop. That changed a whole lot of things. We were criticized for that approach by the

United Way and other powers that be. Grant makers would sometimes say, "Why would we give money to you? You don't have credentialed staff. Your people aren't

educated. So why should we fund you?" We powered through that criticism, and thought that

what we had nobody could take from us. The reality was that we were well connected to the community and when needed, the community folks came to our rescue, they came to support us. At the time I didn't think it was very revolutionary, but as I look back, it really was. Fortunately, more and more organizations are adopting this viewpoint. I think people recognize that at some point, if you can't, if you can't walk into a room of young

black teenagers and get connected to them, what good are you really? And so that was an important

move for Pillsbury.

Treasure Tinsley 18:13

Yeah, absolutely. Really focusing on black leadership. And, and I think that's hugely important to the history. I wonder about the.... I mean, it's really interesting to me, because you're talking about these social services and providing the social services. But I'd love to get a better sense of what they actually were. Like, what your focuses were? and maybe how that changed as the focus as this, you know, shift away from MSWs, as we shift away from being primarily white dominated staff, like, how did those social services change in their focus? And in their outcomes? Maybe?

Tony Wagner 18:58

Unfortunately, we weren't the captain of our ship. The funders are the captain of the ship in human services. I felt that for most of my career, I was doing battle with the foundations, the United Way, and government to get them to understand that some of what they were looking for was just not productive or even helpful to poor and marginalized people. They thought I wasn't serious when I would say, "You know, why don't you just give us a million bucks and we'll do the right thing. They humored me and you know, I think in my entire career, there's only been one funder that ever did that. And he was a great one. It was Russ Ewald at the Knight Foundation. I think he just got tired of me asking and so he finally said "Alright we'll give you a million dollars to do the right thing." That took 10 years of trust building. So much of human service system is built on the Problem/program paradigm. Do you know what I mean by that?

Treasure Tinsley 20:25

Do you want to just expand on it, though?

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Tony Wagner 20:27

Well, the collective view of the community and governmental leadership, the powers-that-be if you will, was that society has social problems. We have people who are uneducated, people who are

addicted, people who are mentally ill and so on. We have created all these problem categories. We then created human service programs to address these problems and then tied funding to those programs. Whole systems and organizations and developed to address the problems. This is the problem/program I'm talking about. The problem with this paradigm, it

seems to me, is it doesn't recognize that people don't live like that. I mean I have yet to see a low income, marginalized family with only one problem. Often, there is addiction, homelessness, a lack of education, an inability to communicate, and often there's a disability in the family.

Individuals and families are much more complicated than a set of problems. The value of what we tried to do at Pillsbury and the value of the whole settlement house movement is that we tried to change the problem/program paradigm and tried to say, look, we

want to connect with you and your family and we'd like to know how we can make something happen together. But

you an integral part of that connection and partnership This is not me, the professional worker with a set of resources, skills, and money saying

to you, "Do you want me to help you?" This is about creating a partnership. Yes, I have resources and skills, but you do too. You are

making it in this world you've got something going for you. So how can

we mutually create a path forward? It's not what I can do for you. It's about what you want

for yourself? I think if we could ever have found or devised a funding stream that would have

supported that, we would have all been better off and farther ahead. At one point, I proposed to a major foundation that

we would return all of its money if it would let me hire 20 Family Advocates (I didn't

know what else to call them). This is what they would do: They would build

relationships, each family advocate would build relationships with about 20 families. They would have access to some monetary resources and then work out an arrangement with

each family to figure out the best thing that can happen over the next five years. That's it.

Tony Wagner 24:10

Anyway, that's what we were dealing with that at Pillsbury United Communities, trying to try to figure out a way to get

that kind of idea supported and funded. It felt like all I ever did was struggle with that. We had to be creative because most funders wouldn't accept any proposals unless they were in the program/problem paradigm. Treasure Tinsley 24:49

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

Tony Wagner 24:52

It was a challenge hiring staff. They were steeped in the program/problem culture and they thought their job was to provide social services. They did not understand the idea of creating a partnership with individuals and families.

Treasure Tinsley 25:09

Mm hmm.

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Tony Wagner 25:10

And so we struggled mightily with that at Pillsbury. We are not service providers, that is not our job. That is not our fundamental role.

Treasure Tinsley 25:21

Mm hmm. What would you say is the fundamental role?

Tony Wagner 25:26

We struggled with that. We settled on something like our job being system navigators, advocates, and organizers. Yeah. We tried hard to figure out what to call ourselves. It was amazing how hard it was to do that, the culture of service provider is so dominant.

Treasure Tinsley 26:02

Yeah. Almost like a scaffolding organization or something. Yeah. Um, how I mean. So I have a couple of questions.... But, um, so one of the questions that I have is kind of about, you know, Pillsbury United Community is formed, right at some point in, you know, the early 2000s. Right, and becomes like Pillsbury United Communities, that is this organization of other organizations that have existed for such a long time. And so I'm kind of wondering, like, what that transition looks like, but also, how this idea of being a scaffolding or navigation or an organizing center factors into that, you know,

merge for you? Um...

Tony Wagner 27:30

You're right. I don't know if anyone has ever shared with you the sort of the organizational history chart that somebody made for us a while ago. There were at least a dozen organizations that were

at one point part of Pillsbury United Communities. In the mid-60s, 1967, I think, there was a merger of South Minneapolis Settlement houses and North Minneapolis Settlement houses. They were essentially shotgun wedding. The United Way determined that there was too many

organizations doing the same things and we don't want to deal with so many similar

organizations. So, we think you should merge. They were the primary funder of the organizations and so they did merge. Unity house on the northside merged with

Wells Memorial Waite House merged with Pillsbury House on the southside and became Pillsbury-Waite Neighborhood Services. Wells and Unity formed Northside Settlement

Services. Over the years there some named changes.

Tony Wagner 28:40

In 1984. I was working with a group of nonprofit agencies that we called the Forum for Nonprofit Leadership. It consisted of 40 of the largest nonprofits in the Twin Cities area. I got to the point where I realized that our future prospects as we then existed were bleak. We didn't have much power in the system, hardly any of the powers-that-be listened to us and we were viewed as simply a niche neighborhood organization. The message was consistently something like, "You're a

niche neighborhood organization, why are you applying for funds that are designated for the south

side of Minneapolis when you only serve the North?" I felt boxed in, that we were being labeled and made into an organization that we didn't want, and so I started thinking

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about how to deal with that. At that point I said, "Hell, let's all 40 of us merge and we'll become very big and very strong. When you're big in this country, people listen.

Tony Wagner 30:13

The Forum for Nonprofit Leadership managed to get the McKnight Foundation to put up some money to help us consider how we could share resources and all that kind of stuff. There was a

group of six settlement houses out of the 40 that began talking more or less seriously

about ways we could work together better. We formed the neighborhood

organization collaboration board consisting of two representatives from each of the organizations. That board met for a couple of years trying to figure

how best to work together. Finally, we arrived at a key decision point. There were three paths we could follow: 1), continue on as we are where the executive directors meet every once in a while, sort of a guild of executive directors, 2) we could formalize the collaboration, creating some sort of partnership, not knowing exactly what

that meant, 3). We could merge. We actually took a vote on which of those models we wanted and the vote was two for merger and four for continuing business as usual. The the director of Pillsbury-Waite at the time and I felt that if were the two that are interested in merger, let's just get it done, and so we did.

The joint merged board selected me to be the chief executive. The Pillsbury Waite executive director left town and I inherited the merger mess. The merger got off to a very rocky start partly because even though we were

both settlement houses, we were two very different

organizations. I'm not sure people would agree with me, but my view was that Pillsbury-

Waite was a very traditional settlement house, and Northside Settlement Services was a very unusual band of people.

Treasure Tinsley 32:33

What do you mean by very traditional? So what does that look like to you as a traditional settlement house?

Tony Wagner 32:39

their board of directors was loaded with more or less wealthy corporate leaders and their spouses. Treasure Tinsley 32:47

mmhmmm

Tony Wagner 32:48

Even though they were intrigued by my background and leadership, many of them never trusted me. I think they just thought I was too far "out there" or something like that. The Pillsbury Waite staff were

good people, but I did not see them as being terribly innovative or risk taking. Pretty conservative,

let's not rock the boat, let's keep things under control and that sort of thing. I was much

more of a risk-taker as was the culture of Northside Settlement Services. After we merged, it seemed like nobody got along.

Treasure Tinsley 33:32

Yeah haha.

Tony Wagner 33:35

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Early on, Treasure, there was a day when I woke up thinking, "You know, right now I'm the only person in the world that thinks this merger was a good idea" I expected push back from the southside folks but

Northside Settlement Services staff started to say, "Well, this merger sucks and board members who were in favor of the merger from the start were asking, " Are you sure

we did the right thing?" Pillsbury Waite's board didn't like it at all. They thought they were getting screwed. But I learned that this is what leadership is about: when nobody else

believes, you've got to get up, put your coat on and get to work. No doubt the merger

was hard, but it was clearly the best move and made us a much stronger organization. It

gave me more freedom to be engaged in sector leadership issues. That's something

nobody really talks much about. We hinder the potential that leaders have by chaining them so tightly to the

organization. Fundamentally, when you're an executive director, you start feeling

responsible for the lives of the 50, 100, 200 staff you have. You start feeling responsible

for their livelihoods, and the demands on you seem to force you inside the

organization. In fact though,

leadership is about looking up and out in the community, being engaged beyond your own

organization. But, it's hard to find time and resources to do that. Thankfully, I was blessed

with boards of directors who understood this tension and gave me permission to travel to New

York, Washington, or wherever to become active in sector issues and ultimately to lead our national and international associations.

I was elected President of United Neighborhood Centers of America and later on the President of the International Federation of Settlements. My board built in sector leadership performance objectives in my annual plan.

Treasure Tinsley 36:33

No, this is amazing. I think that is really important. And I think that ties into what we were sort of

discussing earlier about, you know, what is the role of settlement houses? And like, also, what is the role in different communities? What does their future look like? I would love to talk about that a little bit

more as well. So for you, you know, what do you see? What is the definition of a settlement house to you?

Tony Wagner 37:07

Oh boy, I thought you might ask that...

Treasure Tinsley 37:16

It's okay, if you don't have a definition, but what do you think about as their role in communities,

Tony Wagner 37:22

I used to have an elevator speech but to me, the role of the settlement house or in today's lingo, a community center like Pillsbury United Communities is to be a kick-ass advocate for social justice. Within that is the recognition that change comes about, from within and among

Neighborhood residents, not from so-called leaders. When this advocacy it becomes operationalized it takes myriad forms. That's why Pillsbury United Communities has a

professional theater, a super market, radio station, newspaper and so much more. If you are serious about social justice it doesn't matter what the form is. It's just a way to get things done.

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Treasure Tinsley 38:47

Yeah, absolutely.

Tony Wagner 38:48

The program is a means, it's not an end. We struggled with our staff, board, and funders to understand that. If

we are feeding people at lunch, okay, but that is not the end of what we're trying to do. The lunch program exists to try to bring some sense of justice to food distribution and whatever. And so

it was a challenge keeping our staff focused because the demands of putting food on the table are extraordinary.

It's understandable that staff would say, "Jeez we just fed 200 people, we

just had a good day.” No, you’ve got more to do. One of the best things that ever happened at Pillsbury United Communities took place in the theater withwith Ralph Remington, Faye PriceNoel Raymond. They understood this.Overtime, many others adoptthis view. It was a blessing that I got to work with those folks because they got it.

Treasure Tinsley 40:30

Yeah. Can you talk a bit more about that? I mean, talk about when Ralph came onto the team, and then Faye, and Noel and kind of, you know, about that. I mean, you know, their whole approach to we have to center art, like, art is a huge part of this. And art is a way of, you know, caring for this community, art is a way of, you know, having the process be what matters, not necessarily the outcome, right? How do you see that? What do you, you know, like, what are your thoughts there?

Tony Wagner 41:03

I had always been aware that Pillsbury House had a cultural arts program for a long time, even before the

merger. I’ve have

talked to people who claim that Pillsbury House actually started the Minneapolis

Children’s Theatre. That renown theater grew out of out of the leadership Pillsbury United Communities’ Cultural Arts programs.

When I started working at the organizations, Pillsbury United Communities was one of very few settlement houses in the country that

actually had a full time theater. Karamu House in Cleveland was part of settlement house and was nationally recognized as a great theater.

Early on, I knew nothing

about the theater.But I liked it, It was good stuff. But it was a theaterandit was a program of Pillsbury United Communities.

Then we hired Ralph, um do you know, Ralph?

Treasure Tinsley 42:30

Yeah.

Tony Wagner 42:30

Well, Ralph is not a shy human being. Ralph fills the room, andRalph has

a point of view. He is a forceful advocate for that point of view. He started saying

The theater is more than just a theater. I give Ralph great credit for building the quality and professionalism of the theater. Prior to Ralph’s tenure, it was a nice community theater. I

don't mean to put that down, but it wasn't going to be reviewed in the Star Tribune. It wasn't in the same category as Mixed Blood or Penumbra. It was a little thing in the south side of Minneapolis Ralph brought that to the attention of a lot of people. Under his watch, the theater would become important. Over time though, it was Faye and Noel who transformed the theater and all of Pillsbury House into an integrated arts and human services prototype. For much of my tenure Pillsbury House Director was led by a human service professional. The theater was housed in Pillsbury House and Faye and Noel, as co-directors of the theater reported to me. .

Pillsbury House theater was a tenant, more or less, of Pillsbury House, the settlement house. As we worked through some of these larger issues, it became clearer and clearer to me that arrangement made no sense. The separation of social services and the theater needed to be eliminated. Now, I want to tell you that that decision caused me more grief than practically anything I ever did. We had some great social service leadership who basically accused me of selling out to the theater and throwing social services under the bus. I understood that but the issue was how can Pillsbury House and the theater work through this together to develop the idea that the arts exist not only to appeal to that aspect of human beings, but also to do the work that social services does? Arts and human service can be integrated. It wasn't like we were saying we were going to stop doing social services. It was like how can we use the arts as a springboard for even better social service? For better inclusion of people in the neighborhood? For helping people become more powerful to get things done? When I retired this arts/human service integration was becoming a reality. Chanda Smith Baker my successor, and now Adair Mosely, the current CEO, understand this. Now it's just the way it is.

Treasure Tinsley 46:31

Yeah,

Tony Wagner 46:31

Good thing. It was curious to me that nearly every funder in town gave a lot of money to the arts. But they rarely, if ever, gave money to arts for poor people.

Treasure Tinsley 46:52

Yeah.

Tony Wagner 46:54

It struck me that if the arts are important to you, why do you think it's not important to the poorest of the

poor? We used to get that thrown in our faces all the time. It was like until we feed, clothe and house people, there's no need for art. Not true, a homeless person can appreciate music and can appreciate art and ought to have access to it. To

me, that was the core battle or the idea or whatever.

Treasure Tinsley 47:36

Yeah, absolutely.

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Tony Wagner 47:37

I think it's powerful. I think it's going to march on.

Treasure Tinsley 47:48

I have a lot of questions for you. But one of them

that I'm really interested in hearing from you, in particular is what you see Pillsbury House and theater and Pillsbury United Communities kind of developing into in the

future, what do you see in 10 years is the ideal situation?

Tony Wagner 48:28

Well, I haven't thought much about this stuff for 10 years now - one of the joys of retirement.

Treasure Tinsley 48:40

So is it where you thought it would be 10 years ago when you retired?

Tony Wagner 48:46

I think it is, yes, it's where I hoped it would be. I think it's going well, but I'm a little

concerned with the transition with Faye leaving. I don't know the new person at all, but I

trust Adair, and Noel is still there. So part of it will be how much this new person internalizes this idea to know how the theater will go in the future. I The theater

suffers from this construct that we have theatres in general, the that they're simply entertainment.

Pillsbury House theater

has gone well beyond that with Breaking Ice and the Chicago

Avenue Project and other things they do like discussions after performances and engaging

different artists. This is good work, but I don't know how to frame this new kind of Pillsbury House theater. If I were still there, I'd be working on that trying to understand and articulate this thing? Pillsbury House Theater is out of the realm of being just a

theater, or even just a cool theater? This change has a quality of becoming a

movement. But I don't know what to call the movement. It's easy to get hung up on words and things like that, but my hope is what's going on

at Pillsbury House theater is nationally important. I don't know if that's happening, and I don't know what to do about that. But you know what, I don't have to know anymore. That's

for you, and your generation to figure out. What's happened at Pillsbury House Theater is something really important. Maybe the story you tell will help figure that out?

Treasure Tinsley 52:05

I have lots of thoughts. But going back to our understanding of

Pillsbury United Communities not being a service provider. I think that's a really

important distinction here. When we think about the settlement houses historically, and even now, there's definitely a sense that they are spaces

that provide daycare and all of these different services or

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resources, which lends itself to being service providers. So, why in your mind, is that distinction important?

Tony Wagner 53:05

Because it's, it's about an inherent power paradigm. That's the problem. When you talk about systemic racism this is part of it.

Treasure Tinsley 53:28

Yeah.

Tony Wagner 53:30

The idea that, that I, as the trained and credentialed professional has resources that I'm

willing to give to you, to provide for you, is a power relationship. In other words, you've got to pay attention

to me if in order for you to get what I have. And that to me creates a false connection, because

you're going to do what you have to do to get what I have, and to me, that's not honest, it's not authentic.

Treasure Tinsley 54:12

Yeah.

Tony Wagner 54:13

So how do we create a more equal partnership wherein I still have resources, but so do you. Instead of service provision, the relationship is more mutual, more reciprocal. It's more like we are working together to create something better.

Treasure Tinsley 54:39

Yeah. How do you feel like that plays into this dynamic though, with the funders? I mean, I feel like this is a theme that I just keep hearing. Funders are so focused on one specific element of a person and you guys are trying to really look holistically at a whole person and work with that person, work with that family, and work with that community? How does that, you know, play out? I guess, maybe I'm answering my own question, but I feel like I see you as the mediator that is kind of taking some of those strings that are attached to that money and taking it on you and taking it away from the recipient. How would you characterize it?

Tony Wagner 55:28

Um... Most of my colleagues have... let me let me back up. The United Way one time did one of those DISC surveys that tells you whether or not you're a dominant leader, an influential leader, social leader, or a compliant leader. They did this in advance of a retreat for all the United Way funded agency executive directors, there were around 100 of us. I was surprised by the results. If I remember correctly, 80% of the agency executive directors tested to be high on the social leader category. I came out as high on the dominant leader category. What struck me as odd was that most executive directors seem to see their role as one of keep things in place, managing things. A kind of funny aside. I used the DISC test at my own leadership team, there were nine of us. 13

I did it because I could not figure out why we weren't getting along. The test turned out that seven of us on our

leadership teamscored high on the dominant category. One was high on the social category. That director was often upset because we weren't getting along. My chief financial officer was high on the compliance category that

I thought was great, that sense. With 7 high Dominants, it no wonder we weren't getting along. What I'm saying is I think we in the

leadership of the nonprofit sector have done a disservice collectively by not continuously challenging the funders on this whole issue of who we serve. we could have been much more forceful. By the way, I think the new head of the Ford Foundation, I think his name is Darren Clarke, gets this

stuff. He's trying to change the Ford Foundation. It would be

a much better relationship with funders like the McKnight Foundation or Minneapolis Minneapolis Foundation or whomever to understand these issues. I mean, we can't

just be fooling around, this is serious work. The healthier way to proceed would be that funders would develop relationships with trusted nonprofit directors and ask them, "Okay, if you had a million dollars, what would you do with it?"

Treasure Tinsley 58:32

Yeah,

Tony Wagner 58:33

We need you need to tell us what you'd do because we; not just giving you a million bucks, we trust what you are going to

do with it, that it's going to be beneficial. If that happened, you would see a significant

restructuring of human services. We wouldn't do the things we are currently doing if we had a choice. Pillsbury United Communities had this opportunity once with Russ Ewald at the McKnight Foundation who said to me, "Okay, here's a million

Bucks, what are you going to do with it?" Quite a challenge. That's when we developed Family Advocacy Network System (FANS) program?

Treasure Tinsley 59:14

Can you tell me about it?

Tony Wagner 59:16

It was a program we created along the lines of what I talked

about earlier. Basically, we hired staff and told them their job was to develop relationships with 20 low income 10 year olds and their families and be their advocate until they graduate from high school. We made four

claims: 1) We keep these

kids out of jail; 2)They will not going to get pregnant, or get someone else3) They finish high school with a degree; 4)Theywill make a

contribution to the community. That's what we told the McKnight Foundationwould happen if they gave us the money. Further, we're going to pick them up in third in third grade, aged 10 and we want to work

with them until they're 20 years old,so we want you to guarantee funding for at least seven years and ideally 10 years.At the time that was unheard of because most all funders only funded two years or three years.

FANS was funded and we accomplish those claims. Over time though, foundation staff turned over and slowly but surely the program

petered out. While it was going, each FANS staff person had a cohort ofabout 10 families. We identified 60 kids that we worked with and followed from age 10 to 20. All these kids were identified by Minneapolis public schools as being at risk and would likely not graduate. Lots of tough family situations. During the course of our worki,one of thekids committed suicide and all of thembut two graduated from high

school, none went to jail,and one girl got pregnant. Each year wea plan for the child and his/her family. We learned howdifficult it was for a 10 year old kid or his/her parents to think 10 years into the future.

Treasure Tinsley 1:01:49

Yeah,

Tony Wagner 1:01:50

So, we had to build in six month incentives and yearly incentives.

One of the things we created was paid family vacations if the child did okay in school and is on the path to meet expectations We ended up sending kids and their families to several vacation sites.

Some people

thought that was extravagant, you know, that's what healthy families do. I kept thinking about why is it

that every kid can't have what most middle class kids have?

Treasure Tinsley 1:02:40

Yeah, yeah.

Tony Wagner 1:02:42

That's all

Treasure Tinsley 1:02:43

And everybody deserves that.

Tony Wagner 1:02:44

Right. Everybody deserves that. Right? And why you wouldn't do what you can to help promote that for every child is beyond me sometimes. We've not been strong enough advocates to get funders to listen. Maybe they're incapable of hearing. I got so frustrated that for good reasons Pillsbury United Communities has a theater, a grocery store, and a host of other programs and services needed by the community. Yet funders constantly challenged the need for these. I got to a point where as long as we are dependent on funders, we were never going to be able to do what we wanted to do.

So we tried to figure out how to make our own money. Some of these, some of these

Our social enterprises produced income but it's hard to make money.

Treasure Tinsley 1:03:46

Yeah. Especially with a theater.

Tony Wagner 1:03:52

Treasure Tinsley 1:03:56

yeah, absolutely. No, I think that you're also speaking to the importance of joy, right? Art is not a luxury, to quote Audrey Lorde.

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Tony Wagner 1:04:15

Yes, art is a necessity. Being outdoors is a necessity. Music is a necessity. Education is a necessity and so is housing. I think we all got

hung up in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. But needs aren't hierarchical, they're all necessary human development. If

you are deprived of arts, you'll be less than a fully developed human being in the same way

that being deprived of adequate housing leads to developmental challenges. That's a concept that lots of people don't buy into, but we were trying to sell it.

Treasure Tinsley 1:04:59

Yeah. I think it's really interesting during this past year and a half of COVID, and seeing the ways that people have really responded to the lack of that in their lives and the changes that are encouraging people and I feel like, I'm very hopeful that there'll be a refocusing or a shift and that other people are looking to the future and what that entails.

But thank you so much for sharing all of that with me. I really feel just honored to have spoken to you today and it really means a lot to have heard your perspective on so many different elements of the history of Pillsbury United communities and Pillsbury House Theater.

Tony Wagner 1:05:51

You're most welcome and thank you for doing this work. It's good work.