



Trust Talks Episode 15: We Rise Together: For an Equitable and Just Recovery

Christen Wiggins: Hello everyone. I'm Christen Wiggins, Program Director for We Rise Together: For an Equitable and Just Recovery and welcome to *Trust Talks*. We Rise Together as a funder collaborative housed at The Chicago Community Trust that was formed in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Our goal is to boost economic recovery in communities hit hardest by the pandemic's health, social, and economic impacts. We do that by providing grants for real estate investments, for workforce, and for small businesses, all in communities hard hit by COVID. We started with the real estate projects because we wanted projects that were physical and tangible reminders that help was coming. But knowing that no single building solves everything in a neighborhood, we go back to those same communities and we make investments around folks who are looking for jobs and for the small businesses that make those communities a wonderful place to live.

To learn what was important to community, we've also conducted a series of focus groups and surveys with residents that have helped shape our grant making. For example, we have the goal of improving the local economy. So originally, we didn't plan to fund spaces like childcare and healthcare. To us, that seemed a little out of our purview, but when we did these focus groups and surveys, we learned from community members that getting back to work required childcare and they didn't feel healthy and they needed a place to go. And so we changed our grant making strategy and included those. And we now have three healthcare centers and two childcare centers, some of them are already open.

We also go back every summer and ask with youth surveyors frequently who live in the neighborhood, "What do people keep needing? How have their needs changed? What do they want for their community?" This year, we're going to take that commitment to listening a step further and launch the Together Fund, which is our approach to participatory grant making. Our goal with the fund is to invite residents deeper into the grant making process to help us better understand the impact of our workforce and small business grants on the communities we're serving. First, let me introduce Griselda Piedra, Community Relations Manager at PODER and Nedra Sims Fears, Executive Director of the Greater Chatham Initiative. Griselda, can you introduce yourself?

Griselda Piedra: Hi. Yes, well, thank you so much for the invitation. I've been with PODER for 23 years and I'm also a native Chicagoan, born and raised in Pilsen and have had the experience of experiencing some of the barriers that our community has been facing right now and have been able to put that into practice in the work that we're doing at the organization. And so I thank the Trust for considering our communities and happy to be here and share more on the work that we've been doing.

Christen Wiggins: Thank you. And Nedra, could you introduce yourself?

Nedra Sims Fears: I am Nedra Sims Fears, Executive Director of the Greater Chatham Initiative, which is a community-based organization that serves four neighborhoods on the mid-south side of Chicago, Chatham, Avalon Park, Auburn Gresham, and Greater Grand Crossing. I, as well, am a native Chicagoan, third generation and was reared in Chatham and had the best childhood.

Christen Wiggins: I'm also grateful to be joined by two We Rise Together donors, Nicole and Steve VanderVoort, who really understand and support our impact.

Steve VanderVoort: We are not native Chicagoans, but we have lived in Chicago for over 50 years and we currently have a donor advised fund at The Chicago Community Trust.

Christen Wiggins: My first question is for Griselda. We Rise Together supported PODER's headquarters in Gage Park, which opened its doors last year. What was game changing about the capital funding We Rise provided?

Griselda Piedra: Thanks, Christen. Happy to be here. And let me tell you, well, PODER had been serving the community out of satellite sites for 26 years, spanning from Pilsen to the southwest side, beginning with Gage Park to West Lawn to Chicago Lawn. And as we expanded our reach the city, the need to access our programming increased and not to mention the pivotal shift during COVID. We went from servicing 500 individuals per year to 2,500 as we transitioned back to our new norm after COVID. However, now the needs worked greater. And our career coaches actually transitioned to become member advisors, focusing not only on job readiness, but also on reducing barriers to access critical resources such as health, food, shelter. And we realized that when making these referrals to these services, we were sending our community members to various different neighborhoods. And that's when we realized we need to bring those services in-house all under one roof.

And at a million dollars, We Rise Together became the first major investment from a trusted source, which then spearheaded a next level investment support from both private and government funding. So it really became critical to have the support right from the beginning, especially coming out of COVID. And that gave us the opportunity to raise 92% of our capital campaign, which then, in turn, allowed us to open HQ in January 2023. And since then, we've been able to bring in-house access to critical resources such as free mental health through Centro Sanar, we've been able to bring access to employment opportunities through Skills For Chicagoland's Future. And not only that, but we've also been able to bring on board different partners on a monthly basis to bring in workshops, classes, trainings, even meetings for their members and for their staff to address housing, health, legal and other services that are needed in the community.

And not only have we served 4,988 community members by connecting them to these critical resources in 2023 so far, but we've also been able to serve as an incubator for small BIPOC led organizations, such as Centro Sanar. And we've also been able to deepen our relationship with community partners through our ability to host partner events, trainings and meetings, allowing them to come and serve the community members, meeting them where they're at. PODER is more than just English and job training. We are a welcoming hub where immigrants build connections, access resources, and find support to increase confidence, self-sufficiency and economic mobility. And We Rise Together helped us bring this much needed \$6.5 million investment into the southwest side.

Christen Wiggins: That's awesome. I love hearing that. It makes my heart so happy. Nedra, I want to turn to you now. How has the We Rise Together investment supported your vision for Chatham?

Nedra Sims Fears: My vision for Chatham reflects the realities of what we see in the Chatham neighborhood, which is in the mid-south side of Chicago. And when you look at who's there, we provide business support and 50% of our businesses are restaurants. And so we know that the restaurants are really key anchors for our community, that they anchor our corridors and so it provides food and nourishment. It also provides employment and 50% of our businesses, small businesses are food-based

businesses because it's a low barrier of entry. And the We Rise money allowed us to expand a program that we call Food Lab Chicago. And in Food Lab, we teach restaurateurs how to be profitable so that they can pay themselves and their workers a living wage. We use scientific methods such as plate costing, menu engineering. Our motto is, if every plate is profitable, you will be profitable.

And so we've been doing this work with 84 restaurants that have 300 staff members and what we found is it's a long slog to get them to move from checkbook accounting to financial statements because you can't price what your plates are until you really have financial statements. And for financial statements, it's like telling people how to improve their tax return. What we found was introducing them to menu engineering, which is something that is simple and accessible, where we have this great guy who's a national leader, works with hotels, boutique restaurants and our restaurateurs, and he tells them how to look at their menu and scientifically reformat it so they can be profitable. And what we found is that people who did do the menu engineering, their income increased anywhere from 3% to 38%. Moreover, it became an entree where they could say, "Look, I did it. It wasn't painful."

And so therefore, maybe there is something about these financial statements. It's not just the bankers yapping at us that it's good, but we know that this method works. Let's try other methods. And so that is why I would say the menu engineering and the plate costing and the storytelling that We Rise Together funded us, we have now worked with 84 restaurants. They keep coming back as they learn more and more and more. And we learned something from We Rise. And one of the things that I really want to do is appreciate your thought leadership because before, we saw ourselves as helping one business at a time. Through your thought leadership, we now know that we're educating the whole restaurant ecosystem. We started instead of just working with 15 people in a cohort for a year or 20 people in a cohort, we now have fundamental classes on plate costing and engineering and 40 and 50 people show up. And so we want them to come in in an easy way, gain the information that they need and so that we can serve not dozens of people, but hundreds of people in a given year.

Christen Wiggins: Thanks so much, Nedra. What I love about your two stories together is there's not a simple solution to coming back from decades of disinvestment and then COVID on top of it. It takes community leaders who do deep listening, deep engagement, who keep showing up, who are present, to continue to move the needle forward. And both of your examples are such beautiful examples and so different from each other and we need them both. Steve and Nicole, could you share just a little bit about why you chose to get involved with We Rise Together and for other donors, maybe what you would describe as the impact of this work?

Steve VanderVoort: Well, sure. But if it's okay with you, I'd like to back up for just a minute and talk a little bit about how we got involved with the Trust in the first place. We have been moderately successful and we realized about 20 years ago that we would have more than enough money to carry us through the end of our lives. Neither one of us are native Chicagoans, but Chicago had been our home for over 50 years and we said we want to be able to give back to the community that has given so much to us. And I think a neighbor of ours told us about The Chicago Community Trust and we made a cold call, found a contact, and our contact suggested that we set up a donor advised fund, which sounded wonderful because we didn't have to worry about the headaches of a foundation or where we would invest the money or whatnot. All we had to do was give it away.

Our contact also helped us to develop a philanthropic strategy, if you will. And we decided together with her that that strategy would be to help people in underserved communities, primarily on the south and west side of Chicago, to get a post-secondary education at a good school. That's where a lot of our donated funds went to. But then COVID came along and we kept hearing in the news about how the underserved communities were faring much worse in Chicago than the communities where I live on the

north side. And we said, we have to do something about this, maybe the Trust has something. So I contacted the Trust and she said, "Well, we're just putting together this program." She suggested that we go on the website and read about it and it sounded very attractive to us. Nicole, do you remember what was so attractive about what she said?

Nicole VanderVoort: Primarily, the fact that it was a bottom-up strategy for that particular fund, that top-down strategy. And to me, that was very, very important. That was a perspective that was very dear to me. Just listening to the people I call the boots on the ground, the people who know what's happening, they are the people who suffer and often they have a different perspective from the donors who want to do their thing and perhaps maybe even look good the way that they do it. That really struck me that that particular fund seemed to be very based on that philosophy. And Christen, you mentioned at the beginning, you stole my thunder, one of the things I really like is to hear that the community said, "We need healthcare, we need childcare." And you listen. That, to me, must have really made a big difference in their lives because it was saying, "I get the facilities that I need so that I can then move on and empower myself."

I think everybody knows the parable of this, the Good Samaritan, the Bible. It reminded me a little bit of that in the sense that, well, a number of people passed him. They didn't do anything for this man, but the person that helped them seemed to have helped them a lot. But I felt like saying, "Well, you seemed to go beyond that and asked him what he needs." There's a body on the ground, there's somebody in need, but I think if we go beyond just saying I'm going to do what I think I should do, that's what, to me, is a story that really impressed me. So that's why that particular fund really was our pick.

Steve VanderVoort: I think, also, that the strategy that we read about seemed so good. Number one, as Nicole said, listening to people, but number two, I'm not sure that We Rise Together was really particularly interested in investing in real estate initially, but without facilities, where would your programs go? And so in listening to community leaders like we just heard from, they said, "Yeah, we really do need to invest in real estate because without the real estate, the programs wouldn't exist."

Christen Wiggins: It's funny that you say that because one of the first conversations we had was about how to start and we thought, "Why would people trust us? Why would people trust that We Rise Together has their best interest at heart or that we're listening or that we're really doing what community asked us?" And we said, "We want it to be tangible." So while real estate doesn't solve every problem, we had this very strong sense that we wanted, then, people to be able to walk by somewhere and say, "This was funded by We Rise. We listened. It's real. It's coming. Backhoes, construction equipment, those are not just for the north side. That stuff happens in our communities as well."

I want to just pivot a little bit to this new thing that we're starting this summer called The Together Fund. And this is an attempt to listen even more closely and to bring decision-making even more closely to community leaders. We are going to be recruiting a group of 10 to 12 community leaders to help make the requests for proposals and the grant making guidelines for our final round of grant making through We Rise Together. So they'll be really telling us here's the priorities and they'll be setting out how we create the grants and how we fund the grants and how big the grants are, how many there are. And it's really an attempt to live deeper into this commitment to community listening. So I just wanted to ask the whole group, when you think about how we involve community and We Rise Together grant making in the past, why is it important to continue doing this kind of work and what do you hope will come out of something like The Together Fund?

Nedra Sims Fears: I've been very pleased with The Together Fund, the process, the inclusion, the thought leadership, the big tent approach, and so to go to that next iteration and to expand it to a broader audience that has the lived experience and the big picture. So I feel that it is the right thing to do. There's a saying that became very popular, nothing for us without us. And what can be more empowering than that collective decision-making of the group. I think that it's a wonderful concept and I can't wait to see it executed.

Griselda Piedra: If I may add, I just wanted to highlight a little bit about why it's important to get the community involved in these thought process and brainstorming sessions too, to be able to share on their experiences. But who else is experiencing these needs? It's them. And so bringing them on board to tell you exactly what do they need is crucial. And I love that because at PODER, we're also working at putting our community member in the center in the core and trying to identify you tell us what you need and then we will do our best to address those needs.

And one of the big piece here is just to really hone in on what they're sharing and listening. And so I love the fact that not only do we listen, but we're actually saying and doing what we're saying we're going to do after we've listened to them. And so that helps us build that trust. And it's important because without trust, they're not going to be able to come to you and really share what do they need. It's hard enough to come and say, "I need help." So building that trust is critical. I am really excited for The Together Fund because it's allowing them to contribute to this and now they're being a part of the solution rather than being thought of how do we solve your issues? You bring them and you highlight them and then all brainstorm together to bring that to light.

Steve VanderVoort: I really keyed in on the word investment that you used. I come from a financial background and The Chicago Community Trust has invested in communities for a long time, but not quite in this way. I think that not just throwing money, but as you said, by building real estate, people can walk by and see what is part of their community. And in doing that, they become more invested in making their community grow and prosper. And it all starts bottom up. Top down, very often, doesn't work. It's bottom up. And that's what the Trust is trying to do here with The Together Fund, I think.

Christen Wiggins: Yeah, it's very much the intentionality and I am personally extremely excited because it is one thing to be able to listen to folks. It's another thing to get to do the work with folks and do it together. And I couldn't be more excited to learn from our community leaders during this process. My last question is really what should we make sure we're continuing from We Rise into the future as a donor, as a steering community member and as a grant recipient?

Steve VanderVoort: This whole thing started because of COVID and because underserved communities we're much worse off than they would've been otherwise. And so I think that's why the Trust started, but the underserved communities are still underserved and there still is a great need out there and there will be far into the future, which is why we made a commitment to continue to support in whatever way we can through our money, through our expertise or whatever because we owe it to give back to Chicago, particularly those areas that are underserved have not had the opportunities that frankly Nicole and I have had in our community.

Nicole VanderVoort: The gap continues to grow and to me, that's the thing that people need to be aware of. COVID certainly had a terrible trigger for these communities, but this inequality between the have and the have-nots, the gap is not narrowing. So I think that's important for this message to be heard.

Nedra Sims Fears: I'm so glad you two lifted that up. I was having a staff meeting on Monday and we all do icebreaker questions and so I asked, "What do you normally celebrate for Mother's Day?" And one of my staff members said that, well, it's a hard day for her because her son died from COVID. And so knowing that the ripple effect of COVID just continues to go through the community. And the block that I live on, there were two people who died from COVID, one of their houses are in foreclosure. We're seeing this rippling effect because of people who died and didn't have wheels. And so now foreclosures are on the rise. So you are right that we luckily are here and we survived it and that we are moving ahead, but it was very hard for many families and they will not be whole because of what happened to them from COVID. And so I think people have to understand that we can move forward, but it's for some of us, as you say, it's more inequitable that moving forward is much harder.

Griselda Piedra: And then if I may add, it's always keeping their needs in the center of all of our conversations, planning and actions. I think when we start talking about working together and partnerships, investment seems to be the term to also really elevate what a partnership is. It's a two-way relationship, and we want to make sure that when we're working together or collaborating that it's not about who did what, what is each other's agendas, but really honing in on how can we work together to make that impact in our communities and to uplift our communities. And the fact is that our community member knows the need. Our nonprofit knows how to address the need. When you think about it, our government has a way to look into policies to address what might be potentially a root cause of what the need is.

And then we have, of course, our donors and philanthropy and where they can help in one, the funding piece, but also in the power aspect, the power dynamics of being able to push advocacy that will then trigger government to say, "You're right, we should be addressing these policies and we should be moving the needle in this area." And in turn, really look at how collectively we all really should be working together to, again, come back and address the needs that our community are telling us that they're going through. As again, we've been talking about COVID, everybody has experienced a loss in this timeframe that we've had. When you look at it, it seems like the underserved populations experience a greater loss, but it also gave us an opportunity to shine a light on those inequalities that have been there, but we haven't really been able to address it in the way that we needed to. I don't want to say want to because it's more of we needed to.

But I feel like if we all work together and we all invest in our communities in Chicago, just like how the Trust is looking at restructuring the term investment, I think we can all come out of it in a much higher way. And at PODER we have a saying, it's like, together we can, [foreign language 00:26:23]. And I think the Trust has been doing an amazing job in building trust and gathering people to collectively uplift our community. So thank you.

Christen Wiggins: It was a great conversation. I'm always so grateful to get to work with all of you. COVID had so many hard things that were a part of it and a result of it, but there were some really wonderful things that happened too, seeing people work together to pull towards a common good. One of the things, I think, just in terms of the number of real estate projects that we have gotten to see, all of a sudden with there being resources, I have people coming to me saying, "I heard about We Rise Together. Let me tell you about my vision. Let me tell you about my idea. Let me tell you about my project." And I think to have spurred not just healing and repair from COVID, but to have started to create imagination for what replaces it is one of the great joys of my work and also one of the positive things that we can all take from this experience together.

So I just want to wrap up by saying thank you. This is not a one organization thing. It's not one person. It is something that has to be done together and with each of you at the table, to hear from your different

perspectives about how you've brought your unique gifts, talents, positions, power to bear has been really wonderful. We invite everybody who's listening today to sign up for our newsletter by emailing info@werisetgether.org and asking to be signed up for the newsletter. And we also would invite any donors who are interested to contact their philanthropic advisors or to reach out at the same email. So finally, I just want to say one more time, thank you so much to everyone here, and thank you to our listeners.